

John Dos Passos's USA and Left Documentary Film in the 1930s: The Cultural Politics of "Newsreel" and "The Camera Eye"

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John Dos Passos's trilogy USA (1938) gathered the previously published volumes *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936). The author conceived this sequence as a wide-ranging panorama (he often called it a "photograph) of America in the first quarter of the century. The novels revolve mainly around twelve characters of different social and geographical extraction whose stories are told in an eminently realistic manner. Intercut with the personal narratives, some of which spill over more than one volume, there are sixty-eight "Newsreel" and fifty-one "Camera Eye" sections, all of them written in a fairly experimental style. The Newsreels are collages of found texts, including snatches of songs, journalistic prose, political speeches, headlines, and ticker-tape news releases. The "Camera Eye" segments, for their part, have been described as a "personal memory bank" (Orvell 1989: 268); they are extremely allusive autobiographical sketches whose full intelligibility often depends on an intimate knowledge of Dos Passos's biography. Thrown into this mix are twenty-seven short biographies of historical figures contemporary with the trilogy's fictional present; they range from Isadora Duncan or Frank Lloyd Wright, to T. A. Edison, "Big" Bill Haywood, or William

Randolph Hearst; these portraits are written in a stylized, rhythmic prose that often approaches blank verse.

The idea that the trilogy internalizes cinematic devices has long been a constant in criticism. Already early reviewers pointed out similarities between the novel's compositional strategies and the ability of the cinema to cross-cut between different locales and actions, to merge multiple storylines into an overall design, and to convey the abrupt jolts of modern life. In addition, film is explicitly alluded to in the very names of the "Newsreel" and "Camera Eye" parts. The perceived importance of these cinematic references prompted British novelist Compton Mackenzie to title his review of *Nineteen Nineteen*, "Film or Book?" (1932: 109-110). And like him, other commentators such as Malcolm Cowley (1936: 23-24), Edmund Wilson (1930: 84-87), or Mike Gold (1933: 115-17) called attention, with varying degrees of sympathy and/or perplexity, to this amalgam of modes and media. In general, critics could not help pointing out that both "Newsreels" and "Camera Eye" interludes added a certain "strangeness" to the novel. These devices made the trilogy "kaleidoscopic," wrote Upton Sinclair, with the "Camera Eye" sections as "queer glimpses of almost anything, having nothing to do with the story or stories," and the Newsreels as "'vaudeville material', some of it interesting, some funny, some just plain puzzling." (1930: 88)

Pursuing the clues scattered in these early comments, scholars have subsequently attempted to specify further the relations between film and literature in Dos Passos's work. Inquiries have proceeded in two main (and mutually implicated) directions. Some researchers have focused on narrative technique and tried to establish to what extent the novel's descriptions, transitions, or focalizations mime mechanisms proper to film. (Foster 1986; Seed 1984) Others have sought to uncover specific sources and parallels in film and art history for Dos Passos's style, narrative patterns, and imagery. In this connection, critics have pointed out the debt of the novelist to depictions of urban modernity by Italian futurist Umberto Boccioni, German dadaist George Grosz, by French machine-painter Fernand Léger, and by American avant-garde photographers Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand, among others. (Trombold 1995, Dow 1992, Ludington 1980) In film, Dos Passos's main influences have been traced to American David Wark Griffith and to Soviet director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein. (Spindler 1981)

What struck me in this roster of influences and antecedents and, I gather, served as the original motivation for this writing, was the scant references in the work of these critics to two contemporary conceptions and practices of documentary film that lend their names to sections of Dos Passos's trilogy: "workers' newsreels" and Soviet documentarist Dziga Vertov's "kino-eye," or "camera eye." The importance given to these forms in USA is perfectly consonant with the pervasiveness of documentary expression in 1930s culture. The bid to depict the contemporary scene influenced established literary media, such as fiction or drama (think of the abundant reportage mixed in with the narrative in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the panoramic ambitions of USA, or of the Federal Theater Project's *Living Newspapers*), and even prompted the development of relatively new genres like the documentary book: a blend of sociology, journalism, and photography characterizing, among others, such titles as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen their Faces* (1937) or the more literary *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), by James Agee and Walker Evans. (Stott 1986) Cultural historian Warren Susman connects such documentary interest to the recent dominance of the new electronic media. (Susman 1986: 160-61) As he points out, the thirties saw the consolidation of the sound film and the boom of the radio; of newsreels, which then became an indispensable ingredient in commercial film programs; and of graphic journalism, most successfully practiced in Henry Luce's *Life*, a publication based on photo-essays. In view of these developments, one could say that the literature of the time attempted to assimilate the immediacy and vividness characteristic of radio, photography, and film, increasingly considered by intellectuals of all persuasions the main channels for the spread of ideas and information.

