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The *U.S.A.* trilogy – a portrait of a nation: John Dos Passos' redefinition of American literary tradition through visual art

Josie Devine

The work of John Dos Passos is often overlooked in the American literary canon. The reason for this may lie in the fact that his work, interdisciplinary in nature, is inherently averse to definition. Whereas some critics have identified the influence of the visual arts on the author, none have dealt specifically with the impact of artists such as Pablo Picasso and George Braque on his methods of narrative construction and characterisation. Further, none have adequately expressed the gravity with which Dos Passos transformed the novel form. This article addresses the author's literary transcription of analytic cubism with particular view to his *U.S.A.* trilogy. The competing planes, sharp angles and bold juxtapositions of cubism, are identifiable in Dos Passos' work, and are employed by the author as a method of redefining an American literary tradition. The author explores identity both on an individual, national, and literary scale in an era of social, political and economic upheaval as he offers up a new model for the great American novel.

John Dos Passos' (1896-1970) *U.S.A.* trilogy is a strikingly original text. Its many different literary forms, which encompass both fiction and non-fiction (narrative, biography, newsreel and camera eye), combine to create a complex, panoramic view of the first three decades of the twentieth century. The literary innovation of the trilogy departs from, and redefines, a long-standing American novelistic tradition. Influences from all areas of modern culture can be identified in the text: realism, cubism, caricature, poetry, theatre, cinema, the list goes on. Inherent in its manifold influences and multifaceted form is an ambiguity in the identity of the text itself. Dos Passos himself recognises this ambiguity, and simultaneously provides the reason for contemporary literary critics' neglect of his work: 'there's this strange schizophrenia in American Publishing between fiction and nonfiction, and so people who review nonfiction have never read any of the fiction. It works

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both ways.'[1] It is true that in its distinct originality, *U.S.A.* occupies a unique position in the literary field, somewhere between fiction and nonfiction, but also – and critically to this study – between two competing *artistic* canons: realism and its fidelity to objective representation, and the avant-garde with its rendering of the subjective experience. This article, then, seeks to approach the text from its roots in the visual arts, and more specifically address the ways in which analytic cubism influenced the author's treatment of plot and characterisation in his multi-dimensional trilogy.

Following on from the influential work of authors such as Stephen Crane (1871-1900), Frank Norris (1870-1902), and Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), Dos Passos is often grouped together with so-called 'second generation' realists such as F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) and Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961). [2] Their respective novels: *Tender is the Night* (1934) and *To Have and To Have Not* (1937) join, and often overshadow *U.S.A.*, as the most important literary works of the period, featuring the distinct pessimism symptomatic of their era. *U.S.A.* was published, first as three individual novels, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936), and subsequently as a trilogy in 1938. *U.S.A.* is a retrospective work, one which looks back on, and satirises, the decades that had just passed. It is therefore entwined with, and detached from, the period it represents. The 1930s, which bore the consequences of the Wall Street crash of 1929, became 'a period when American democracy was undermined.' [3] The devastating national and international reverberations of this event transformed American identity overnight, as the wealth and extravagance of the twenties dissolved to mythical illusion. Among the artists and writers of this unstable period 'there was a widespread commitment to a realism that aspired to present a truthful picture of the world.'[4] And in the arts, scene paintings which depicted images of America's founding history became increasingly popular – no doubt to reinforce national identity in a time of upheaval – and were a tradition within which the *U.S.A.* trilogy, as historical reflection, both adhered to in its subject

[1] J. Dos Passos in D. Sanders, 'Writers at Work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews', in J. Dos Passos, *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, (ed.) D. Pizer (Detroit, 1988), 241-252 (246).

[2] M. Geismar, *American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity* (Toronto, 1971), 25.

[3] P. Meecham, 'Realism and modernism', in (ed.) P. Wood, *Varieties of Modernism* (New Haven, 2004), 75-116 (88).

