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Source: *MoveableType*, Vol. 6, 'Nightmare' (2010)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.051

MoveableType is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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Manhattan Nightmares: John Dos Passos, Charles Sheeler and the Distortion of Urban Space

By Alastair Beddow

When Kate Clephane, the central character in Edith Wharton's 1925 novel *The Mother's Recompense*, returns to New York after nearly twenty years living abroad, she finds a different city to the one she had eloped from two decades before. Fifth Avenue is no longer 'a thoroughfare of monotonously ugly brown houses' but a street lined with skyscrapers and 'a huge lava-flow of interlaced traffic'.¹ For Kate Clephane, the change in the city's environment is nightmarish, a visual shock which manifests itself through anxiety; she feels 'oppressed and confused' by the unfamiliar topography of the city she once knew. On her return to America, Kate 'strain[s] her eyes at the Babylonian New York which seemed to sway and totter toward her menacingly' (36) and, as the novel progresses, Kate has to readjust her spatial perception to accommodate the new visual demands of a new New York. For Kate Clephane, New York is a 'fluid city' (40) which seems to be ever in flux.

Wharton's novel was right to suggest that the city had changed unrecognisably during the period of Kate Clephane's absence: the amalgamation of New York's five boroughs into a single identity in 1898 under the Greater New York Act created the second most populous city in the world after London.² In the years that followed, New York became America's commercial centre, and in the resulting population and immigration boom the city grew from 1.4 million inhabitants in 1890 to over 7.4 million in 1940.³ The change manifested itself physically too: in the course of the 1920s the average height of New York's skyline increased by one hundred feet.⁴ This process of rapid spatial expansion and industrialisation is presented as overwhelming in Wharton's text, and it provides the immediate context to John Dos Passos's novel *Manhattan Transfer*, published in the same year as Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*, and Charles Sheeler's contemporary visual representations of the city in painting, photography and on film.

The complex spatiality of the city's geometry – its constantly changing skyline and its 'interlaced' network of traffic, for example – adds to the sense of the city as a new visual spectacle. From her perspective at her window looking down on Fifth Avenue below, Kate Clephane 'seemed to see the buildings move with the vehicles'; although she attributes this vision to a *trompe l'oeil* (the buildings move like 'a stationary train appeared to move to travelers on another line'), it also indicates the striking visual impact of movement within

the modern city, which arrests the viewer and destabilises perception by drawing the eye in many directions simultaneously (43). Similarly, in *Metropolis*, an experimental photomontage completed in 1923 by the Dutch artist Paul Citröen, the viewer is confronted with a chaotic mass of jumbled urban landmarks. The multiple image fragments in Citröen's collage present a composite image which evokes the visual and epistemological fluidity of the metropolis. The overlapping layers of city imagery create an effect of simultaneity – the collapsing of temporal and spatial boundaries – a common feature of visual and literary representations of the city throughout the modernist period. Just as the viewer of *Metropolis* is able to overcome distances of time and space simply by moving their eye around the canvas, Dos Passos distorts spatial and temporal norms in *Manhattan Transfer* by constructing a composite portrait of New York through the montage of discontinuous narrative fragments and by cutting between multiple points of view.

In *Manhattan Transfer* as the young Jimmy Herf arrives into Manhattan's harbour he witnesses the excitement of a fourth of July parade. Jimmy's mind is filled with, to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf, a 'myriad of impressions'⁵ when his mother points out the many landmarks of New York in rapid succession: "There's the statue of liberty [...] and see, that's Brooklyn Bridge. And look at all the docks...that's the Battery...and the masts and the ships...and there's the spire of Trinity Church and the Pulitzer Building".⁶ Here the reader is put in same position as the young Jimmy Herf because the narrative never lingers on any one focal point long enough to explain or describe exactly what is being seen. Instead the reader is given a chaotic impression of the advancing New York skyline; the syndetic cataloguing of New York's scenery has an overwhelming, cumulative effect akin to the overlapping of images in Citröen's *Metropolis*. As if in anticipation of the effect this visual assault may produce, Jimmy's mother warns the young boy not to get too overexcited.

