THE PAINTED NOVEL: AVANT-GARDE TECHNIQUE IN JOHN DOS PASSOS'S
MANHATTAN TRANSFER

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Jason Anthony Powell, B.A.

****

The Ohio State University
2005

Master's Examination Committee:
Dr. Steven Conn, Advisor
Dr. Brian McHale
Dr. Kevin Boyle

Approved by

Advisor
Department of History
ABSTRACT

John Dos Passos was a modernist writer who employed modernist techniques in a fictional work about New York City, arguably America’s most fascinating city. In his 1925 novel *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos sought to capture and channel the energetic life of New York City by utilizing Simultaneism and other techniques he learned from the European avant-garde. During the spring and summer of 1923, a few years before the novel was published, Dos Passos resided in France and cultivated relationships with avant-garde painters and writers that nurtured his writing talent. He mingled with such painters as Russian émigré Natalie Goncharova, her American pupil Gerald Murphy, and the French painter Fernand Leger. These painters impressed upon Dos Passos the primacy of developing a formal structure when approaching a work of art. French painters Robert and Sonia Delaunay showed the young writer that he could transform a static image into a dynamic work of art by utilizing Futurist techniques. While in France Dos Passos imbibed these techniques and incorporated them into *Manhattan Transfer*, his first mature work of modernist literature, which he began writing when he returned to New York City in the late summer of 1923.

This essay will first explore Dos Passos’s introduction to modernist art that began as early as the Armory Show in 1913, but fixed itself into his thinking by 1916, his senior year at Harvard. Dos Passos began his travels abroad in the summer of 1916, but it was
not until 1923 that his insatiable desire to learn the techniques of modernist art compelled him to seek out modernist artists that helped him to nurture his talent. Secondly, I will show that as a young writer and amateur painter, Dos Passos employed European avant-garde painting techniques for *Manhattan Transfer* that evinced a painter's vision of the city. To demonstrate this second point I will break the rest of the essay into three parts which correspond with how a painter approaches a canvas. In the first section, I will show that, like a painter, Dos Passos developed the city's formal shape by focusing on the city's size and space, demonstrating a city that was both expansive and confining. Secondly, in the Color section I will show that Dos Passos filled in the form by adding extensive color in order to draw attention to, and set apart, the numerous images in the novel. Finally, in the third section I will argue that he employed techniques of Futurism to the shape and color to give the novel a sense of dynamic motion.
VITA

September 27, 1967................................................................. Born – Seattle Washington
2002.................................................................................... B.A. History, Calvin College
2002 – present................................................................. Graduate Associate, The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: History
Specialization: American Intellectual and Cultural History
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sections:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dos Passos's Immersion into Modern Art</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Form</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Color</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Motion</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conclusion</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1913, poet Blaise Cendrars and painter Sonia Delaunay created the first simultaneist novel, *The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France*. Cendrars crafted the prose poem vertically down the right side of a twenty-two panel single sheet of paper that reached a length of almost seven feet. Delaunay provided the visual art. She painted abstract designs on the left side of the sheet and interspersed color throughout the text on the right side. Although the crafting was complex, the purpose was not: the reader was meant to absorb the text and images of the poem simultaneously. The purpose of simultaneity was to create a vision of reality that incorporated movement between the text and images. The advocates of Simultaneism believed that life was in constant motion. The artists planned to publish one-hundred-fifty copies of the simultaneist novel, boasting that if each two-meter copy were joined end to end, the length would equal the height of the Eiffel Tower. Describing the effect of the poem, Cendrars exclaimed, "I have a fever. And this is why I love the painting of the Delaunays, full of sun, of heat, of violence. Mme Delaunay has made such a beautiful book of colors that my poem is more saturated with light than is my life. That’s what makes me happy." For Cendrars, art and life were one and the same. He declared that "All of life is nothing but a poem," and for him, the best place for life and art to find their fullest expression was in the city, having been convinced that he had written his best poetry "among five million men." The city held his fascination as it did for many modernist artists because in the city multiple "dialects" and the "flesh of whores" merged

with the exotic legendary world of “the Apache” and “the good Negro.” The city’s populace, full of colorful personalities, supplied the city with its perpetual energy and provided the artist with a repository of images from which he or she could draw. It was in the city that the imagination of the artist collided with the energy of life.¹

The above anecdote reveals the modernist attempt to capture the activity of twentieth-century life in an innovative way. It also reveals the modernist fascination with the city. John Dos Passos was one such modernist writer who employed modernist techniques in a fictional work about New York City, arguably America’s most fascinating city. In his 1925 novel *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos sought to capture and channel the energetic life of New York City by utilizing Simultaneism and other techniques he learned from the European avant-garde. During the spring and summer of 1923, a few years before the novel was published, Dos Passos resided in France and cultivated relationships with avant-garde painters and writers that nurtured his writing talent. He mingled with such painters as Russian émigré Natalie Goncharova, her American pupil Gerald Murphy, and the French painter Fernand Leger. These painters impressed upon Dos Passos the primacy of developing a formal structure when approaching a work of art. French painters Robert and Sonia Delaunay showed the young writer that he could transform a static image into a dynamic work of art by utilizing Futurist techniques. While in France Dos Passos imbibed these techniques and incorporated them into *Manhattan Transfer*, his first mature work of modernist literature, which he began writing when he returned to New York City in the late summer of 1923.

This essay will first explore Dos Passos's introduction to modernist art that began as early as the Armory Show in 1913, but fixed itself into his thinking by 1916, his senior year at Harvard. Dos Passos began his travels abroad in the summer of 1916, but it was not until 1923 that his insatiable desire to learn the techniques of modernist art compelled him to seek out modernist artists that helped him to nurture his talent. Secondly, I will show that as a young writer and amateur painter, Dos Passos employed European avant-garde painting techniques for *Manhattan Transfer* that evinced a painter's vision of the city. To demonstrate this second point I will break the rest of the essay into three parts which correspond with how a painter approaches a canvas. In the first section, I will show that, like a painter, Dos Passos developed the city's formal shape by focusing on the city's size and space, demonstrating a city that was both expansive and confining. Secondly, in the Color section I will show that Dos Passos filled in the form by adding extensive color in order to draw attention to, and set apart, the numerous images in the novel. Finally, in the third section I will argue that he employed techniques of Futurism to the shape and color to give the novel a sense of dynamic motion.

Just as any painting is more than its technical application, *Manhattan Transfer* presented more than just a visual depiction of the city. Dos Passos confessed that the novel was a way to "get a great many things in to give a picture of the city of New York because I had spent quite a while there. I was trying also to get a certain feeling in."\(^2\) Therefore, by approaching the novel as a painter, Dos Passos transcended conventional literary techniques in order to expose the complex makeup of the city.

---

William Dow, a contemporary Dos Passos scholar, argues that for too long criticism has neglected the influence of the French avant-garde upon Dos Passos's literature. Dow insists that Cendrars played a crucial role in defining Dos Passos's writing techniques, and that critics have ascribed too much importance to British and American modernists. Citing Dos Passos's own admission of the vital importance of poetry in his life, Dow insists that it was not so much the poetry of Eliot, Pound, and other Anglophone modernists than the innovative experiments of Cendrars and the French avant-garde that pushed Dos Passos to try poetry as fiction in *Manhattan Transfer*.4

Dow is correct in that much of the focus of Dos Passos studies has been directed at Anglophone writers. I would take Dow's corrective one step further and suggest that the one-sided focus has not always been regional. Scholars have primarily concentrated on one medium, focusing on the literary affinities between Dos Passos and other writers. While this focus has not been misplaced in any way, I aim to supplement the discussion by drawing attention to the French avant-garde painters with whom Dos Passos spent a considerable amount of time during the early nineteen twenties.5

---


5 Ezra Pound used the term “vortex” to refer to the community of artists who created an atmosphere suitable for the assimilation of others’ techniques. Pound said that words were charged with “the power of tradition, of centuries of race consciousness, of agreement, of association,” which created a milieu for everything the artist does not invent but must know. Randolph Bourne’s essay *The Experimental Life* argued that close relationships were vital for the formation of ideas. He wrote that to “learn of life from others’ words is like learning to build a steam-engine from books in the class-room.” Dos Passos understood the importance of his surrounding community, preferring those relationships to opportunities at being the center of attention. To quote from Aristotle, with whom Dos Passos was very familiar: “what friends have is common property” for “friendship depends on community.”
Dow is also correct to suggest that Dos Passos was "influenced" by the European avant-garde. The word "influence" is a tricky word, however, as it might incorrectly suggest that Dos Passos was simply a passive receptor of avant-garde techniques; that he unquestioningly rode the artistic wave begun by the splash of prewar cubists. Dos Passos's own experiences with art, American modernity, and the Great War caused him to ask similar questions and seek similar answers concerning how artistic media could express the tempest of modern life. Though Dos Passos was an active agent in his artistic inquiries and accomplishments, however, we cannot assume that the relationship between Dos Passos and the European avant-garde was on equal footing. Dos Passos did initiate his contact with European painters, but it was he who learned and grew from them. In *Atlantic Crossings*, historian Daniel Rodgers suggests that the first three decades of the twentieth century provided a reciprocatory exchange of ideas between Europe and America in social politics and cultural ideas. Concerning highbrow, avant-garde painting and literature during this time, however, the balance was tipped toward the European influence upon American artists.
Dos Passos's Immersion into Modern Art