[4] Ibid.

matter yet ironized in its pessimism. Dos Passos provides an alternative founding history of the modern day; he identifies his contemporary flawed society of the thirties as a product of corrupt social, political and economic conditions of the years that went before. Alfred Kazin confirms that the trilogy 'shows history as a bloody farce, now unspeakably wrong, a mocking of the hopes associated with the beginning of the century.'[5]

In keeping with the realist tradition, much of what is said of Dos Passos' work, and specifically *U.S.A.*, centres on his concern for the accurate portrayal of a historical moment. Donald Pizer notes, 'he wanted to write objectively about America.'[6] Wagner similarly describes Dos Passos as an 'observer of American morality.'[7] And in his essay 'The Business of a Novelist' Dos Passos himself states that a novelist is not dissimilar to a historian, that one should create 'an accurate permanent record' of their time.[8] Yet it is problematic that these words 'observer' and 'record' – which evoke detachment and distance – are used when discussing *U.S.A.*, when, in many ways, the text can be regarded as autobiographical. The three novels deal so closely with events the author will have personally experienced that it is unlikely that they are treated impartially. History is in this way rendered by Dos Passos, with both objectivity *and* artistic flare; otherwise opposing concerns are juxtaposed, and simultaneously compete against and complement one another. The camera eye sections, for example, are described as a 'stylised recreation of feeling,' and act as the stream of the author's own consciousness in amongst the historical details of the newsreels and biographies. [9]

The camera eye sections of the trilogy evoke the pure subjectivity of authors such as James Joyce (1882) and William Faulkner (1897-1962), who, it is fair to say, brought the stream of consciousness technique to precedence. But they also reflect an affinity between words and visual art: Arnold L. Goldsmith writes that 'the Joycean device of combining words has the effect of wide, long brushstrokes on

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[5] A. Kazin, 'John Dos Passos and His Invention of America' (1985) 9 *The Wilson Quarterly* 154-166 (157).

[6] D. Pizer, *U.S.A.: A Critical Study* (Charlottesville, 1988), 30.

[7] L. Wagner, *Dos Passos: Artist as American* (Austin, 1979), xvi.

[8] Dos Passos, 'The Business of a Novelist', in *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 160-161 (160).

[9] Pizer, *U.S.A.*, 58.

canvas.'[10] Dos Passos abandons punctuation and introduces phrases such as 'chromegreen,'[11] 'riversmell'[12] and 'dontjaunderstandafellersgottogetup,'[13] which display the influence of the *Ulysses* author on his own representation of the fluidity of thought as well as a cubistic rendering of prose, as words become planes that collide and fuse together. Dos Passos himself admitted to the difficulties of blending objectivity with fiction, yet ultimately concludes that the 'discussion is fruitless, Artistic works to be of lasting value must be both engaged and disengaged.'[14] So despite the personal, autobiographical nature of these sections, the trilogy remains, in the author's view, a viable and objective representation of American experience. In this vein, Dos Passos describes the camera eye as the 'safety valve' for his own feelings,[15] which 'made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier.'[16] David Sanders suggests instead that 'critics might drop labels altogether when they take up *U.S.A.*.'[17] Indeed part of Dos Passos' re-definition of tradition lies in the trilogy's unique position between fiction and nonfiction, history and art, and its aversion to absolute categorisation. Dos Passos suggests that these opposing concerns are not necessarily contradictory. He writes, 'I was thoroughly embarked on an effort to keep up a contemporary commentary, always seen by some individual's eyes, heard by some individual's ears, felt through some individual's nerves and tissues.'[18] Clearly then, historical record and subjective experience go hand in hand for Dos Passos.

Dos Passos and his contemporary writers of the so called 'lost' generation found themselves estranged from the previous generations of their parents and grandparents, and indeed of their literary idols, who did not know of the terrors of modern warfare, the mechanisation of the modern, industrial age, nor the economic hardships of the great depression. While strong influences remain from

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[10] A. L. Goldsmith, *The Modern American Urban Novel: Nature as 'Interior Structure'* (Detroit, 1991), 21.

[11] J. Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (London, 2001), 350.

[12] Ibid., 351.

[13] Ibid., 480.

[14] Dos Passos, 'What Makes a Novelist', in *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 268-275 (273).

[15] Dos Passos, in Sanders interview, 247.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Sanders, in interview with Dos Passos, 248.

[18] Dos Passos, 'What Makes a Novelist', 272.

authors such as Emile Zola (1840-1902) and Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), *U.S.A.* incorporates the techniques of cubism, which, although a movement similarly detached from Dos Passos in years, was a more appropriate model on which to base the expression of his own era's complexities. The author re-locates literary and national identity, as well as the identity of his characters, as something unavoidably fragmented and disjointed, since the blind idealism of the twenties has all but dissolved.