Witness to the growing prestige of the electronic media, particularly of the cinema, is the attention given to documentary film as instrument of left political organization, education, and critique, not only in specialized periodicals of the time, such as *Workers' Theatre*, later called *The New Theatre*, *Experimental Cinema*, or *Film Front*, but also in broader cultural reviews like *The New Masses* and in the Communist Party organ *The Daily Worker*. As a temporary "fellow traveler" who was frequently involved in a number of causes and protests throughout the late twenties and thirties, Dos Passos was familiar with the range of left contemporary

documentary forms and with the specific cultural politics they connoted. For this reason, exploring the significance of these modes and their particular reception in USA will expand our understanding of the intellectual contexts of Dos Passos's major work. As I will show, these documentary modes – workers' newsreel, Vertov's "Camera Eye" – are evoked by name yet appear, at the same time, highly contested. Their form and cultural politics are parodied, critiqued, and eventually sidestepped. For this reason, they paradoxically figure in USA as an omission, a hole in the whole, and a highly significant one at that, since around this absence the cultural politics of Dos Passos's work take shape.

II.

This type of argument demands that we move beyond the positivistic bias common in historical analysis of influence and adopt a poststructuralism-indebted interpretive strategy that would endow with meaning not only what is actualized in the text but also the text's absences and omissions. At the root of this approach is the idea, first developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, that meaning is systemic and differential, and must therefore be mapped within a network of relations of which discrete elements are a part and within which they signify. What specific elements mean is a function not only of their presence in the communicative chain, but also of those systemic possibilities not actualized at a given time, and in whose hollow a particular textual configuration emerges.

These ideas were consistently adapted into ideological criticism by French philosopher Pierre Macherey in *A Theory of Literary Production*. This book was largely devoted to questioning the protocols and ideologies of what he called immanent, or text-centered, criticism, whose goal is to expose the meaning or the hidden structure of a text by working from a visible surface to a "deeper," invisible realm where "the truth seemingly lurks. Such procedure was, for Macherey, founded on the unacknowledged conception of meaning as "a secret" embedded in the text yet inaccessible to the lay reader's gaze. The function of immanent criticism is then largely tautological: to retell the text and, in the process,

to expose its secret, "to free [its meaning] from all the impurities which alter and interrupt it, to ensure an essential adequation between the work and the reader." (1978: 77)

Opposing this procedure, Machery advocates the practice of ideological and historical critique; a type of inquiry that seeks to expand the usual scope of critical discourse, confined to the study of text as product, and to explore the "determinate conditions" of meaning-production. (1978: 78) The emphasis on production connects the text to a material horizon outside itself; by virtue of this connection, textuality appears as the asymmetrical product of a negotiation with outside forces, which are, however, only retrievable as traces in the writing. Such materialist perspective reveals signification not as a dispersed "wholeness" to be restored by criticism, but as a conflicted plurality arising from the irresolvable tension between a number of antagonistic discourses: "The book is not the extension of a meaning; it is generated from the incompatibility of several meanings, the strongest bond by which it is attached to reality, in a tense and ever-renewed confrontation." (1978: 80) In addition, Macherey's most radical proposal maintained that textual meaning is radically incomplete, in so long as it is always marked and enabled by certain gaps and silences which allow the text to say what it says: "The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure. Thus the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence, without which it would not exist." (1978: 85) This assumes that the work's form emerges through the selective realization of certain possibilities, and that such realizations imply, in turn, a number of avoidances, refusals, and gaps around what the text cannot, or will not, say. Since it is the mute gaps and absences that allow speech to emerge, we must, Macherey proceeds, "investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking." (1978: 86) The task for criticism is therefore double. First, it should try to retrieve the possibilities available in the cultural system. This procedure is akin to what critic Hans Robert Jauss has named the "reconstruction" of the "horizon of expectations" of a given artistic form, that is, the range of variation that readers can expect from a specific cultural artifact at a given historical context. (Jauss 1970: 11-14 and *passim*) At a later moment, criticism should assess the meaning of the actualized utterance against those unrealized systemic

possibilities. In the caesura between the given text and the postulated horizon of expectations the ideological work of the text, or, what is the same, its cultural meaning takes shape. Using these ideas as our guide, in the following sections we will first reconstruct the range of practices and significations that the terms "camera eye" and "newsreel" connoted at the time *USA* was written and first published; and second, we will assess the trilogy's peculiar actualization of these terms. In the interval between absent potentialities and present realizations we will read the cultural politics of Dos Passos's text.