Dos Passos's first experience with modern art was at the International Exhibit of Modern Art in 1913. The exhibit showed at New York City's 69th Street Armory, but it is unclear whether Dos Passos actually saw it there. He did see the show at the April 28th through May 19th showing at Boston's Copley Hall where, because of limited space, all the American and some of the European painters were excluded, leaving 244 modernist paintings for the seventeen-year-old Dos Passos to absorb. He admitted later that he did not remember most of the painters or their works except Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, but he did recall the exhibit having a profound effect upon him; the art was innovative and modern in a way that he and his artistic friends would come to define modern.\(^6\)

Dos Passos confessed that it was not until 1916, his senior year at Harvard, that he really discovered what modern art would mean for him. He recalled that his friend Edward Nagel, a Harvard art major and stepson of prominent sculptor Gaston Lachaise, “infected both Cummings and me with the excitements and the experiments of the school of Paris.”\(^7\) Dos Passos learned the modernist credo: “in the arts everything was abolished; everything must be reinvented from scratch.” In Nagel’s room Dos Passos

---


read his first copies of *BLAST*, which contained Eliot's early poems, and "Diaghilev's Ballet and the novelties at the Boston opera and the Armory Show did the rest."\(^8\)

It was the war, however, that urged Dos Passos to think differently about both life and literature. Like American modernists E. E. Cummings, Ernest Hemingway and Malcolm Cowley, Dos Passos became an ambulance driver during the war. In his youthful optimism he had a voyeuristic yearning to witness first hand the social and political calamity that was demolishing Europe. After experiencing the devastation of war, however, he wrote in his diary, "I'm dying to write – but all my methods of doing things in the past merely disgust me now, all former methods are damned inadequate – Horror is so piled on horror that there can be no more – Despair gives place to delirious laughter – How damned ridiculous it all is."\(^9\) Having his naïveté of war erased, Dos Passos considered the fate of his writing and confessed that "all my past attempts are on the wrong tack." With the inadequacy of his pre-war literary writing firmly set in his mind Dos Passos devoted himself to finding a literary form that could some how correspond to a new world. For the old, prewar world of "cant and hypocrisy, all the damnable survivals, all the vestiges of old truths now putrid and false infect the air, choke you worse than German gas."\(^10\) Postwar society, for Dos Passos could no longer be defined by prewar literary techniques.

In search of a new literary form, Dos Passos's artistic education reached its climax in France during the summer of 1923, where he met the people who would vastly

---

\(^8\) Dos Passos, *Best Times*, p. 35.


\(^10\) Dos Passos, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 89.
influence his vision of modernist art and nurture his aesthetic style for describing the world. While in France he read James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses*, which inspired him of the possibilities of literature, commenting that if the book "didn't accomplish anything else – for me at least – it disposed of the current theory that the English novel was dead."\(^{11}\)

Paris was the home for many American postwar expatriates, and Gertrude Stein's Paris home at 27 rue de Fleurus was the nucleus of much expatriate and artistic activity.\(^{12}\) Dos Passos knew Stein and understood that she was an important collector of modern art.\(^{13}\) She had helped his friend Ernest Hemingway develop a perceptive eye for painting, so that he saw "things and people uncolored by sentiment or theory."\(^{14}\) Dos Passos was on friendly terms with Stein and would have been familiar with the modernist painters on her walls, but he was not a frequent visitor at her home as he deplored what he considered to be the "nose in the air attitude that always bored me about Bohemians."\(^{15}\) As a result, when in Paris, especially during the summer of 1923, he avoided the typical expatriate

---

\(^{11}\) Dos Passos, *Best Times*, 148.


\(^{14}\) Dos Passos, *Best Times*, p. 162. Stein had an eye for modern art and due to an inheritance had the financial means to obtain a number of paintings. She and her brother Leo had a remarkable collection, and Robert McAlmon relates in *Being Geniuses Together* that their collection was due to the fact that "painters naturally desire to sell their pictures, and it came to be that shortly it meant réclame to have Gertrude Stein possess one's work." The Museum of Modern Art's publication *Four Americans In Paris*, shows that by 1915, even after she split her studio from her brother Leo, Gertrude had 21 Picassos among the numerous works displayed on her walls, which included artists such as Cézanne, Matisse and Manet.

\(^{15}\) Dos Passos, *Best Times*, p. 153.
gatherings. He preferred solitude or quiet evenings with close expatriate friends such as Hemingway and Cummings, or the more luxurious furnishings in the villa of fellow expatriates Gerald and Sara Murphy, although he tried hard to cultivate "the pose of sidewalk proletarian to whom riches were vanity." He declared that "in the private universe I was arranging for myself, literary people generally, and particularly Greenwich Village and Paris exiles, were among the excommunicated categories. Their attitude toward life made me want to throw up."\(^{16}\)

The Murphys became the nexus for the friendships Dos Passos developed as an expatriate. He mingled with such artists as Natalie Goncharova, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Leger and Blaise Cendrars. He spent a good deal of time with Gerald in 1923, and the two quickly became close friends, binding a relationship that helped to shape Dos Passos’s vision of the material world.\(^{17}\) Concerning the import of individual artistic expression, Murphy resonated with Dos Passos’s own need for innovation. Murphy believed himself to be an original painter. Although he maintained close relationships with some of France’s greatest painters, like Leger and Picasso, he was not influenced by their work as much as by what they believed. Later in life Murphy recalled that "I had no desire to paint like Matisse, Picasso, or the others."\(^{18}\) Part of Murphy’s originality stemmed from his belief that there existed a symbiotic relationship between art

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 158.

\(^{17}\) Murphy infected Dos Passos with an enthusiasm for Diaghilev’s ballet, and according to Linda Miller in *Letter from the Lost Generation* the two spent the days and some nights together painting sets for the June 17th premiere of Stravinsky’s *Les Noces*. Through Murphy, Dos Passos was able to attend the rehearsals of the ballet, which increased his fascination with many things modern, including the ballet. Dos Passos used that experience to learn more about modern ballet’s techniques and staging, which not only underscored his dilettante interests in a variety of artistic media, it revealed the special attention Dos Passos’s paid to matters of form that were utilized in those media.

\(^{18}\) Rubin, p. 6.
and the sensory world. He actualized that conviction by drawing his painting material from his experiences of everyday life. Writer and friend Archibald MacLeish described Murphy as a painter immersed in his own time, not necessarily because of his conceptual originality, but because he had a passion for direct experience. That passion for unmitigated experience had also dominated Dos Passos’s psyche before the war and was the impetus for his itinerant lifestyle throughout the nineteen twenties. He was convinced that travel was the only thing that could satiate his desire to experience the world. He confessed that “at the slightest excuse I bolted for foreign parts. It was during these years that I lost track of the number of times I crossed the Atlantic.” Dos Passos recalled that young women he met at cocktail parties told him he was running away from himself. He admitted “that was partly true. Maybe I was running away from them. I never got around to explaining that I was running toward something too. It was the whole wide world.”

---

19 Dos Passos *Best Times*, p. 149.
Form

Dos Passos’s attentiveness to experience in both life and art compelled him to develop a form that could explore the manifold experiences of New York City without plunging the reader into a series of haphazard or chaotic images. In order to accomplish this task he approached the page in the same way a painter approached a canvas. Throughout the narrative he created a deliberate form for the city that enabled him to describe and contain the city within the text. Dos Passos’s connection with avant-garde painters imprinted upon him the primacy of developing form for both painting and writing.

In 1923, in France, before he began work on Manhattan Transfer, Dos Passos met Gerald Murphy’s painting instructor Natalie Goncharova, a Russian émigré who, at the time was designing the sets for the Diaghilev ballet. After meeting Goncharova he reminisced that “ever since I’ve had great respect for the Russian way of doing things.” Goncharova worked with a blend of Cubism and Futurism that used distinctive shapes and colors in lively semiabstract compositions; it developed its pictorial style from Russian folk and religious art. A decade earlier she, along with her lifelong partner Mikhail Larionov, co-founded the art form Rayonism, a style that encompassed all existing techniques of past art forms. Goncharova believed that other styles were simply

---

20 Dos Passos, Best of Times, 166.

points of departure for a Rayonist perception and construction of a picture. According to Larionov, Rayonism was a “crossing of reflected rays from various objects.” It focused upon line, color and “spatial forms that can arise from the intersection of the reflected rays of different objects, forms chosen by the artist’s will.” Larionov believed that Rayonism demonstrated the true freeing of art from the former realistic conventions that had previously oppressed the artistic community. On the periphery of the Russian Constructivist movement, Goncharova’s art embodied a synthesis of traditional and modern sources. She codified for Dos Passos an artistic approach that was grounded in tightly controlled form. For Goncharova, form, line and color determined the meaning of a work of art.