The author's unique artistic handling of literature comes as no great surprise – both as a viewer and as an artist, Dos Passos had a great interest in the visual arts. As well as writing, he created some four hundred artworks, mainly watercolours and sketches, depicting the people and landscapes he had encountered on his travels.[19] In his essay 'What Makes a Novelist' (1967) he talks of his admiration of early Renaissance art: 'I am sure that the great narrative painting of the thirteen and fourteen hundreds profoundly influenced my ideas of how to tell a story in words.'[20] These artists, Dos Passos adds, 'had made eternal their view of the world they lived in. It was up to us to try to describe in colours that would not fade, our America that we loved and hated.'[21]

These 'colours that would not fade' could be found for Dos Passos in Europe, where a new visual language had emerged in the shape of the avant-garde. Artistic traditions were overthrown, and in the tumult of the thirties, so too did Dos Passos seek to redefine and indeed re-establish the literary language and tradition of his own country. There exist only a handful of accounts on the place of visual art within the trilogy. George Knox explores various artistic influences on the author's literary techniques, tracking his move away from the impressionism of his earlier novels to the increasingly cubist abstraction of *U.S.A.*.[22] Michael Spindler similarly explores the painterly concerns of the author, yet focuses primarily on *Manhattan Transfer* (1925).[23] What seems to have been brushed aside by both

[19] T. Stanciu, 'The Art of John Dos Passos', 10 September 2001. Available: <http://www.gadflyonline.com/9-10-01/art-passos.HTML> [accessed 15.11.13].

[20] Dos Passos, 'What Makes a Novelist', 269.

[21] Ibid.

[22] G. Knox, 'Dos Passos and Painting' (1964) 6 *Texas Studies In Literature & Language* 22-38.

[23] M. Spindler, 'John Dos Passos and The Visual Arts' (1981) 15 *Journal of American Studies* 391-405.

Knox and Spindler, and what this present study intends to confront, is the importance of visual art to one of the most central themes of the text – the displaced and fragmented identity of an era defined by disenchantment. The new visual language – of the European avant-garde, and more specifically analytic cubism – is of paramount importance to a consideration of *U.S.A.*. Dos Passos confronts the difficulties of the era with bold cubist juxtapositions, and conceives a new literary tradition, resurrecting the then outmoded novel form as an interdisciplinary, multi-faceted phenomenon – 'I refused to believe that the novel was dying.'[24]

It is interesting that Dos Passos' *U.S.A.,* a novel written some twenty years after the peak of cubism, is so bound up with the artistic movement. However, if one considers on one hand the tumult of the thirties in which the trilogy was written, and on the other, the social, political and economic fervour of the pre-, post- and mid- war years in which the novels are set, it is with increasing clarity that the movement is of particular relevance to the author. It too 'developed in (an) atmosphere of rapid change,'[25] the impending war, the discovery of the x-ray – which spurred on a growing mistrust in outward appearances – and, not least, Freud's research into the workings of the mind, that redefined consciousness, and compelled artists to get beneath the surface and explore perception and the mind. The philosophical lectures of Henri Bergson redefined common and accepted notions of time and space, which the cubists emulated and transcribed in their own re-evaluation of pictorial space in their fragmentary and many-sided views of the world.

With *U.S.A.*, the author reshapes the conventional novel and simultaneously captures the gravity of the 'seminal art movement of the twentieth century.'[26] As Dos Passos rebuilds a literary tradition, so too was Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) 'rebuilding' the eye.'[27] Cubism, broadly speaking, was a European art movement, based primarily in France and Spain that reached its peak in the years preceding the First World War, with artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque (1882-

[24] Dos Passos, 'What Makes a Novelist', 269.
[25] M. Antcliff and P. Leighton, *Cubism and Culture* (London, 2001), 9.
[26] Ibid., 7.
[27] Dos Passos, Introduction to *Three Soldiers*, in *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 146.

1963), Juan Gris (1887-1927) and Robert Delaunay (1885-1941) at its helm. The cubists developed a particular approach to representation that firmly rejected the formal constraints of academic art – which was 'nothing but eye fooling illusionism' – as well as the delicate superficiality of their impressionist predecessors. [28] Taking their place was an interest in abstract forms, disjointed perspectives, perception, and the inanimate. These artists sought to project upon the canvas a subjective and perceptual experience of the world, while recognising and embracing that canvas as an entirely physical and defined surface – just as Dos Passos blends the historical objectivity and artistic subjectivity of his own 'contemporary chronicles.'[29]

Analytic cubism is of most relevance to this study. The term refers to the fragmentary break down of the subject matter into barely identifiable shards, as though seen through a cracked mirror. This branch of cubism is perhaps the most appropriate art form to be labelled cubist as the images produced within this sub-movement literally incorporate the abstract geometric forms of their namesake, putting the 'cube' in 'cubism'. Human subjects, as well as landscapes and still lifes, are viewed in an entirely new way as fragmented, broken and even mechanised objects, defined by lines and shapes and a new abstract treatment of light and colour. Some portraits are so abstracted that it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the subject, whose importance is sacrificed for the totality of abstraction. Perspectives compete, just as the subject and object compete as the primary concern.