III.

The "Newsreel" and "Camera Eye" sections in *USA* are highly overdetermined as meeting points for three interlocking factors: fascination with the machine (and with film as one of its products), the early-1930s documentary vogue, and Dos Passos's peculiar left politics.

In the context of 1910s and 1920s modernism, the machine was the focus of a varied, wide-ranging cumulus of ideas and artistic practices that celebrated it as aesthetic object, as harbinger of a more rational society, and/or as prime emblem of modernity. The best known exponents of the machine aesthetic tend to be European trends like Cubism, Futurism, Soviet Constructivism, Bauhaus, and De Stijl, some of which were introduced into the US through the 1913 Armory Show. But there was as well a modernist American tradition, whose immediate ancestor was Walt Whitman, and which happily cross-bred with European machine cults. Some of its exponents were the New York journal *The Soil*, the paintings and photographs of Alfred Stieglitz, Man Ray, Morton Schamberg, Paul Strand, Charles Scheeler, and Charles Demuth, the poetry of Hart Crane, and of course, the narrative of John Dos Passos. (Tashjian 1975; Kouwenhoven 1967) In addition to the work of these figures, the machine age was being effusively celebrated right around the time Dos Passos was preparing the early volumes of *USA*. The occasions for such celebration were two well-advertised art shows: the Macy's department stores "Art in Trade" display of May 1927, devoted

to industrial design, and, a year later, the "Machine Age" exhibition, sponsored, among others, by the experimental journal *The Little Review*. (Pilgrim 1986)

Born with the second industrial revolution, of which it was at once symbol and eminent recorder, the film camera was intensely fetishized as the ultimate machine. Coming after the inventions of photography and the phonograph, it seemed an important step forward towards what French critic André Bazin called a "complete illusion of life," which was, according to him, a historical aspiration of artists and technicians. (Bazin 1967: 20-21) An additional reason for the modern fascination with the cinema may have been its anthropomorphism: it engaged the human sensorium by posing as an all-seeing mechanical eye, and appeared thus as an incarnation of early Enlightenment philosopher La Mettrie's *homme-machine*. Furthermore, by oneirically projecting images in the dark, the cinema embodied what some critics and commentators regarded as an external nervous system which mimed the mechanisms of memory, imagination, and analysis. A pioneering work of film theory, Hugo Münsterberg's *The Film: A Psychological Study* (1916), conceived the cinema in these terms: "The photoplay, incomparable in this respect with the drama, gave us a view of dramatic events which was completely shaped by the inner movements of the mind." (1982: 74) Similar ideas were expounded by other writers in diverse avant-garde periodicals. A famous example was sculptor Jean Epstein, whose essay "The New Conditions of Literary Phenomena," published in the dadaist review *The Broom*, affirmed 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...." (1922: 6) The apparatus of cinema then appeared to blur the limits between the human and the mechanical and did so in a period particularly aware of the wholesale transformation of the life-world effected by the spread of a manufactured "second nature." Because of its claim to total representation and its capacity for analysis, the camera was often enlisted into the exploration of reality under a variety of agendas which ranged from a seemingly apolitical aestheticism to revolutionary projects. Among the aestheticist agendas were the different experimental film genres practiced through the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and America – some of these are the "city symphony film,"

abstract cinema, machine films, narrative shorts (in dada, surrealist or expressionistic modes), and lyrical film poems. (Jacobs 1974: 543-562; Horak 1995) Among the committed agendas was the left documentary movement, whose practices and ideologies are an important background for the cultural politics of USA.