Later in the novel Ellen Thatcher experiences a similar sensation of being overwhelmed by the sheer mass of urban stimuli whilst she walks along New York's streets:

After crossing Lafayette Street roaring with trucks and delivery wagons there is a taste of dust in her mouth, particles of grit crunch between her teeth. Further east she passes pushcarts; men are wiping off the marble counters of softdrink stands, a grindorgan fills the street with shiny jostling coils of the *Blue Danube*, acrid pungence spreads from a picklestand. (219)

In this passage it is not just the sights of the urban landscape that arrest Ellen but its sounds, smells and textures as well: Dos Passos's city is not a passive space in which the events of his novel are played out, but it is a physical intrusion on the lives of his characters. These interactions with the city echo comments made by Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in which he argued that the 'psychological conditions which the metropolis creates' are 'the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions'.⁷ Simmel's modern city reads like a description of a Freudian neurosis in which the city is not experienced as a continuous narrative but is

instead reduced to a series of fragmentary images which are only partially registered by the eye and defy coherence. As the physician John Girdner similarly attested in his 1901 book *Newyorkitis*, the inhabitants of America's first city suffer from a unique condition, the symptoms of which are 'rapidity and nervousness and lack of deliberation in all movements'.⁸ In Simmel and Girdner's analyses the city so influences its inhabitants that they adapt their own behaviour to mimic its characteristics.

Dos Passos's recurring descriptions of the speed of the metropolis, and, in particular, the speed of the moving El train are cases in point. Dos Passos gives his reader fleeting glimpses of the El train as it navigates the city space; like the movement of the trains across the city, references to the El train occur only briefly and at regular intervals throughout the text. Ruth and Jimmy try to conduct a conversation underneath an El train station but are constantly interrupted by the flow of traffic: "An Elevated train shattered the barred sunlight overhead. He could see Ruth's mouth forming words" (128). Shortly after a similar incident occurs:

"Jimmy you shock me...She keeps losing her false teeth," began Ruth; an L train drowned out the rest. The restaurant door closing behind them choked off the roar of wheels on rails. (128.)

In both of these examples the El train intrudes into the text by blocking out parts of Ruth's speech from both Jimmy and the reader; Dos Passos describes both the sound of the El train ('the roar of wheels on rails') and the effect that sound has on the city's inhabitants, as represented here by the ellipsis in Ruth's dialogue. Even the title of Dos Passos's novel, *Manhattan Transfer*, suggests the endless movement of vehicles and people across the city, referring as it does to a New Jersey exchange station, an intermediary or transitional stage of a commuter's journey into and out of New York.

Dos Passos's fascination with the nightmarish qualities of modernity, as epitomised by his repeated references to the daunting speed of the metropolis, captures a sense of both the technological advancement of the machine-age and a general uneasiness that control over the rapid pace of modernity was slipping away. One character near the beginning of *Manhattan Transfer* makes the observation that 'all these mechanical inventions – telephones, electricity, steel bridges, horseless vehicles – they are all leading somewhere' (26): the problem is that nobody seems quite sure where. In an article in the avant-garde magazine *Broom* Jean Epstein similarly argued that, 'all these instruments: telephone, microscope, magnifying glass, cinematograph, lens...are not merely dead objects. At certain moments they become part of ourselves, interposing themselves between the world and us'.⁹ For Dos Passos and Epstein these archetypes of modernity (telephone, camera, El train) disrupt established conventions of time and space and usher in new ways of experiencing the modern world by acting as intermediaries to perception.

An even stronger case against the rise of mechanisation in American society was made by Paul Rosenfeld in a 1921 article in the American magazine *The Dial*:

For a century, the machines have been enslaving the race. For a century, they have been impoverishing the experience of humanity. Like great Frankenstein monsters, invented by the brain of human beings to serve them, these vast creatures have suddenly turned on their masters, and made them their prey.¹⁰

Rosenfeld's polemic, nestled within an otherwise appreciative account of the work of photographer Alfred Steiglitz, moves beyond Epstein's idea that modern technologies merely *interpose* themselves between humanity and the world for humanity's benefit, towards a view in which technologies *impose* themselves on humans and thus limit the scope of human behaviour. The modern city, for Rosenfeld, had become a breeding ground of monstrousness and modern technology was monstrousness incarnate.