Because she drew from other artistic traditions Goncharova practiced the latest modes of avant-garde artistic expression. According to the short-lived publication Broom, published and avidly read by expatriates, she was a part of the arrival of a “‘proud and simple art’ that was based on plastic (formal) terms. These terms meant that the new art dispensed with the old ‘necessity of documentary representation,’ in favor of a ‘completely intellectual and speculative meaning based upon the abstract variables of line, form, and color.’ Goncharova reinforced for Murphy and Dos Passos the importance

---


of developing form first and then applying colors to the form later, imprinting upon the two young artists a strong respect for certain shapes and colors.\textsuperscript{25}

Goncharova was not the only advocate for the preeminence of form whom Dos Passos encountered. During the summer of 1923 he had the opportunity to commune with the expatriates Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, as well as Pablo Picasso and Fernand Leger. By that time Leger was painting in the style of Purism, a technique in which form was integral. The Purist painter did not create form in an imaginative vacuum. Purist ideology propagated the artist's need to find inspiration for the substance of a painting's formal structure from the surrounding industrial and technological world and transform that world into a new vision.\textsuperscript{26} The Purist mantra was that a "New Spirit" had arrived; it was a spirit of construction and synthesis that was guided by clear conceptual formal terms. Like the prewar Rayonism, which attempted to amalgamate the various cubist techniques, Purism was a post-war movement that tried to pull together all the aspects of the modern; it attempted to create a postwar artistic synthesis.\textsuperscript{27} Purism, touted by its 1920 – 1925 periodical \textit{L'Esprit nouveau} (The New Spirit), appealed to artists such as Dos Passos and Murphy because of its emphasis on the stimulation of the senses, which were meant to be contained on the canvas by structured conformations of form and color.\textsuperscript{28} The Purists averred that even against the background


\textsuperscript{26} Stewart, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{27} Christopher Green, \textit{Art in France: 1900-1940}, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 141.

of the chaotic world created by the war there could be order and harmony. For Dos Passos, controlling the chaotic images of Manhattan was vital, as contemporaneous literary scholar Joseph Warren Beach noted, Dos Passos’s formal structure in Manhattan Transfer was the nexus for a city where the social nexus was absent; Dos Passos created “an atomistic world, a moral chaos, set in a frame of cosmic order.”

Having completed hundreds of paintings as an amateur painter, Dos Passos understood the primacy of form when approaching the canvas. He was first exhibited at the Whitney Studio Club in January of 1923 for three weeks. Although Gertrude Whitney did not officially found the Whitney Museum of American Art until 1930, she began giving exhibitions twenty-five years earlier for American artists who were outside of academia, the venue in which most American painters were recognized and exhibited. During the 1920’s the club held annual exhibitions and this was the opportunity for many young modernist painters to get their first public showings. Dos Passos’s exhibition demonstrated elements of cubism and futurism that corresponded to his work in literature.

The form of his paintings was motivated, in part, by his Harvard training in Classical Greek and Latin literature, Greek philosophy, as well as Medieval and Renaissance art. These courses galvanized his conception of traditional classical and

---

29 Stewart, p. 8.


romantic art. Classical art revealed to him the primary artistic elements against which he would revolt, along with providing him with the impetus to be innovative. Dos Passos, who admitted that he never planned to be either a professional painter or writer, was nevertheless caught between which medium he would choose to spend the bulk of his time. Painting was in his blood, and in a 1918 letter to a friend, Dos Passos confessed “I’ve gone quite dippy about early Italian fresco painting – from Giotto to Botticelli – with Raphael all Italian painting seems to go to smash in vapid banality and a coloratura sort of ease.”

In the end, writing won out as his primary medium, but his experience as a painter taught him the techniques and meticulous patience to create an imaginative novel.

Under Goncharova’s tutelage a painter such as Murphy had to develop a formal shape prior to executing any other design in a painting. Murphy would start by subdividing the canvas into nonfigurative shapes. Then, depending on the shapes’ outlines, sizes, and position on the canvas, he would color the “weak” ones, giving them a more vibrant and imposing color so that they could hold their own on the plane of the picture. Murphy approached the painting process as if he were preparing and developing a scenic design. With unabated deliberation he first created a tempera sketch on paper. Then, using a pencil and a grid he transferred the outlines of the picture onto airplane linen that had been mounted on three-ply veneer panels. Finally, using oils, he painted in the design on the canvas. It was a painstaking process and Murphy took many months to

---

33 Nanney, p. 18.


35 Tempera is a painting technique in which a combination of water and egg yolk is used as a binder. It creates a film on the canvas and dries quickly.
complete a picture. As an amateur painter Dos Passos understood his friend’s deliberation on the canvas, but unlike the modernist painter, who could geometrically construct a formal shape of the city by visually manipulating the shapes on the canvas, Dos Passos had to rely solely on the descriptive device of verbally comparing the scale of objects within the novel’s pages. Scale, a comparative device for demonstrating the size of one object against a particular standard, allowed the writer to emulate the painting technique through the descriptive process of comparing and contrasting the size and space of objects in the text. Using the same technique as a painter, Dos Passos employed scale to place shapes in foreground or background positions for certain emphases.

Dos Passos would have appreciated his friend Georges Braque’s presentation of form in his townscape Houses at L’Estaque (1908), which demonstrated a formal structure that played with various positions of the houses to depict a scene that was both ominously large and compact.36 When compared to D.H. Kahnweier’s 1909 Photograph of Houses at L’Estaque, Braque’s painting opened the scene up. Braque cleared away the foliage from the view of the houses, stacked the houses in prisms and triangles, and brought them into the foreground, creating a sense that the viewer had a greater vision of the scene than was actually viewable. By effectively manipulating the scale of the town with the background of the canvas, Braque created a new visual dimension to offer the viewer his rendition of the town’s size and space.

In the novel Dos Passos could not simply imitate Braque’s manipulation of size and space. Though, like Braque, he desired to manipulate his image in order to create his own literary vision of Manhattan’s size and space, he had to confront the restrictions of

applying the visual art innovations to the non-visual medium of literature. To compensate, Dos Passos revealed his conception of the city’s size and shape by looking through his characters’ perceptions. That vision cleared away obstructions that limited an exhaustive view of the city. Through the characters the reader could scan the city’s skyline, peer into the harbor, as well as around the nearest corner into an alley or a bedroom. By utilizing the comparative device of scale Dos Passos opened up a vision of the city for the reader that was both ominously large and meticulously confining.

Picasso had introduced the portrayal of size through scale as a modernist painting technique two decades earlier, and through Sara Murphy Dos Passos had occasion in 1923 to meet him. Dos Passos was fascinated with Picasso but believed him to be just like his art, “impenetrable” and with no “offhand geniality,” because “the man and the work were inseparable.” For this reason Dos Passos generally kept his relationship with him on a casual basis, but he recognized the genius of Picasso’s work.\(^{37}\) In his 1926 translation of Blaise Cendrars’s poetry, Dos Passos cited Picasso as the first of the “cubist barricades” to send a “creative tidal wave” that began from Paris and covered the whole world.\(^{38}\) Picasso first demonstrated size through scale in *Nudes With Crossed Legs* (1906), a painting in which he created a background to contain very large figures in an environment where a viewer could not imagine any of the objects in the painting having a breath of air.\(^{39}\) Picasso also demonstrated the technique in Large *Bather* (1921), where he sought to contain a woman disproportionately large for the space provided on the canvas.


Picasso’s goal was to provide a visual weight beyond the actual dimension of the painting, knowing the potent psychological impact it created.\textsuperscript{40} The objects in the paintings seem to struggle to break free from the constrictive background.

Portraying that visual weight of the city in order to create a psychological heaviness was an elaborate but effective technique for Dos Passos. He invokes that sense of oppression by describing the city’s seemingly unlimited upward expansion. He dwarfs his characters against the city’s grandiose height. A cabin boy, supine on a harbor deck, gazes into the sky and compares the clouds to buildings, describing them as “great piled edifices with the sunlight crashing through between.”\textsuperscript{41} The metaphor of clouds as buildings indicates how the city’s literal buildings appear to extend into the sky, strutting as high as the clouds.

Dos Passos uses the enduring background of the sky as his standard for comparison. For the novel’s characters the sky functions like a theater set background that outlines the city’s vertical structures. One character views the sky as a background “behind cornices, tanks, roofpeaks, chimneys.”\textsuperscript{42} An unnamed taxi patron amidst the city’s buildings sees “the blue as a sapphire” sky beyond the roofs and chimneys.

The city continually protrudes into the sky, often obstructing portions of the sky’s brilliant colors, of which onlookers only get glimpses. Jimmy Herf, a struggling reporter, and one of the novel’s central characters, metaphorically sees the telescope shaft of the Woolworth Building jutting out into the middle of the “robin’s egg blue” sky. Stanwood

\textsuperscript{40} Cowling, p. 419.