Left documentary practice stemmed from the conceptions of film current in radical milieus of the time. In these circles, the cinema was praised for its progressive potential, a trait that vividly contrasted with its present role as disseminator of middle-class ideology and perpetuator of the status quo. The film's utopian promise was enlarged upon, for example, in the pages of the journal *Experimental Cinema*, launched in February 1930 by aspiring filmmaker and left sympathizer Lewis Jacobs. Jacob's periodical sought to study and promote a kind of art cinema that would function at once as a conduit of knowledge and a catalyst of worldwide solidarity. (Platt 1930: 1-2) One of the pieces in the opening issue – by Seymour Stern – compared the camera as a cognitive tool to the X-ray machine: both shared the ability to "pierce through to the innermost" of reality (1930: 15). From a more explicitly political perspective, these ideas were echoed in the short-lived review *The Left*, whose section on cinema boasted the following epigraph from Lenin: "Among the instruments of art and education, the cinema can and must have the greatest significance. It is a powerful weapon of scientific knowledge and propaganda." Right below this pronouncement, in the first issue of *The Left*, a piece by Seymour Stern – editor of the section – stated the need for a proletarian cinema "terrific as the sweep of a nationwide demonstration – for food, for work, for the triumph of the working class." (Stern 1931: 70-71) This type of cinema would be an invaluable aid in bringing revolutionary consciousness to the masses.

The left idealization of the cinema rested largely on the achievements of Soviet directors Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovienko, Dziga Vertov, and Illya Trauberg, among others. In particular the worldwide success of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1926) opened the way for the appreciation of Soviet films. Part of the reason for the success of *Potemkin* and of later titles from the Soviet school lay in their simultaneous artistic and political appeal. When Lewis Jacobs declared that it was "not until the projection of *Potemkin* that cinema became aware of its individuality" and independence from the other arts, he was

praising the film on aesthetic grounds for its innovative use of movement, time, montage, and composition, which offered alternatives to standardized Hollywood productions, still "parasitic on other arts." (Jacobs 1930: 14) The London-based *Close-Up*, the modernist intelligentsia's film review, epitomized this formalist reception. In the opening issue, an editorial statement by Kenneth MacPherson described the Soviet school as part of an international art-film front which also enlisted less explicitly political filmmakers such as German Expressionists Friedrich Murnau, Fritz Lang and Wilhelm Pabst, Surrealist Luis Buñuel, Dadaists Fernand Léger, and Hans Richter, independent film poets Slavo Vorkapich and Robert Florey, and even documentarists Joris Ivens, Merion Cooper and Ernest Shoedsack (these last two had made the highly praised *Grass*, and would later direct *King Kong*). (MacPherson 1927: 5-15) After MacPherson, many subsequent pieces confirmed this attitude. American poet H. D.'s "Russian Films," for example, regarded the Soviet cinema as Biblical "in spirit." While it obeyed a local political agenda, it also rose far above it to universal mythic stature by teaching us, in sum, "that life and the film must not be separated, people and things must pass across the screen naturally like shadows of trees on grass or passing reflections in a crowded city window." (1928: 18, 28) This aestheticist attitude was continuous with the exhibition practices of the so-called "little cinemas," the art-houses of the time, which screened Soviet work back to back with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Un chien andalou*, or *Rain*, grouping these titles together on the basis of form, and ignoring their widely divergent cultural politics.

More committed reviewers, however, subordinated Soviet films' artistry to their political radicalism, and made their revolutionary form the outcome of revolutionary intent. An exponent of these ideas was Harry Alan Potamkin, poet, film critic and secretary of the New York John Reed Club. Writing for *Experimental Cinema*, he stated that the "idea-dynamics of the Soviet film is dialectics", whose terms were: the thesis, the status quo; antithesis, the proletariat; and the synthesis: the new world order brought about by the proletarian revolution. (1930: 16-17) This politicized reception of Soviet films was further promoted by the fact that their production and circulation was most often financed by a branch of the Workers' International Relief (WIR), a Comintern-controlled organization whose purposes ranged from providing aid in

case of famines, war, or natural disasters, to the promotion of proletarian culture throughout the world. To this effect, the WIR sponsored and financed workers' orchestras, dance and drama groups (like the Workers Laboratory Theatre and the German-speaking Prolet-Bühne in 1920s America), art and photography workshops and exhibits, and film-related activities. Their main film production unit was in Russia, and was responsible for such successes as Pudovkin's *Mother*, *The End of St. Petersburg*, and *Storm Over Asia*, Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs about Lenin*, and Nicolai Ekk's *Road to Life* (the first Soviet sound film). Outside Russia, the WIR sponsored workers' newsreel units (particularly active in Germany, Austria, and Britain) and handled the distribution of Soviet films (Hogenkamp 1978). In the United States, the WIR affiliate handled the non-theatrical distribution of Soviet features to be used in rallies, membership drives, celebrations, and fund-raising activities. On these occasions, they were often shown together with newsreels of strikes, breadlines, and Communist Party activities produced by amateur workers' groups in Europe. (Campbell 1985: 124) These exhibition contexts must have enhanced the revolutionary content and documentary character of Soviet films, and, at the same time, they must have suggested a narrow connection between artistic experimentation, social conscience, and political engagement.