Dos Passos's attitude towards modernity is not as apocalyptic as Rosenfeld's but it does share the same scepticism about the intrusion of technology into daily life. After settling into an apartment building in Greenwich Village in 1921, Dos Passos wrote a letter to Germaine Lucas-Championère offering a description of New York which echoes the analysis of the city offered by Simmel. For Dos Passos, New York City was:

magnificent [...] a city of cavedwellers with a frightful, brutal ugliness about it, full of thunderous voices of metal grinding on metal and of an eternal sound of wheels which turn, turn on heavy stones. People swarm meekly like ants [...] crushed by the disdainful and pitiless things around them.¹¹

In the letter Dos Passos represents the experience of being in New York as both 'magnificent' and 'frightful': he was both attracted to the city's vitality, and repelled by its nightmarish abundance of noise and visual sensation – 'metal grinding on metal', 'the eternal sound of wheels' – and by the way in which individuals are 'crushed' by the social forces acting upon them.

Dos Passos reiterates his personal ambiguity about the city in an image at the opening of *Manhattan Transfer*:

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 on the tide, crashes, gulps the broken water, slides, settles slowly into the sliHandwinches whirl with jingle of chains. Gates fold upwards, feet step out across the crack, men and women press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-house, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press. (15)

In spite of the obvious revulsion towards its subject matter that this passage induces in the reader, the highly aestheticised description of the detritus and the attention paid to the different ways in which things move ('spume,' 'skidding,' 'whirl,' 'crushed,' 'jostling') create a sense of wonder or spectacle. The simile of men and women 'jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press' as they disembark the ferry is a typical example of how, for Dos Passos, the city de-individuates humans and turns them into machines. Here, the image of a

swarming crowd is a useful trope for representing both the visual assault of the metropolis and the feeling of alienation it creates.

The nightmarish plight of the individual within society is a concern that recurs throughout Dos Passos's writing: at a structural level, *Manhattan Transfer's* large cast of characters, some of whom appear just once never to be seen or heard of again, enacts the threat of anonymity posed by the city. Ellen Thatcher, a character whose repeated changes of name indicate the instability of her self-identification, continually feels alienated by the collectivising pull of the city: "She felt hungry and alone. The bed was a raft on which she was marooned alone, always alone, afloat on a growling ocean" (157). For Ellen, the city is a treacherous space, a 'growling ocean', which traps her, flattens out difference and constantly threatens to engulf her into its mass identity.

The painter and photographer Charles Sheeler's response to New York throughout the 1920s showcases a similar dichotomy ('magnificent' / 'frightening') to that found in Dos Passos's writing. Attraction towards the urban environment is suggested through Sheeler's repeated choice of machine-age technology as subject matter, but this is offset by Sheeler's distinctive visual language which acknowledges that these same technologies that seem to represent progress also disorientate the experience of urban spatiality. Sheeler is usually grouped within the Precisionist school of American painters who were concerned with stripping away ornament from their work in favour of a sharply defined, angular, detached style. Categorising him in this way is fair, but in defining Sheeler as an exponent of a very clinical representational style one must not overlook the ambiguities present in his work. In the 1920 photograph *New York, Park Row Building*, for example, Sheeler deliberately chooses not to present the building's recognisable, ornate frontage in favour of an alternate view in which a solitary window is overwhelmed by a mass of concrete. Even the height of the building – it was the tallest in the world on its completion in 1899 – seems oddly truncated by the frame of the photograph. The strange play of light and shadow causes the building to be ominously engulfed by a black mass in the bottom left-hand corner of the image. The composition renders the building utterly undistinguishable; any identifying markers are stripped away and the Park Row Building is subsumed into the mass of skyscrapers that comprise the Manhattan skyline.