Analytic cubism is of particular importance when considering Dos Passos' methods of composition as he structures his trilogy in a similarly fragmentary manner. The trilogy seems to lack a coherent plot due to its multiplicity of form, however Pizer makes a case for the unity of the text, as he describes the trilogy as 'a single object rendered through multiple angles of vision'.[30] These angles are embodied by the four narrative modes, as history, stream of consciousness, poetry and prose appear both intertwined and juxtaposed. Cubist use of light, shade, texture and perspective, is in this way transcribed by the author, creating an

[28] N. Cox, *Cubism* (London, 2000), 111.
[29] Dos Passos, in Sanders interview, 248.
[30] Pizer, *U.S.A.*, 55.

ambitious multi-dimensional portrait of American life. Charles Marz extends upon Pizer's statement and notes 'the trilogy must be understood dynamically. Its power and meanings come ultimately from vertical, a-temporal, simultaneous events.'[31] For this very reason it is challenging to identify specific examples from the text, since, just as the planes of a cubist painting such as George Braque's *Castle at La Roche Guyon* create energy and tension as they compete and collide, so too do Dos Passos' narrative modes create meaning through their relation to others.

An example of this type of meaning through juxtaposition can be found in 'Newsreel 47'. In this chapter opportunity is the key word, as the items that feature concern the thriving employment market: 'boy seeking future offered opportunity,' 'young man wanted,' 'young man for office, young man for stockroom.'[32] In the narratives that follow this section, Charley Anderson returns home to Minnesota following his time serving overseas. When he refuses his Brother Jim's offer of employment or indeed partnership in his 'Anderson Motor Sales Company' he is met by hostility from Hedwig as she scolds him: [33] 'I don't see how you're going to get anywhere if you turn down every opportunity.'[34] When Charley moves on to New York in search of greater opportunities in aviation, he is left disappointed as 'nobody could promise him a job.'[35] Eventually he settles for a position he finds in the newspaper job listings under the 'Mechanics and Machinists' section. [36] Clearly, though separated by boundaries of form, the different modes are linked through their content and concerns, as the search for, and availability of employment takes precedence. Newsreel 47 pre-empts Charley's job search both textually as we have seen, but also temporally. The reader knows that prior to his arrival in New York there were plenty of opportunities of which he has narrowly missed – 'if he'd only come a couple of months sooner.'[37] The juxtaposition of these segments portrays the volatility of the job market and, by the same token, the economy of the post-World War One era;

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[31] C. Marz, 'Dos Passos's Newsreels: The Noise of History' (1979) 11 *Studies in The Novel* 194-200 (194).

[32] Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 753.

[33] Ibid., 764.

[34] Ibid., 762.

[35] Ibid., 788.

[36] Ibid., 792.

[37] Ibid., 788.

Dos Passos becomes both social historian and cubist artist.[38] The factual and historical markers of the Newsreels are offset by the specific fictional experiences of his characters as he creates meaning in a cubist manner through the juxtaposition of competing planes.

The author's use of juxtaposition is a complex matter. The different narrative modes relate to one another in their immediate juxtapositions – as illustrated above – yet they also create meaning through the overarching effect of the trilogy as a whole. Pizer remarks that:

> The reader of the trilogy is … required to perform two simultaneous interpretive acts at any one moment in the trilogy. He must be aware of the implication of the fictional event he is experiencing in its immediate context, a context that will include adjacent segments of other modes. And he must be aware of an ever-increasing ripple of implication of the event within the trilogy as a whole.[39]

Pizer here confirms that each of the modes employed by Dos Passos (newsreel, camera eye and so on) interconnect and are in continuous dialogue with one another. He refers to the effect of the trilogy in its entirety; as these modes are juxtaposed they create an ever-expanding network of implications, which accumulate and gain meaning over the course of the text.