The assumed effectiveness of film in the social struggle prompted left intellectuals to promote revolutionary filmmaking in America. In the July 1930 *The New Masses*, Harry Alan Potamkin, who had been running movie lectures, screenings, and discussions in the John Reed clubrooms in New York, suggested organizing a group "for the study of the technique of picture-making and the education of workers in the cinema as an ideological and artistic medium." (Cited in Alexander 1981: 6) Concurrently, *The Daily Worker* published a piece by Sam Brody demanding an independent workers' film movement modeled after the ones already at work in Britain and Germany. (Alexander 1981: 5) But if movie production was in order, what kinds of films should be made? Again, both Brody and Potamkin came out in defense of newsreels. The prestige of the Soviet cinema's factual style, together with the understanding of film as instrument of information and education, placed a high premium in documentary. There was, in addition, an urgent need to oppose the popular mainstream media. Filmmaker Leo Hurwitz, active

in the 1930s left film movement, reminisced that in the popular Fox Movietone Newsreels or the (Hearst-owned) Metronome News "there was little that reflected what was happening to people Occasionally a newsreel shot of an unemployment demonstration of the bonus march, always with a protective commentary to take the meaning out of the event." (1975: 9) This awareness was by no means restricted to radical cliques, nor did it remain unvoiced until the thirties. Wilbur Needham, writing in 1928 for the arty *Close-Up*, deplored the extreme aesthetic and social conservatism of the American film industry and the unofficial censorship it imposed on the screen: "Frank discussion of sex, the infrequent beauty of the human body (unless draped suggestively) and all hints at the radical in government or sociology disappeared long ago from the screens of America, impelled by the outraged toes [sic] of an emasculated minority. Not content with that, the movie monarchs descended another step from their thrones and voluntarily erased the Sacco-Vanzetti case from the screen, burning all news-reel shots of the murdered men." (1928: 45) For his part, media historian Robert T. Elson confirms that in the 1930s "producers and exhibitors alike were spineless when confronted with any protest by politicians, local censors, or patriotic groups." For example, due to German diplomatic pressure, by 1934, Adolf Hitler's regime had received scarce newsreel coverage in the United States, and when it did, its expansionist ambitions and brutal repression of opposition forces were often glossed over. (Elson 1979: 107) This sort of evasiveness made Sam Brody propose in *The Daily Worker* of May 20, 1930: "The newsfilm is the important thing: ... the capitalist knows that there are certain things it cannot afford to have shown. He is afraid of some pictures." (Cited in Campbell 1985: 125) Potamkin, more restrained and betraying a residual aestheticism, also confirmed at about the same time the need for newsreels – but only as a start: "There is no need to begin big. Documentaries of workers' life. Breadlines and picketlines, demonstrations and police attacks. Outdoor films first. Then interiors. And eventually dramatic film of revolutionary content." (Cited in Campbell 1985: 125) Additional advantages for documentary production were that it could harness the skill of the photographers already active in the Workers' Camera League, and it required a minimal crew and little postproduction.

The next step was not long in coming. In December 1930, Sam Brody,

Potamkin, and a few others established the Workers' Film and Photo League, the film production unit within the American section of the Workers' International Relief. The philosophy and goals of the association were explained in Potamkin's "A Movie Call to Action" in the July 1931 Workers' Theatre. This agenda proposed, among other goals, "The encouragement, support and sustenance of the left critic and the left movie maker who is documenting dramatically and persuasively the disproportions in our present economy". (Potamkin 1977: 585) The Film and Photo League plunged into work with *Winter* 1931, documenting social unrest during that period. This was followed, between 1931 and 1935, by *Hunger March*, 1931, *Hunger* 1932, *Bonus March*, *Scottsboro Demonstration*, in addition to footage of the 1932 Foster-Ford Communist Party election campaign, the Kentucky coalminers' strike, May Day parades, demonstrations, rallies, and celebrations. For film historian Russell Campbell, "rather than ... of individual films, it is more correct to speak of 'footage' – news films processed and printed rapidly and then roughly edited for the quickest possible screening and maximum impact." (1985: 126-27) When its topical interest wore out, footage was recut into later productions.