\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Manhattan Transfer}, p. 35.
Emory, a minor character, looks out across the series of “tall walls, the birchlike cluster of downtown buildings,” that from his vantage point “shimmered up the rosy morning like a sound of horns through a chocolatebrown haze.”43 A waiter leans over a table and casually glances out the restaurant window to see beyond the “graystone parapet, the tops of a few buildings jutting like the last trees at the edge of a cliff.”44 Dos Passos even describes flagpoles up and down fifth avenue where the stars on the flags “jiggle sedately against the slate sky, the red and white stripes writhe against the clouds.” Whenever characters simply glance upward they see the city extending into the sky. In these passages the sky functions as a background and a shroud under which the inhabitants still live, but from which they cannot escape.

Not only are the denizens covered by the city’s skyline canopy, they are also framed by its seemingly endless perimeter. Early in the novel a character reminds the reader that New York is the second largest city in the world, and he believes he will see the day when “bridge after bridge spanning the East River have made Long Island and Manhattan one, when the Borough of Queens will be as much the heart and throbbing center of the great metropolis as is Astor Place today.”45 The characters have an impression that the city goes on indefinitely, that as far as one looks the city is there.

Characters move throughout the city and through their senses perceive parts of the city that are beyond their immediate surroundings. Jimmy Herf walks down the street and focuses on the occasional puddle on the sidewalk while noticing to his right and left the

43 Ibid., p. 251.
44 Ibid., p. 287.
“flickering patches of houses in the distance.” Moving the imagery from his feet to
distant dwellings makes Jimmy feel that no matter where he is, whether in an alley or a
building, he is still in the vast stretches of New York City. While he sits on a bench by
the Aquarium he notices a big white steamer passing in front of the Statue of Liberty. He
looks out along the shore and in spite of the “encumbering wharfhouses the end of
Manhattan seemed to him like the prow of a barge pushing slowly and evenly down the
harbor.” The city extends into the horizon from wherever he looks. Ellen Thatcher, the
other major character, realizes that the city is always larger than her immediate
environment when she feels the warm wind from the river and hears a steamboat whistle
while standing in the middle of Broadway Avenue. In another scene she covers her
apartment window with curtains to hide the “blotchy pattern of red and purple flowers the
vista of desert backyards and brick flanks of downtown houses,” that are always part of
her view.

Along with showing how the city stretches into the sky and beyond a character’s
immediate environment, Dos Passos develops the internal size of the city by having the
reader travel with the characters all through the city, naming specific streets and buildings
along the way. On a Washington Square bus Ellen passes Fifth Avenue and she
witnesses detailed images. “Sunshades, summer dresses, straw hats were bright in the sun
that glinted in squares on the upper windows of houses, lay in bright slivers on the hard
paint of limousines and taxicabs.” The bus takes her to Fortysecond Street, then to

46 Ibid., p. 317.
47 Ibid., p. 246.
48 Ibid., p. 153.
49 Ibid., p. 186.
Eighth Street where she departs and walks from 105th street to Fiftyninth through the park. What seems to be an inane list of streets allows readers experience the immediacy of the urbanscape. As a modernist painter filled in space on a canvas to connote a sense of confinement, Dos Passos created a city that was immeasurably large, yet compact and stifling so that many of the novel’s characters find their environment psychologically constrictive. Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) emphasized positive and negative space by distorting the empty space so that the viewer did not exactly know what was solid or void, opaque or transparent. Also concerned with blurring positive and negative space, Dos Passos manipulated the placement of objects in the novel to create a city where space seemed to be an invaluable but limited commodity. Art historian John Golding suggests that the initial impression of *Les Demoiselles* was violence and unrest. *Manhattan Transfer* also depicted the violence and unrest of the city by filling in the empty space with a flood of images that barraged characters. Dos Passos accounted for the minutest details including a description of a fly gleaning itself on a window seal. He filled in the gaps of action to which he believed other American writers did not attend. Therefore, instead of devising a more traditional linear plot that branched out into sub-motifs, Dos Passos modeled his novel on the collage, a collection of literary images pasted together to create a thematic whole.

The collage technique, adapted by Guillaume Apollinaire, was explained by Italian Futurist Gino Severini as an attempt “to comprehend the sense of a more profound

---


51 Hughes, p. 21.


53 Perloff, 48.
and secret inner reality which would have been born from the contrast of materials employed directly as things placed in juxtaposition to lyrical elements." 54 In short, collage combined visual and literary art. Numerous critics, contemporaneous and current have recognized Manhattan Transfer's technique as a general work in collage because of the numerous short scenes that are pieced together. Dos Passos used collage to engorge Manhattan with disparate yet cohesive images, allowing him to create an image of the city that was too big and crushing for any one character's experience. 55 This approach was consistent with Picasso's ideology that the use of collage gave the "idea that different textures can enter into a composition to become the reality in the painting that competes with the reality in nature." 56

Collage was developed by painters who incorporated text amongst the visual imagery. Upon closer investigation of Picasso's Bowl with Fruit, Violin, and Wineglass (1913) one notices that the newspaper texts in the painting are not a random selection but daily Parisian events such as sports, crime, religion, crime, sex, technology, and the financial world. The newspaper texts surround the woman/violin figure at the center of the painting, offering a backdrop of the current issues confronting society at the time. 57 Collage provided the artist with maximum imagery without sacrificing thematic continuity.

56 Louis Aragon, Les Collages (Paris: Hermann, 1980), found in Perloff, p. 44.
57 Perloff, 50.
To compliment the fragmented collage structure of the novel, Dos Passos included newspaper text in order to actuate Picasso's ideal of creating a work of art that competed with the reality of nature. Collage allowed Dos Passos to compare and contrast reality and fiction in order to offset the realities of urban life for closer analysis. While sitting in a barber chair Bud reads "ADmits killing crippled mother..." The narrative continues then Dos Passos interjects "PARKER'S FRIENDS PROTECT," followed by more narrative and then "MOB STONES..." The reader gets pieces of the story, intentionally capitalized to draw attention to the article. Dos Passos then actually cites two paragraphs from the newspaper, allowing the reader to get behind Bud's very eyes and read: "Nathan Sibbetts, fourteen years old, broke down today after two weeks of steady denial of guilt and confessed to the police that he was responsible for the death of his aged and crippled mother, Hannah Sibbetts, after a quarrel in their home at Jacob's Creek, six miles above this city." Bud sets the newspaper down and walks out of the barber shop. Dos Passos records his thoughts: "Outside the air smells of crowds, is full of noise and sunlight. No more'n a needle in a haystack... 'An I'm twentyfive years old,' he muttered aloud. Think of a kid fourteen... No more'n a needle in a haystack."

Collage offered Dos Passos a way to describe and disclose the psychological impact of the city upon individuals.

As a writer thoroughly immersed in his time, Dos Passos also used the newspaper text to set the novel within its temporal context, freeing the writer from conventional literary attempts to historically place the novel. Instead of providing calendar dates he drops clues as to when events are taking place. For example, Dos Passos avoids directly discussing events of the Great War but chronologically it occupies the middle of the
novel’s narrative. He announces its inception through a character’s casual reading:

"ASSASINATION OF ARCHDUKE WILL HAVE GRAVE CONSEQUENCES.
AUSTRIAN ARMY MOBILIZED." The reader realizes that the narrative is
cronologically divided by the worldwide cataclysm.

Not all contemporaneous literary critics appreciated the collage technique in
_MANHATTAN TRANSFER_. Editor Paul Elmer More described the book as an “explosion in a
cesspool,” most likely referring to a New York Times art critic’s comment about
Duchamp's _NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE_ as an “explosion in a shingle factory.” More
recognized, however, that Dos Passos had been influenced by the French and admitted
that the novel was “too knowing to be called crude intellectually or perhaps even
artistically.”¹ H.L. Mencken, the inflammatory journalist with a Victorian aesthetic
commented that the novel was “incoherent, and not infrequently very dull.” Michael
Gold, playwright, novelist and co-founder of the _NEW MASSES_ with Dos Passos admitted
that he did not entirely understand what Dos Passos was doing in a method that was too
new and experimental for his tastes, but he knew that Dos Passos’s attempt at criticism in
the novel was “fiercely honest and accurate.”¹ Commenting on the novel more than a
decade after its publication, literary critic Alfred Kazin understood Dos Passos’s reliance
on contemporary poetry, but like Mencken seemed to have missed Dos Passos’s formal
intentions, suggesting that he had no real style of his own and though the form was
indeed experimental it was inconclusive and muddy.¹ In _THE NATION_, reviewer Allen Tate
recognized that Dos Passos was a modernist writer who “measured the current taste,” or
was “caught in some of its deeper extensions,” who approached the city as an artists but