Much of the city imagery of *Manhattan Transfer* undoubtedly originates from Dos Passos's own experiences living in New York, but his novel also exhibits the influence of contemporary visual representations of the city including those produced by Sheeler. Throughout the 1920s the city was a popular subject in visual culture: Joseph Stella, Georgia O'Keeffe and Hugh Ferriss all created important works inspired by New York. Peter Conrad, for example, has persuasively argued that in *Manhattan Transfer* Dos Passos's use of the metaphor 'the *Mauretania* stalked like a skyscraper through the harbour' (262) is a knowing inversion of the popular image of the cruise-liner-like Flatiron Building as famously captured in a 1904 Edward Steichen photograph.¹² Dos Passos had a keen interest in visual culture: he visited the influential Armory Show of 1913 in which works by

Delauney, Duchamp and Picasso (as well as some of Sheeler's early paintings) were exhibited for the first time in America; after graduating from Harvard in 1916 he trained as an architect, and he was an accomplished painter throughout his life.¹³ Dos Passos's path continually crossed with the artistic avant-garde: as a prolific contributor to a number of magazines, including *The New Republic* and *The Dial*, he shared a platform with a diverse range of artists and writers, and so it is likely that Sheeler and Dos Passos were at least loosely aware of each other's work.¹⁴

The imagery of the opening of *Manhattan Transfer* (quoted above) may have been specifically suggested to Dos Passos by the short film *Manhatta*, which Charles Sheeler made with fellow photographer Paul Strand in 1920. It is possible that Dos Passos saw *Manhatta*, which was shown in both New York and Europe after its premiere at the Rialto Theatre in New York on 24th July 1921; if not, he would have encountered Sheeler's earlier work at the Armory Show and may have met him through their mutual connections at the Whitney Studio Club, where Dos Passos exhibited some of his own paintings.¹⁵ Often regarded as one of the first avant-garde city films, *Manhatta* documents a typical day in the city through a series of slow, panoramic shots which focus on buildings, cranes, automobiles, all of which are interspersed with intertitles displaying quotations from Walt Whitman. Like Dos Passos's novel, the film opens with images of people disembarking a ferry and crowding through the terminal gates. As in *Manhattan Transfer*, the depiction of this event in *Manhatta* is tinged with ambiguity: Sheeler and Strand seem to be fascinated by the extraordinary feat of engineering that the ferry terminal represents but also overwhelmed by the large crowd surging towards the camera lens.

The New York represented by Strand and Sheeler in *Manhatta* is viewed through a camera lens which distorts received notions of geography and perspective and which lends itself to experimentation with scale and composition. One shot in the film recreates Paul Strand's 1915 photograph 'Wall Street'; in the image the vast, imposing façade of Wall Street's Morgan Guaranty Trust Building is deliberately contrasted with the commuters below. In another image from *Manhatta*, the viewer is presented with a streetscape, yet the view is obscured by the detail of a building in the foreground, which itself is partly truncated by the camera lens. The viewer is forced to peer through the architectural barrier, but, because of the choice of perspective, the street below is half cast in shadow, so very little detail is discernable. The composition foregrounds the act of seeing or spectatorship to show how the spatial dimensions of the modern city – the perspective gained from a tall building, for example – lend themselves to new way of seeing the city. The figures in the image have been described by the critic Jan-Christopher Horak as 'ant-like', a description which calls to mind the detail from Dos Passos's letter to Germaine Lucas-Championère (quoted above) that in New York 'people swarm meekly like

ants'.¹⁶ In the images from *Manhatta*, as in Dos Passos's novels, the buildings dwarf the individuals below and thus add to the overwhelming visual onslaught of the city's topology.

Thinking about Sheeler's modernist city imagery can be consolidated through the Freudian notion of *das Unheimlich*, both in its literal translation (i.e. Sheeler's city is constructed as an 'unhomely' space – he produces depopulated, denatured landscapes which are largely static and geometric), and in the sense that the experience of being in the city represented in his work causes a feeling of 'uncanniness'. The familiar iconography of New York is rendered unfamiliar, or in Freud's term *Unheimlich*, at the very moment it is framed in Sheeler's photographic image; the viewer comes into contact with the city's landscape not by looking directly at it, but through Sheeler's conscious composition of an image of it. As his camera frames it foregrounds perception. Indeed it is worth noting that in his essay "The "Uncanny"" Freud develops his concept of the Uncanny whilst walking through the deserted streets of an Italian town.¹⁷ As in Freud's essay, Sheeler's work is full of thresholds that cannot be crossed, such as his painting 'View of New York' (1931), in which the 'view' is merely an empty blue sky through an open window. The only other object in Sheeler's painting is his camera, and, in this regard 'View of New York' can be read as something of a self-portrait or, at the very least, a self-reflexive commentary on his own work.

In Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta* the urban quotidian is elevated to the status of cinematic performance; by training the camera on the urban performance being enacted, Strand and Sheeler position the viewer as a spectator of everyday phenomena. It is this mix of the everyday and the spectacular that makes the images in their film *Unheimlich*. Juan Suarez has argued that *Manhatta* 'structure[s] the contingency of modern life' by 'portray[ing] the city as an idealised architectural space and a hieroglyph of modernity'.¹⁸ The disparate elements of *Manhatta* gain coherence through the loose structural device of the 24 hour cycle, whereas in *Manhattan Transfer* Dos Passos gives structure to this contingency as his narrative fragments, which at first seem unconnected, begin to intertwine. Suarez's use of the term 'hieroglyph', which alludes to a hybrid word-image signification system, evokes the American poet Vachel Lindsay who, in his writings about film, put forward the idea that individual image fragments function as 'picture-words' within the 'universal alphabet' of cinema.¹⁹ Lindsay's notion of the cinematographic 'hieroglyph' is borne out by the self-conscious image-making of *Manhatta* whereby fragments of everyday life are transformed into visual spectacles. Yet I disagree with Suarez that this process encodes idealism. *Manhatta*'s wariness of the technology of modernity suggests scepticism rather than idealism. The sheer ordinariness of the film's imagery – people disembarking a ferry, trains arriving in stations, cranes operating on construction sites – conveys urban simultaneity through the montage of conventional, rather than idealised, images. *Manhatta* is reluctant, therefore, to transform the urban quotidian into a symbol of something greater than itself.

Just as the camera in *Manhatta* consciously constructs images from New York's striking visual landscape, Dos Passos uses details of the physical topography of the city to construct linguistic images in his writing. For Dos Passos, the primacy of the visual image in the city is epitomised by the abundance of advertising signs which can be found on every street corner; William Brevda has calculated that by 1925 there would have been over 12000 advertising signs, many of them electric, on Broadway alone.²⁰ Jimmy Herf is described at one point in *Manhattan Transfer* as walking 'through the city of scrambled alphabets, through the city of gilt letter signs' (315). The contemporary fascination with signs is emphasised in George Salter's design for the jacket of the 1943 Houghton Mifflin edition of the novel in which the novel's title is depicted as a giant red sign on the top of a New York tenement building. The capitalist economy of Dos Passos's New York functions through visual spectacle and the aesthetics of the sign, so that the visual shock of advertising in the novel is almost equal to the visual shock of the skyscraper or El train. In the text this visual shock is rendered by capitalisation such as the 'green letters pointed with crimson [that] read DANDERINE' (129). The recurring references to signs advertising commodities such as Gillette and Danderine demonstrate that the advertising sign has become divorced from its signified (the commodity that it advertises) to establish itself as a visual signifier, or image, in its own right.

The visuality of Dos Passos's text is strongest when his characters walk the city streets and are confronted by its mass of visual stimulation. Late in the novel Joe O'Keefe walks around New York when it begins to rain:

Coming out of the building O'Keefe had to make his way though people crowding into the portal. A slate sky sagging between the tall buildings was spitting the pavements with fiftycent pieces. Men were running to cover with their straw hats under their coats. Two girls had made hoods of newspaper over their summer bonnets. He snatched blue of their eyes, a glint of lips and teeth as he passed. He walked fast to the corner and caught an uptown car on the run. The rain advanced down the street in a solid sheet glimmering, swishing, beating newspapers flat, prancing in silver nipples along the asphalt, striping windows, putting shine on the paint of street cars and taxicabs. (190)