But the activities of the League and its collaborators were not limited to film production. It actively promoted film discussions, lectures, analyses, and even the creation of a film school in its headquarters. Its newsletter, *Film Front*, informed of the league's activities, expressed members' opinions, and frequently translated and discussed the writings of Soviet filmmakers. This forum spread Dziga Vertov's theories on "kino-eye," or camera eye, theories which were deployed in the United States in the defense of a newsreel cinema devoid of fictional and dramatic elements. In his practice and writings, Vertov opposed the narrative strain of Eisenstein, Trauberg, and other members of the Soviet school. They and the commercial filmmakers from abroad traded, in Vertov's pugnacious metaphors, in "film-vodka" or "film cigarettes" – pleasant articles for consumption that tended to distract audiences from examining and understanding their immediate social reality: "Poisoned by film nicotine, the viewer [of film-dramas] sticks like a leech to the screen that tickles his nerves." (Vertov 1984: 62) Opposing this use of cinema, Vertov's staccato, manifesto-like writings of the mid and late 1920s are impassioned calls for documenting the everyday reality of the

new Soviet state: "the movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account." (1984: 69) Documentary cinema – kinopravda, or film-truth – was the mode best suited to this purpose, and kino-eye was the name Vertov gave to his own documentary formula: "Kino eye = kino-seeing (I see through the camera) + kino-writing (I write on film with the camera) + kino-organization (I edit). The kino-eye method is the scientifically experimental method of exploring the visible world." (1984: 87) This bid for actuality did not mean direct recording, in the manner of the 1960s *cinéma vérité*, but the presentation of "carefully selected, recorded, and organized facts (major or minor) from the lives of the workers themselves as well as from those of their class enemies." (1984: 66) Organization was indeed essential to Vertov's films, which often presented elaborate graphic and conceptual montage patterns. Furthermore, their skilful manipulation of trick cinematography (remember *Man with the Movie Camera's* use of double and triple exposures and split screens) and their sophisticated self-referentiality (most obvious in multi-leveled framing and in the foregrounding of the shooting and editing processes) were quite different from the spare stylistic repertoire of the League's productions.

However, in the United States, Vertov's "Camera Eye" was taken to mean direct cinema devoid of formal sophistication to be used for agitation and propaganda purposes. Speaking at the League's National Film Conference in late 1934, David Platt invoked Vertov's ideas in this connection as follows: "The Soviet film began with the Kino-Eye [Camera Eye] and grew organically from there on. The Film and Photo Leagues, rooted in the intellectual and social basis of the Soviet film begin also with the simple newsreel document ... Aside from the tremendous historical and social value of the reels thus photographed, [newsreels] are also true beginnings of film art ... the only films in America that breathe a spirit of art and life." (Cited in Alexander 1981: 57) Such appeal to the Russian documentary legacy appeared increasingly necessary as League members and outside observers began to criticize the group's focus on newsreels and to demand more sophistication and broader range in production. Dissension would eventually lead to the split of the League into two factions: one was

resolutely pro-documentary; the other, led by filmmakers Ralph Steiner and Leo Hurwitz, among others, appealed to the cultural authority of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and advocated a more dramatic, better crafted cinema, since, in the opinion of some, revolutionary films needed to have artistic quality in order to have popular appeal. (Hurwitz 1979: 93; Alexander 1981: 56) This latter faction ended up divorcing the League and creating another collective, Nykino, acronym for New York Kino, in the final months of 1934. The new group maintained its sympathies with the radical left yet sought to distance itself from Communist Party directives.