---

¹ MANHATTAN TRANSFER, p. 183.
did not raise or solve any aesthetic difficulties. Although Tate did not explain what he meant by aesthetic difficulties, reviewer Cyril Hume may have conveyed Tate's sentiments by suggesting that Dos Passos had "felt but he [had] failed to express quite intelligibly that awful and mechanical din which harries us day and night in the City." ¹

Despite the opponents of Manhattan Transfer's formal elements, a common denominator among the critics was their perception that Dos Passos's form was intentional and deliberate. In 1925, a New Republic reviewer compared Manhattan Transfer to a Sears, Roebuck catalogue but considered the catalogue a "trifle more interesting." Comparing the novel to a painter's canvas, however, he suggested that it left "a clear impression of its carefully thought-out design." ¹

There were, however, a few critics who believed that Dos Passos had captured something unique about New York by utilizing collage. Edmund Wilson, literary critic and friend of Dos Passos, understood the novel's modernist impulse, suggesting that it was the "best modern book about New York that I have read." Wilson, responding to reviewers who were confused by the disjointed non-linear novel absent of plot, believed that the novel's confusion was "genuine, not affected; it is life, not a pose." The important aspect of Wilson's review is that he recognized Dos Passos's intent in the novel's form, suggesting "Manhattan Transfer is still a greater ravel of flights from nowhere to nowhere. But, at least, the author knows it, and gets a kind of tragic significance into the fact." ¹ The greatest accolade came from Sinclair Lewis, who had only met Dos Passos once by the time the novel was published. He praised the book as the first sign of the "foundation of a whole new school of novel-writing," and even went as far as to suggest that the novel was more important than anything written by Stein,
Proust and Joyce with the exception that “Dos Passos is interesting.” Lewis regarded their novels with respect as they are “treatises on harmony, very scholarly,” but “confoundedly dull” whereas “Manhattan Transfer is the moving symphony itself.” Lewis recognized Dos Passos’s use of collage and believed that Dos Passos’s ability to intertwine the stories of so many individuals were the formal structure’s masterpiece.\(^1\)

To compliment the collage, Dos Passos developed the spatial form through his characters’ senses of sight, sound, and smell. Emphasizing the visual, Dos Passos describes Jimmy Herf on his first boat trip into the harbor where he sees the innumerable docks, boats, and sails in the foreground of the cityscape. He notices a barge carrying a “whole train of cars,” conveying a sense of the city’s encroachment upon the harbor.\(^59\) In the introductory caption to the second chapter Dos Passos explains that “Steel, glass, tile, concrete will be the materials of the skyscrapers. Crammed on the narrow island the million-windowed buildings will jut glittering, pyramid on pyramid like the white cloudhead above a thunderstorm.”\(^60\) Even on the roof of an apartment building a delivery boy is still ensconced in the city’s superstructure as “chimneys stood up in alert ranks all about him, black against the glare from the streets.”\(^61\) Ellen’s father, Ed Thatcher stares out his apartment bay window to see an endless stream of automobiles.\(^62\) The caption of section two chapter five provides the most visual sense of the confining city street. “A block deep four ranks of cars wait at the grade crossing, fenders in taillights, mudguards

\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 69.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 12.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 149.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 197.
scraping mudguards. . . cars from Babylon and Jamaica, cars from Montauk, Port Jefferson, Patchogue. . . cars full of asters and wet bathingsuits, sunsinged necks.”

Wherever a character looks, the space of the city is filled with objects or activity.

Sound is one of Dos Passos’s most creative ways to demonstrate space. A minor character sitting in a café hears a women scream along with the “scrape of the shoes of hairyhoofed grayhorses and the grind of the wheels of producewagons [that] made a deafening clatter and filled the air with sharp dust.”63 Empty space is a ruse; the city overflows with noise. Characters hear Eleventh Avenue as it is “full of icy dust, of grinding rattle of wheels and scrape of hoofs on the cobblestones. Down the railroad tracks comes the clang of a locomotive bell and the clatter of shunting freight-cars.”64 Many of the auditory images are metaphors that capture the reader’s imagination as to what life on the street sounds like. One street is described as noisy as a brass band, “full of tambourine rattle, brassy shine, crystal glitter, honk and whir of motors.”65 The city is never quiet and one can never escape the sounds that permeate everything. A character stands in a construction site. He is visually blocked from the rest of the city, and for a moment feels peaceful, but he cannot escape the “rasp of traffic that seeped through the hoarding.”66 The sound penetrates building walls. In his apartment, as a child, Jimmy hears the sounds of wheels, of shouting, and of a band playing in the distance.67 From within her kitchen, Ellen Thatcher hears the rumbling of trucks, clattering sounds from

63 Ibid., p. 19.
64 Ibid., p. 47.
65 Ibid., p. 302.
66 Ibid., p. 190.
67 Ibid., p. 71.
other apartment kitchens, and from “all around came a growing rumble of traffic beginning.”

Finally, Dos Passos demonstrates the cramped space of the city through the sense of smell. Like sounds, smells invade the matterless air. Jimmy Herf turns up a street “smelling of asphalt and crowds.”68 On another street he watches a steamroller roll back and forth over the hot tar where a smell of “scorched grease and steam and hot paint came from it.”69 As a nostalgic sense smell allows readers to reminisce about similar experiences with smell and transfer those experiences from the drama unfolding within the pages to their own memory, whether the images are pleasantly fragrant or stomach-turning pungent. As Ellen Thatcher walks along 105th Street “a fetor of mattresses and sleep seeped out from the blocks of narrow-windowed houses,” while out in the street the garbage cans “stank sourly.”70 Two youths escaping a gang of kids slide through a construction yard fence. Their nostrils fill with the river, cedar planks, and sawdust.71 In a subway car a messenger boy is pressed up against a woman who smells of perfume, and Dos Passos adds to the boy’s confinement by placing him in an environment where “elbows, packages, shoulders, buttocks, juggled closer with every lurch of the screeching express.”72 Odors erase any remaining empty spaces and fill the air in areas of the city that one can neither see nor hear. By filling in the city’s space with the character’s sensory perceptions Dos Passos is able to display the never ending sense of confinement.

68 Ibid., p. 70.
69 Ibid., p. 112.
70 Ibid., p. 154.
71 Ibid., p. 297.
72 Ibid., p. 148.
Approaching the novel’s form as a painter enabled Dos Passos to formulate the city’s shape by emphasizing its upward, outward, and internal size. He used collage and characters’ senses to fill the empty space of the city’s canvas. The novel’s form contained the socially variegated experience of New York City and its inhabitants. Dos Passos exploited the city’s vast size and its confining space to depict its psychological effect upon its inhabitants. He described a picture of the city in which the individual was relegated to a paltry existence, lost within the great expanse, yet unable to move freely.
Color

Post-war Purist painters such as Goncharova and Leger developed the formal structure of a painting first. They would have then filled in the form with color to bring the visual depiction to life. To successfully apply color, painters needed to exercise acute visual perception. In 1922, the Director of The Denver Art Association, George William Eggers wrote that new mediums such as motion picture required an artist who “acquired much of the vision of his seeing eye through an early training in art.”

From an early age Dos Passos the artist was piqued by visual sensation. Dos Passos biographer, Townsend Ludington maintains that sixteen year old Dos Passos, while in Italy, had to be excited by the architecture, art and history throughout Florence. His diary records his precocious writing ability which already evinced an eye for visual detail: “When I awoke this morning & looked out of my window a most beautiful panorama greeted my eyes. Delphi lies near the top of one of the spurs of Parnassus and below it stretches a deep valley with numerous gorges leading to it. In the distance one could see the bay and beyond a little slip of land, the Corinthian Gulf. The mountains of Achaea, several of them snow-capped, occupied the far horizon. I took a short walk up the road which winds along high above the valley before breakfast which I enjoyed very

much.” 74 Wanting to make the world tangible, Dos Passos utilized vivid sensory imagery in much of his early writings. It was not a matter of simply tapping his imagination; he actually saw the world’s detailed array of images. Later, about New York, he wrote “I delighted in exploring the creeks and channels and backwaters of the city. . . always as the visitor, the tourist on his way to the railroad station.” 75 Dos Passos the adult dismissed the literary ability revealed in his teenage writings, as probably do most mature authors, but those early writings demonstrated the complimentary affect his perceptive eye for description would eventually have upon his novels and travel narratives during the nineteen twenties.

Having a keen eye for visual detail Dos Passos held himself accountable to never miss a chance to be learning through informal education. He believed that life offered a constant repository of material for the artist. In a 1918 letter he complained about his own apathy and complacency toward writing, but stated his philosophy about how to pursue it. “Never let a chance go by’ – a chance for an adventure, a story, a dinner. Life doesn’t often hold out her hand to you – I think one should take it when she does and let the consequences take care of themselves, rather than stop to ask if she wears gloves or not.” 76 Dos Passos never let his contact with the world subside and he admitted that he did his best to keep up with everybody that he ever liked. Instead of dominating those relationships, he simply claimed that “Listening I enjoyed more than talking.” 77 His


75 Dos Passos, Best Times, p. 149.


77 Dos Passos, Best Times, p. 156.
detailed perception of the world, love of learning, and enjoyment of relationships prepared him to consume, digest, and utilize the techniques that the avant-garde introduced to him.