Picasso's use of colour, texture and interpenetrating planes creates unity in his analytic portraits as the subjects appear to be simultaneously at one with, yet separate from, the space they occupy. This is arguably an artistic representation of the way in which Cezanne 'believed that the depth of the world was a product of the human place in it.'[40] For Dos Passos, *characters* become the products, of the social, political and historical forces that shape them – similar to those of Hemingway's fiction. These systems are shown to the reader through the author's inclusion of factual information in the newsreels as well as the biographies, but their effect and depth is only achieved through the perceptual accounts of the

[38] Sanders, in interview with Dos Passos, 241.
[39] Pizer, *U.S.A.*, 114.
[40] Cox, *Cubism,* 99.

camera eye. Thus, the 'depth of the world' is not something that can be communicated through fact (or artistic representation) alone, it depends instead on experience – the viewer's personal experience of a painting, or Dos Passos' embodiment of this in the camera eye sections, as he traces his 'human place' in the era.

While purging his subjectivity in the perceptual impressions of the autobiographical camera eye sections, the characters that occupy the remainder of the text lack the same psychological complexity. Dos Passos does not represent his characters in depth but in breadth; rather than extended passages devoted to the inner workings of their minds, he provides a cubist, multi-perspectival position, as the reader views, and continuously re-views them through the narratives of others. A cubist portrait of one of the trilogy's central characters, Moorehouse, is not evoked through individual descriptions alone, but through the collection of several together which form an overall image of the man. While on the one hand, Eveline is comforted by his paternal character traits, Eleanor appreciates and is attracted to his 'oldschool gentlemanly manners.'[41] Later in *Nineteen Nineteen*, Richard Savage recognises something of 'the Southern Senator in his way of talking,' as he meets the 'large quiet spoken blue eyed jowly man' for the first time.[42] From these sparse snippets of information, certain characteristics prevail – blue eyes, Southern accent, prominent jowl; the identity of Moorehouse can therefore only partly be gauged through his own narrative sections, otherwise the reader is reliant on the piecing together planes of fragmentary perspectives and pieces of information.

This treatment of identity is not exclusive to the one character we have discussed; rather it is consistent with Dos Passos' treatment of characterisation throughout the trilogy. From her desk Janey looks 'enviously' at the 'welldressed' Eleanor as she visits Moorehouse.[43] In Paris, Richard Savage notices her as 'a frail looking woman with very transparent alabaster skin' who is once again 'stunningly welldressed.'[44] These sparse snippets of information act as brush strokes creating a

[41] Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 238.
[42] Ibid., 632.
[43] Ibid., 280.
[44] Ibid., 632.

character portrait. The fragmented planes are in this way complementary to one another. Pizer notes that 'In Janey's narrative Joe is an uncouth rough neck seaman'[45] as Dos Passos writes 'she thought of the rough life he must be leading, and when he came back she asked him why he didn't get a different job.'[46] While, in Joe's narrative he is a 'pathetic seeker of Janey's unforthcoming love'[47] – 'it made him feel like a bum going around with her.'[48] The reader can see from this that Janey and Joe have become barely recognisable to one another as their social positions – Janey the refined office clerk, and Joe the Merchant seaman – dictate their respective view of events, as well as the reader's experience of them. In this way the reader's sympathy is shifted back and forth as events are seen from competing angles; characterisation becomes a subjective concern entirely dependent on perspective. Pizer helpfully points out 'in *U.S.A.* characters do not develop … what changes in the course of time and event is our own understanding of the pattern of failure in the nation as a whole.'[49] In a cubist sense, the reader's idea of a character begins simply as an outline and only gains depth of meaning through the unravelling of the plot, and the planes of their portraits. Thus it can be argued that Dos Passos employs analytic cubism as a method of characterisation. His character portraits are essentially cubist in style, as one unified view is both lost through, and constituted by, competing or complementary fragmentary planes.

They too become the planes of Dos Passos' larger portrait, this time on a national scale, illustrating the breadth of the American experience. The author paints a dynamic picture of the era and, through many different channels, allows his reader to *experience* it. Analytic cubism has a clear impact on the author's work, most notably in his construction of the trilogy and his representation of characters. He presents many facets of his subject, through fact, fiction and perception, which create various layers of meaning. Thus, Dos Passos uses the visual art of analytic cubism to build upon his literary roots, in order to create a new tradition in American literature. The novel is transformed by Dos Passos into

[45] Pizer, *U.S.A.*, 138.
[46] Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 286.
[47] Pizer, *U.S.A.*, 138.
[48] Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 388.
[49] Pizer, *U.S.A.*, 71.

an all-encompassing, democratic literary form which may now find its source in the visual as well as the literary. What was brushed aside by both Knox and Spindler, and what this study has confronted, is the importance of visual art to this end, as the author represents the displaced and fragmented identity of an era.

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