In this passage Dos Passos concentrates not just on *what* Joe sees but *how* he sees: the large drops of rain appear initially as 'fiftycent pieces'. As in *Manhatta*, the reader is given a panoramic view of the scene ('slate sky sagging between tall buildings') before the eye of the camera picks out individual details such as the rain-beaten newspapers or shining paint of the taxicabs. Here Joe's eye functions in the same way as *Manhatta's* camera: Joe 'snatched blue of their eyes' – not 'the blue' but 'blue' – suggesting the intensity of colour. This is a kind of *visual* free indirect discourse, conveying observations of the eye, rather than interior monologue, as free indirect discourse usually does. In a phrase such as 'Men were running...' it is impossible to distinguish whether the observation comes from the narrator's or from Joe's own eye.

Dos Passos's text thus draws attention to how, in the process of seeing, his characters reconstruct the spatiality of the city. The passage just quoted, in which Joe witnesses people avoiding the rain, does this in three ways: it signifies the dynamism of the city space; the way in which Dos Passos's characters perceive that dynamic space,

and also Dos Passos's ability to represent the process of perception on the page. In *Manhatta* the movement of the camera around the city – how it pans across a scene, tilts up the side of a building, or cuts quickly between locations – demonstrates the ability of the camera, and hence the eye, to 'mobilise and explore space'.²¹ In its response to the city space Sheeler's camera creates its own cinematic space through a technique called shot-countershot (sometime referred to as 'reverse angle cutting') in which Sheeler alternates between two shots rotated around an axis of approximately 180 degrees. This technique is used to represent both the subject and the object of perception or the different eye-lines of two people talking. So in the sequence under discussion, a description of Joe O'Keefe is followed by a description of what Joe can see. The effect of this technique, Adams Sitney has suggested, is to create a 'seamless fictional space' by establishing a sequence of shots which 'has the implicit effect of erasing the presence of the camera' and thus the viewer's awareness of the camera, or eye, as a perceiving consciousness.²² In Dos Passos's novel, the rapid juxtaposition of points of view within, and between, narrative fragments creates a similar effect.

If Dos Passos's narrative attempts to explore the interaction of space and perception, then the short, descriptive vignettes which precede each chapter in *Manhattan Transfer* distil the essence of perception into linguistic form. The vignettes represent an impressionistic way of seeing the world in which a chaotic mass of stimuli is processed through a series of fleeting sensory perceptions. Each vignette introduces its chapter by establishing a particular image or mood rather than by directly developing character or plot. Just like the passages quoted above, the vignettes are written in a kind of *visual* free indirect discourse, although in the vignettes the focalisation of the text is almost never attributed to a knowable source. In the opening vignette of the novel ('Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes...'), quoted earlier, short sentences replicate individual camera shots. The naturalistic description of the ferry terminal ('spoiled cabbageheads heave between the splintered plank walls'), contrasts with impulse of the passage towards abstraction: the objects described are reduced to abstract forms, and presented as things without articles they become pure visual images. In these vignettes Dos Passos mirrors most closely the way in which the cinema camera, to quote David Trotter in *Cinema and Modernism*, 'describe[s] the world in the absence of a perceiving consciousness'.²³

This tendency towards abstraction is indicative of the way in which both Dos Passos and Sheeler were influenced in their perception of urban space by the lens of the camera. In a paper given at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Sheeler announced that in the camera, 'man has produced an eye which [...] is better than his own'.²⁴ And in their press release for *Manhatta*, Strand and Sheeler suggested it was cinematography which most allowed them to 'register directly the living forms in front of them' by capturing the simultaneity of the city's fleeting impressions in time as well as in space.²⁵ Dos Passos's interest in reproducing the techniques of the camera on the page begin with his experimentations with visual free indirect discourse throughout

Manhattan Transfer, and later develop further through the 'Camera Eye' passages of his 1938 trilogy *U.S.A.* In the trilogy, Dos Passos's 'Camera Eye' – the internal camera of his memory – produces images which are perceived, and can be recycled, like images from old photographs. In an interview in 1968 Dos Passos commented that the 'Camera Eye' was 'part of the search for objectivity' within *U.S.A.* as a whole:

My system has always been to try to do it objectively. That's why I put the Camera Eye things in *U.S.A.*; it was a way of draining off the subjective by directly getting in little bits of my own experience.²⁶

For Dos Passos the 'Camera Eye' functions as a personal 'subjective' commentary on the 'objective' elements of the narration elsewhere in *U.S.A.* and its focus is often turned on the everyday stuff of New York's streets: references to 'signs', 'ads', and 'a taxicab careening down Park Avenue' recall the visual shocks of Dos Passos's earlier novel.²⁷

Just as the French artist Francis Picabia, writing in the *New York Tribune* on the occasion of the Armory Show in 1913, referred to New York as 'the cubist, the futurist city [which] expresses in its architecture, its life, its spirit, the modern thought', Dos Passos's fiction and Charles Sheeler's artworks capture something of the 'modern thought' through their engagement with the visual modernity and spatiality of the city.²⁸ It is this 'modern thought' that leads to their representations of, and gradual understanding that, the city is a fractured space. In *Manhattan Transfer* Dos Passos re-interprets this fracturing of city space as the impossibility of 'getting to the centre of things' (25). Picabia's prophetic vision of New York as the 'cubist city' can therefore be read a rallying cry for the art, both visual and literary, that was produced in the decades that followed, including both Sheeler and Dos Passos's nightmarish cityscapes.

Alastair Beddow

NOTES

1. Edith Wharton, *The Mother's Recompense*, (London: Virago, 1986) 43-4.
2. David Ward and Olivier Zunz, 'Between Rationalism and Pluralism: Creating the Modern City' in *The Landscape of Modernity: New York City 1900-1940*, ed. by Ward and Zunz, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1992) 3-15 (3).
3. Graham Clarke, 'The City as Ideal Text: Manhattan and the Photography of Alfred Stieglitz 1890-1940' in *New York: City as Text*, ed. by Christopher Mulvey and John Simons, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) 12-27 (12).
4. Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made*, (London: Duckworth, 2000) 27.

5. Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life. Selected Essays: Volume Two*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993) 5-12 (8). The quasi-scientific tenor of Woolf's imagery in this essay ('innumerable atoms'... 'engraved with the sharpness of steel') reflects her desire to articulate an essentialist view of modernity in contrast to the rather impressionistic quality of the experience she describes.
6. John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, (London: Penguin, 1986) 71.
7. Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903) in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. by Richard Sennett, (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1969) 47-60 (48).
8. John Harvey Girdner, *Newyorkitis*, (New York: Grafton Press, 1901) 119.
9. Jean Epstein, 'The New Conditions of Literary Phenomena', *Broom* 2 (1922), 3-10 (6).
10. Paul Rosenfeld, 'Stieglitz', *The Dial* 70 (1921) 397-409 (401).
11. Quoted in: Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, (New York: E. P Dutton, 1980) 200.
12. Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York*, (Oxford: OUP, 1984) 200.
13. *Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 55.
14. For more on Dos Passos's close relationship with figures from the avant-garde art and theatre worlds see: *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, ed. Townsend Luddington, (London: André Deutsch, 1974.) *Fourteenth Chronicle*, 340; *Twentieth Century Odyssey*, p255-56.
15. *Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 222.
16. Jan-Christopher Horak, 'Modernist Perspectives and Romantic Impulses: *Manhatta*' in *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work*, ed. by Maren Stange, (New York: Aperture, 1990) 55-71, (70).
17. See Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in *The Standard Edition of Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey and others, XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955) 237.
18. Juan Suarez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*, (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2007) 50.
19. Vachel Lindsay, 'Photoplay Progress', *New Republic* 10 (1917), 76-77 (76).
20. William Brevda, 'How Do I Get to Broadway? Reading Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* Sign', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38 (1996), 79-114 (79-80).
21. Tom Gunning, 'An Unseen Energy Swallows Space' in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. by John Fell, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), 355-66 (362).
22. Adams Sitney, *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature*, (New York: Columbia U P, 1990) 18.
23. David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 172.
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