Modernist painters galvanized for Dos Passos the vitality of visual awareness. Dos Passos described an experience walking along the Seine with Gerald Murphy and Fernand Leger as the "first of many marvelous walks." He recalled that Leger, a son of a Norman butcher, "seemed to me to have a sort of butcher's approach to painting, violent, skillful, accurate. Combined with this was a surgeon's delicacy of touch that showed up in the intricate gestures of his hands." While walking up the quay Leger and Murphy fanned each other's flames of visual perception. Leger maintained a visual fury and kept pointing out shapes and colors with a cool originality, while "Gerald's perceptions were rational, discriminating, with a tendency to a mathematical elegance. Gerald's offhand comments would organize vistas of his own." Murphy and Leger "picked out winches, the flukes of an anchor, coils of rope, the red funnel of a towboat, half a woman's face seen behind geraniums through the casement window of the cabin of a barge." The transformational effect on Dos Passos was immense. He recalled that "instead of the hackneyed and pastel tinted Tuileries and bridges and barges and bateaux mouches on the Seine, we were walking through a freshly invented world. The banks of the Seine never looked banal again after that walk." Those walks indelibly imprinted the importance of visual experience into Dos Passos's mind and provided him with visual examples of the relationship between form and color, which solidified in his thinking the importance of expressing experience in vivid colorful language. Dos Passos's liberal use of color

---

78 Dos Passos, *Best Times*, p. 164.
illuminated the structure of his novel in the same way that Murphy learned from Goncharova to add color in order to illuminate weak shapes.

The primacy of color kept painting and its techniques in the forefront of Dos Passos's mind. In order to accentuate the colorful aspect of *Manhattan Transfer* Dos Passos painted the cover for the first edition. *Watercolor of New York Harbor* displays a crowded building scene that dominates the center of the picture. Half of the buildings' colors are muted primary red and yellow, the visual colors of fire, a constant theme in the novel. These color-filled buildings offset the series of black and white buildings, creating a sharp contrast in the city as if one is looking at the city during night and day simultaneously. The scale of the harbor pales in comparison to the convoluted cityscape as the buildings bear down upon the waterfront. The dotted dark blue harbor with red and yellow boats provides contrast while connoting a never ending activity to the city. To aid in the contrast, a series of white jagged shapes sporadically cover large sections of the city, creating the effect of a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. The cover creates a pictorial mood of the city commensurate with the novel's narrative.

Like the cover, the novel opens up in the harbor. Dos Passos reveals his propensity for descriptive imagery in the novel's first sentence: "Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads that heave between the splintered plank walls, the green waves spume under the round bow as the ferry, skidding

---

79 Virginia Carr, "Dos Passos, Painter and Playwright: New Possibilities in Research," *Resources for American Literary Study*, 1983 Autumn, 13:2, p. 209. No art historian has yet to undertake a serious study of Dos Passos's paintings and Carr has suggests that an analysis of Dos Passos the painter would be beneficial for understanding Dos Passos's approach to art in general. A number of venues have picked up Dos Passos's paintings for exhibitions over the last 75 years.

on the tie, crashes, gulps the broken water, slides, settles slowly into the slip.”

The first colorful image of the city is of a boat docking into a garbage littered harbor. Although this and many other images represent the city’s decay, the novel is replete with beautiful images of human accomplishment. Dos Passos understood New York City to be a whirling contradiction, a city filled with people of broken dreams who were often at the mercy of the city’s sheer mass, and the socially elite who utilized the city’s political and social machinery to realize their ambitions. At Ellen’s birth, father Ed Thatcher flits his eyes around the hospital room, noticing “rows of beds under bilious gaslight, a sick smell of restlessly stirring bedclothes, faces fat, lean, yellow, white.” His eyes move to the window and he looks down onto the trees in the square that are “tangled in blue cobwebs. Down the avenue lamps are coming on marking off with green shimmer brickpurple blocks of houses; chimney pots and water tanks cut sharp into a sky flushed like flesh.”

For Ed, looking out the window is “like looking down into water.” The colors give the impression of a sea of people from which he cannot escape. 82 Dos Passos often describes the sea as black, symbolizing its density. 83 He uses the same image when Ed shows his daughter Ellen the immigrant ships pulling into Ellis Island where the “decks are black with people.” 84

Dos Passos plays with images of light. Reflections during the day and electric lights at night reveal the tension of a perpetually active city that wants to conceal is darker seedier side. Morose Bud Kornpenning often walks through the city under cover of

---

81 Manhattan Transfer, p. 3.
82 Ibid., p. 6.
83 Ibid., p. 54.
84 Ibid., p. 64.
the dark and observes the lights that the night city exudes. The tension surfaces as Bud lays down on the gray rubbish slide next to the wharf as the sunset's light "flamed in the windows of factories on the Long Island side, flashed in the portholes of tugs, lay in swaths of curling yellow and orange over the swift browngreen water, glowed on the curved sails of a schooner." Running up the street Bud again sees the revealing effect of light as "Bars yawned bright to them at the corners of rainseething streets, Yellow light off mirrors and brass rails and gilt frames round pictures of pink naked women was looped and slopped into whiskeyglasses guzzled fiery with tipped back head, oozed bright through the blood, popped bubbly out of ears and eyes, dripped spluttering off fingertips."

Color revealed the constant human activity in the city. Colorful advertisements highlighted the cityscape, corporate signs suspended from buildings, billboards supported by wooden scaffolding. By 1925 New York City had 12,228 advertising signs throughout the city. The rampant commercialism appears early in the novel as an unnamed character stares at an advertisement. Dos Passos provides the visual energy of the sign, declaring "It was a highbrowed cleanshaven distinguished face with arched eyebrows and a bushy neatly trimmed mustache, the face of a man who had money in the bank. Under it in copybook writing was the signature King C. Gillette."86

The very title of the novel was based on a huge sign "MANHATTAN TRANSFER" that was posted above a train terminal in New Jersey. It was the transfer

85 Ibid., p. 66.

86 Manhattan Transfer, p. 11. Besides being a testament of American commercialism it may have been a reference to Murphy's Razor, which displayed a Gillette razor, and was exhibited the same year as Manhattan Transfer's publication. Pointed out to me by Brian McHale, Professor of English at Ohio State University.
station for honeymooners who were traveling from Manhattan to Atlantic City. The novel suggests that behind the signs, behind the advertisements, behind the opulence of the American dream, lays the urban reality of crime and despair."

In a 1920 letter to a friend Dos Passos decided that “New York is rather funny – like a badly drawn cartoon – everybody looks and dresses like the Arrow-collar man.” He finished the letter with “After all N.Y.’s damn jolly to look at. Babylon gone mad.” New York offered a repository of images with which a young aspiring author could work. By 1920, Manhattan alone had 2,284,103 inhabitants. The daily newspaper, which he continually quoted in his “Newsreel” sections of the USA Trilogy, recorded many of the 5.4 murders per 100,000 people between the years 1921 to 1925. An avid reader of the New York Times Dos Passos understood both the city’s vitality and its danger. In a letter to friend and writer Arthur MeCombs, Dos Passos admitted that after he had finished Manhattan Transfer that it was a novel “full of niceties of observation & the total effect is certainly to give one the feel of the wonderful horror which is N.Y.”

The painter’s use of color in the novel enabled Dos Passos to draw into focus parts of American life that he wanted to disclose. The vivid color images were Dos Passos’s way of giving life to the city, preventing a sterile depiction of the city’s structured size and space. He transformed ordinary city streets when he described “the

---


88 Dos Passos, Fourteenth Chronicle, p. 299.

sunstriped tunnel hung with skyblue and smokedsalmon and mustardyellow quilts. His use of color to illuminate characters, social settings, and events compelled contemporaneous literary critic Warren Beach to describe Manhattan Transfer as a Kaleidoscope.

Dos Passos employed color in the novel to compliment a multifaceted and disjointed form, to highlight shapes, and to create contrast in the story. Although his use of color and imagery to highlight various themes was creative, it was not particularly innovative, as many pre-modern authors used color to depict certain motifs and moods. Dos Passos's originality was the deliberate application of color upon a literary canvas to bring New York City to life.

---

90 Manhattan Transfer, p. 10.

Motion

Painters first outlined the shapes on canvas in order to establish the painting’s form and then began filling the shapes in with color to bring the painting to life. Yet, for many modernist painters, such as the Futurists, a painting needed more than just color to depict that life; it also needed a sense of dynamism, a sense of motion to explore the accelerated pace of life that was considered to be a primary post-war social phenomenon. The Great War awakened the modernist consciousness to the drastic implications of technology and the machine age. Like Dos Passos, many modernist authors fixated on what seemed to be America’s love affair with new technology. Dos Passos’s desire to expose the implications of technology and the pace of life compelled him to utilize Futurist and cinematic techniques in Manhattan Transfer which drew the reader into a cinematic experience of a city alive with movement.

In the visual arts, Futurism contributed the idea that fragmentation, contrast, and the interplay of discordant materials on a canvas was a direct expression of the speed and diversity of modern life.92 One of the movement’s founders, Umberto Boccioni, wrote in his essay Futurist Paintings: Technical Manifesto 1910, that “all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of

speed." The Futurists captured motion and speed and integrated it with dynamism, the fluid sense of movement from one image to another.

From Futurism Manhattan Transfer incorporated Simultaneism, a technique inspired by two of Dos Passos’s friends, painters Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Simultaneous action in art reflected the dynamism of experience in life. In a 1925 essay Robert Delaunay understood Simultaneism to be “simultaneousness of color, simultaneous contrasts and all uneven measures issuing out of colour, conform to their expression in their representative movement: this is the only reality to construct a picture.” Delaunay rebutted Futurist claims on the term, but emphasized a mutual innovation in painting where all useless elements are completely eradicated for the creation of a new geometry. Delaunay suggested that “Life is movement! It is crucial that everything be in motion, that images move one after another.” Blaise Cendrars, friend of both the Delaunays and Dos Passos, suggested that Simultaneism used contrast to demonstrate a most “profound point of view—reality—form—construction—


94 Green, Leger and the Avant-Garde, p. 81. The pre-war Futurist painters lauded Leger for his acknowledgment of their innovations. Umberto Boccioni stated that “Leger’s article [The Origins of Painting and Its Representational Value (1913)] is a true act of Futurist faith which gives us great satisfaction,” because Leger agreed with them that present-day life was “more fragmented and faster moving than life in pervious eras.” Because of life’s fragmented nature, Leger modified the Futurist portrayal of dynamism as fluid motion to what he called “dynamic divisionism.” Green suggests that in dynamic divisionism the fluid movement from one image to another is destroyed by the sharpness of the breaks between different images, creating an artistic portrayal of dissonant contrast. Natalie Goncharova set the precedent for using Futurist techniques in literature when she illustrated poet Alexei Kruchenykh’s volume Journey across the Whole World. This collaboration demonstrated the Futurist drive to liberate the word and to abolish the traditional boundaries between genres.


representation—life.”^97 For avant-garde painters Simultaneism was not just a technique; it was a mode of presenting reality that was truer to the experience of life than other modes of artistic presentation.

Simultaneist painters used the technique because it allowed the viewer to seemingly move around a two-dimensional object as if it were three-dimensional; they could experience the canvas as one would experience reality. In his memoirs Dos Passos reminisced about the effect of Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, recalling that it gave him the impression of cinematic motion and speed. Duchamp admitted his dependence upon the cinema for *Nude*; he wanted to emulate the cinematic montage which allowed the viewer to see two different places at one time.

For many artists Simultaneism became an effective technical expression for the kinetic postwar society. In *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos used simultaneity in order to allow the reader to experience a single event from different places within the city and at different times within the narrative. He describes an event from one character’s point of view and then has a different character discover the same event in a different scene. The reader witnesses the event from two or more perspectives. In one scene Dos Passos describes Ellen Thatcher’s wardrobe, paying no more attention to her red hat than any other article of clothing. A few scenes later, in a different part of the city, a man looks up from the sidewalk and notices a taxi transporting a woman with a red hat. No more is said but the attentive reader knows that Ellen has left her coterie at her apartment and is

---

travelling alone down Broadway. The seemingly banal description of a red hat shifts the reader to a different time and place within the city.

In another seemingly inconsequential description Dos Passos utilizes simultaneity to describe the movement of events in the memory of the reader. "The morning has grown bleak. Leaden clouds have settled down over the city. 'Git up old skin an bones,' shouts Gus Jerking at the gelding's head. Eleventh Avenue is full of ice dust, of grinding rattle of wheels and scrape of hoofs on the cobblestones. Down the railroad tracks comes the clang of a locomotive bell and the clatter of shunting freightcars."98 Without a change in paragraph, the next sentence has Gus talking gently to his wife in bed about moving out of the city because of its dangers. What the reader does not yet know, is that the description of Eleventh Avenue full of icy dust, and the grind of wheels on the cobblestones describes a serious accident. Dos Passos waits until the next chapter to introduce newspaper headlines "ANOTHER ACCIDENT ON ELEVENTH AVENUE TRACKS." The reference not only titillates the civil suit lawyer George Baldwin, who relishes the thought of a new client who will surely need his services, it also reminds the reader of the crash sounds a few pages earlier. The reader concludes that the scene with Gus talking to his wife actually occurred some time before the accident. By manipulating chronology and disclosing information at certain times the reader reflects upon the accident scene at two different times, which provides a sense of temporal dynamism, and suggests that in the city, in modern life, time is not incrementally consistent. Eventually the reader learns that Gus lives but has been crippled, when late in the novel someone witnesses a man hobbling across a street with a cane. He does not mention Gus's name.

98 Manhattan Transfer, p. 47.
but Dos Passos once again piques the reader's memory to move back in time to when Gus was crippled by his collision with the train.

Dos Passos's use of simultaneity around Ellen's memory discloses different circumstances about her life and the modern world in which she lives. On her way to honeymoon in Atlantic City, Ellen Thatcher gazes out the train window onto the rain soaked landscape that reminds her of a childhood song her parents taught her when it rained:

Oh it rained forty days  
And it rained forty nights  
And it didn't stop till Christmas  
And the only man that survived the flood  
Was longlegged Jack of the Isthmus.  

The brief mention of Longlegged Jack of the Isthmus becomes the Chapter Two title in the second section of the novel, a chapter where Ellen contemplates her childhood happiness that so eludes her present life. The chapter ends with Ellen in bed and the reader knows that Ellen’s childhood innocence and happiness are gone. No rain, no childhood memories, only a rumble of traffic surrounds her as she realizes she is hungry and alone. The bed she sits upon becomes a "raft o which she was marooned alone, always alone, afloat on a growling ocean. A shudder went down her spine. She drew her knees up closer to her chin."  

After another rainstorm, Long Legged Jack of the Isthmus comes up again when Ellen tells her husband Stan about the song she learned as a child. Stan's response is simply befuddlement at why anyone would have children, declaiming that "Procreation is

99 Ibid., p. 118.

100 Ibid., p. 168.
an admission of an incomplete organism. Procreation is an admission of defeat.\textsuperscript{101}

Through the simultaneous device of mentioning the \textit{Longlegged Jack of the Isthmus} in different scenes Dos Passos gives us different visions of Ellen reminiscing about her childhood happiness, confronting her own loneliness in the city, and a reprehensible social view of children and families from a modern mindset. The title of the song appears once again when Stan thinks of the song as he looks at the buildings that are piled up like white clouds above a thunderstorm. The reference to flood and water again appears as Stan wishes he were a skyscraper, a structure that is able to rise above the tumultuous city.

Simultaneity evinces the modernist conviction that multiple perspectives more accurately represent the accelerated pace of life of post-war society better than the traditional single perspective.\textsuperscript{102} In her renowned essay \textit{Modern Fiction}, Virginia Woolf declared that the mind receives a myriad of impressions and the modernist writer should “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace


the pattern, however, disconnected and incoherent in appearance."\textsuperscript{103} Dos Passos rendered the mental imagery, the subjective method, as modernist literary scholar Randall Stevenson calls it, to organize the perception of the city as it came to the minds of his many characters. With the subjective method he created multiple perspectives of the city.\textsuperscript{104}

Like Duchamp, Dos Passos was enamored with cinematic montage.\textsuperscript{105} In a 1967 address he affirmed that the “artist must record the fleeting world the way the motion picture film recorded it. By contrast, juxtaposition, montage, he could build drama into his narrative.” Dos Passos went on to say, specifically of Manhattan Transfer, “I started a rapportage on New York. Some of the characters out of abandoned youthful narratives got into the book, but there was more to the life of a great city than you could cram into any one hero’s career. The narrative must stand up off the page. Fragmentation. Contast. Montage. The result was Manhattan Transfer.”\textsuperscript{106}

Affected by the memory of Duchamp and “some of the poets who went along with the cubism of the painters of the School of Paris” Dos Passos thought that New


\textsuperscript{105} Michael Spindler, “John Dos Passos and the Visual Arts,” Journal of American Studies 15 (December 1981), p. 396; David Sanders in Writers at Work: The “Paris Review” Interviews, ed. George Plimpton, 4th ser. (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 272. Some critics have incorrectly suggested that Sergei Eisenstein’s films were the impetus for Dos Passos. Dos Passos had not yet seen Eisenstein’s work so his introduction to montage probably had American origins. Literary critic Michael Spindler contends that Eisenstein’s films could not have influenced Dos Passos’s writings of the early 1920’s because his first film Strike was never released in America and his second film Potemkin was not released until 1926. Part of the confusion is due to Dos Passos’s own memory. In an interview with David Sanders in July 1962, Dos Passos said that he may have seen Eisenstein’s Potemkin before writing Manhattan Transfer, but he could not remember for certain. We now know that he did not see the movie before writing the novel, but he believed he had seen D.W. Griffith’s 1915 Birth of a Nation and 1916 Intolerance.

\textsuperscript{106} Dos Passos, Major Nonfictional Prose, p. 272.
York, rather than European cities, was the appropriate city to connote motion and speed. In a 1915 interview Marcel Duchamp rebuked American artists’ reliance upon the European art tradition. He declared that “New York itself is a work of art. Its growth is harmonious. And I believe that your idea of demolishing old buildings, old souvenirs, is fine. The dead should not be permitted to be so much stronger than the living. We must learn to forget the past, to live our own life in our own time.” In the same interview, Duchamp announced that European art was dead, claiming that “America is the country of the art of the future.”

Duchamp was not the only European artist to recognize the vitality of the New York avant-garde. Many Europeans and the majority of American artists still considered Europe the center of the art world but Duchamp and other Dada and Futurist artists realized that America’s technophilia was more passionate than Europe’s. New York exemplified the mechanization that these European artists sought to capture in their art. Some of the European avant-garde believed that European cities had tended to stagnate as cultural innovators by the time of the Great War. Duchamp and his coterie believed that by 1913 France was no longer the central arbiter of artistic taste.

The cultural icons that had for so many years made Paris the center of the art world were waning in their power to influence. For many avant-garde artists a new age had dawned and Leger, along with other avant-garde painters, believed America to be the most

---


complete expression of the technological age. America was the place where art, trade, and industry were closely allied.\textsuperscript{109}

Even if Duchamp and his circle of artist friends were right, the French avant-garde with which Dos Passos associated was also adapting to a new age because America was not the only place where artists felt the pace of life. The French avant-garde believed their society had rapidly increased in pace; it had become visually demanding and thereby required a technique in painting that disregarded any privileged point of view. The simultaneity created by many painters was an attempt to create motion in objects that did not move on the canvas, creating a break with the old world and recombining the parts in new and startling ways.\textsuperscript{110}

A sense of motion pervades the whole novel, but like size and color, motion first exerts its presence in the harbor. As a little girl, Ellen watches ferryboats shuttle back and forth, while other boats, including ocean liners, move in and out of the harbor.\textsuperscript{111} Onlookers are impressed by the myriad boats and their new speed. One Irish onlooker exclaims "Tyke a look at the Mauretania, farstest ocean greyhound."\textsuperscript{112} Dos Passos describes the ship as a "black relentless hull" that moves forward into the North River. As an adult Ellen looks out her window in the morning to see a windjammer, a white sloop, and red and green tugs lugging around the harbor. In the same paragraph Dos Passos easily draws the reader from the harbor to the motion of the city when Ellen steps into the

\textsuperscript{109} Stewart, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Manhattan Transfer}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 289.
streets that are “noisy as a brass band, full of tambourine rattle, brassy shine, crystal glitter, honk and whir of motors.”

Modes of transportation play in integral role in the motion of the city. On the train to Atlantic City Ellen looks out the window as the “jeweled stripes on the window ran straight down when the train stopped and got more and more oblique as it speeded up. The wheels rumbled in her head, saying Man-hattan Tran-sfer. Manhattan Tran-sfer.” Motion takes on a life of its own, whispering to Ellen of its constant presence. Downtown café patrons peer out of the front window to watch the endless “jostling crowds filing in and out the subway.”

It was not coincidence that Dos Passos detailed many images of automobiles in the city. By 1925, Henry Ford’s factory was able to turn out a car every ten seconds as opposed to the fourteen hours it took in 1913. The assembly speed caused the incredible price break from $950 in 1910 to $290 in 1924. The affordability and accessibility of automobiles could be witnessed among the dense traffic scenes of Manhattan. “Green light. Motors race, gears screech into first. The cars space out, flow in a long ribbon along the ghostly cement road.” At night the automobiles still rush around and Dos Passos focuses on their headlights, “Cones of light cutting into cones of light along the hot humming roadside, headlights splashing trees, houses, billboards, telegraph poles with bread brushes of whitewash.” Observations of traffic are not just detached, distant visualizations in the novel. Dos Passos places the reader within various vehicles to get a

---

113 Ibid., p. 302.
114 Ibid., p. 376.
116 Manhattan Transfer, p. 217.
sense of first hand imagery of the city's motion. Inside a taxi Ellen sees that “Fifth Avenue was jammed to the curbs with taxis, limousines, motorbuses.” When traffic resumes its forward motion Ellen’s experience becomes the readers as “At last the taxi jerked forward, there was a gust of exhausts and whir of motors, the clot of traffic began moving up Murray Hill. The traffic stopped again, the brakes of the taxi shrieked, she was thrown forward on the seat.”117 A while later in another taxi Ellen notices that “Beyond the shaking glass window of the taxi, like someone drowning, she saw out of a corner of an eye whirling faces, streetlights, zooming nickleglinting wheels.”

Besides specific images of traffic Dos Passos focused on the ubiquitous and perpetual motion of a city that was the embodiment of human activity. On his way down from an elite dining club Jimmy’s stomach turns with the drop of the elevator. He steps into the crowd hall and watches “people elbow their way through perpetually revolving doors.” Still not satisfied with the image, Dos Passos describes the conglomerate of people from Jimmy’s perspective. “Softcheeked girls chewing gum, hatchetfaced girls with bangs, creamfaced boys his own age, young toughs with their hats on one side, sweatyfaced messengers, crisscross glances, sauntering hips, red jowls masticating cigars, sallow concave faces, flat bodies of young men and women, paunched bodies of elderly men, all elbowing, shoving, shuffling, fed in two endless tapes through the revolving doors out into Broadway, in off Broadway.”118 The revolving door imagery evokes the sensation of an endless cycle of motion. For every stop there is a start; for every person who enters, another leaves.

---

117 Ibid., p. 373.
118 Ibid., p. 120.
Dos Passos exposes the city's perpetual motion by detailing the city's habitual morning and evening routine. Before work, "morning clatters with the first L train down Allen Street. Daylight rattles through the windows, shaking the old brick houses, splatters the girders of the L structure with bright confetti." Going into greater detail and moving inside peoples apartments he describes a universal morning event where "men and women stir under blankets and bedquilts on mattresses in the corners of rooms, clots of kids begin to untangle to scream and kick." At the end of a work day "The sun's moved to Jersey, the sun's behind Hoboken. Covers are clicking on typewriters, rolltop desks are closing; elevators go up empty, come down jammed. It's ebbtide in the downtown district, flood in Flatbush, Woodlawn, Dyckman Street, Sheepshead Bay, New Lots Avenue, Canarsie."

One of the more striking images of the city's motion occurs when young Jimmy Herf, fresh off an ocean liner, remarks to himself, "Funny after you've left the ship you can still feel the motion." Lest the reader interpret the line as the familiar feeling of the swaying solid ground that people feel when they depart a boat, Dos Passos continues the narrative through the vivid description of Jimmy's next sights as he enters the city on July fourth. "Blue chunks of dusk melting into the squarecut uptown streets. Rockets spurting bright in the blue dusk, colored balls falling, Bengal fire, Uncle Jeff tacking pinwheels on the tree outside the apartmenthouse door, lighting them with his cigar. Roman candles you have to hold. Hot thud and splutter in your hands, eggshaped balls soaring, red, yellow, green, smell of powder and singed paper." While Jimmy witnesses

\[\text{119 Ibid., p. 129.}\]
\[\text{120 Ibid., p. 169.}\]
the nonstop firework activity a fire engine roars by followed by an ambulance to attend to the next link in the tragic chain of destructive events, where his uncle callously remarks, "Somebody got his."

By applying Simultaneism, and Montage to *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos creates a multi-perspective vision of New York in which the plot flows between scenes and characters in order to develop a sense of dynamic movement. Dos Passos presents the characters lost in the whirlwind of activity. Jimmy Herf watches the city with objective detachment as the denizens move in and out of the revolving doors. Ellen Thatcher is often immersed in a sea of activity and motion, and feels lost and alone within the sea's spinning vortex. For Dos Passos, America's use of technological advances increased the pace of life, but the consequence was a vision of America that became "more oblique as it speeded up."
Conclusion

Near the end of The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France, Cendrars ponders the sounds of train wheels rolling along the track, which, for him, accurately conveys his poetic vision:

I have deciphered all the garbled texts of the wheels and united the scattered Elements of a violent beauty
Which I possess
And which drives me

Like his poetic mentor, Dos Passos deciphered and united the garbled, violent, ugliness and beauty of the urban experience. Like many American modernists Dos Passos believed that modern life was too feverishly energetic, fast-paced, and complex to be contained by conventional nineteenth-century literary techniques. In order to convey such a society, Dos Passos moved beyond conventional literary techniques and created a painter’s vision of the city. By applying the painting process to develop the Form, Color, and Motion of his vision he essentially painted a novel.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