This is the intellectual context in which newsreel, camera eye, social documentary, and the cinema as a tool for the exploration of reality accrued political momentum. It is important to point out that the influence of these debates spread beyond the immediate context of film production. The aims and philosophies of the documentary and newsreel movements had direct resonance on the stage. In a way, the mixture of radicalism and actuality characteristic of left newsreel had been tried out in the late 1920s by the New Playwrights collective, co-founded by John Dos Passos, Mike Gold, John Howard Lawson, Francis Faragoh, and Emjo Basshe. (Ludington 1980: 165-192 passim, 211-13) And later on in the 1930s there was a constant traffic of people and ideas between the film and theater milieus. Herbert Kline, editor of *New Theatre* was involved in the Film and Photo League, then in Nykino. Ralph Steiner, League camera and famous still photographer, worked with Group Theater actors and technicians in his movies *Cafe' Universal* and *Pie in the Sky* – Elia Kazan, a member of the Group at the time, collaborated in this last project. (Jacobs 1974: 558) The Living Newspapers, part of the Federal Theater Projects, adopted cinematic montage strategies in their performances, and occasionally used film clips and photographs as background, a technique imported from the German and Soviet avant-garde theater. Moreover, during the heyday of its influence, the League counted among its collaborators or sympathizers writers like Erskine Caldwell, Langston Hughes, and Nathanael West. As close observer and participant in these developments, Dos Passos must have been well aware of League-related activities. He certainly must have bumped into League activists and cameramen in his visit to the Kentucky coalfields during the violent strikes of 1931 and 1932, recorded in several League

films. He was involved in the work of Nykino. With Leo Hurwitz he co-wrote the English subtitles for the US release of *The Wave*, shot in Mexico by a team headed by Paul Strand and Fred Zinnemann. Later on, in late 1936 and early 1937, when Nykino restructured and changed its name to Frontier Films, Dos Passos's name appeared in the brochure with which the organization announced its existence. He was listed as advisory board member and consultant, along with Malcolm Cowley, Waldo Frank, Archibald MacLeish, Lillian Helman, Clifford Odets, and many others. (Alexander 1981: 146) As member of this group, he wrote the commentary for *Spain in Flames*, a hastily assembled newsreel film released early in 1937 to promote support for the democratic Spanish republic, threatened by General Franco's right-wing uprising. Shortly afterward, Dos Passos was to work as consultant and scriptwriter in a twin Frontier Films project: Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth*. (Waugh 1984: 112-13) It was during the production of the film that he definitely broke up with the official (pro-Stalinist) left. (Wagner 1979: 112 and ff; Ludington 1980: 265-71)

IV.

Neither the "Newsreels" nor the "Camera Eye" sections as they are developed in *USA* replicate the form or the ideology of the contemporary workers' cinema. It is true that both workers' films and Dos Passos's "Newsreels" sought to link the individual and the public realms. Proletarian newsreels did so in order to make audiences aware of the class dimension of their struggles; Dos Passos's newsreels in order to evoke the "public consciousness contemporary with the private events" that make up most of the narrative. (Wilson 1930: 85) But that's where the similarities end. Where workers's newsreels were highly didactic, attempting to instruct audiences by delivering an unequivocal message, Dos Passos's "Newsreels," whose raw materials are the inexhaustible linguistic debris churned out by the media – popular songs, headlines, news items, and so forth – often evoked confusion in a media-saturated environment. Take, for example, Newsreel 18:

Goodbye Picadilly, farewell Leicester Square
 It's a long way to Tipperary
 WOMAN TRAPS HUSBAND WITH GIRL IN HOTEL

to such task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes and everything that we have with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness, and that she has treasured, God helping her she can do no other

It's a long way to Tipperary ... (120)

The effect here is largely comic, emerging from the juxtaposition of the headline announcing family drama with the ensuing political statement, and the eventual return to the song, which seems to have been droning on, indifferent to the unfolding of the interspersed domestic and national tragedies. In addition, because of the way the fragments are joined together, the antecedent of the solemn pronouncement "to such task we can dedicate our lives" appears to be the bathetic pursuit of philandering husbands. Such cut-and-mix strategies exploit the film camera's ability to juxtapose disparate fragments, and they play up sardonically the incongruity of the results. In this respect, their spirit is closer to the zaniness of dada collages than to the earnest indoctrination of the Film and Photo League's productions.

The didactic editing of an early sequence of *Bonus March*, by the Workers' Film and Photo League, sharply contrasts with Dos Passos's "Newsreel": shots of dead soldiers on the battlefield and of maimed and wheel chair-ridden veterans are followed by takes of the U.S. flag, a priest, churches, a homeless man on a park bench, heroic statuary, and the U.S. eagle on the Bank of the United States building. (Campbell 1985: 129-30) The point – the devastating collusion of church, state, and financial interests in the war and its aftermath – was hard to miss. A further example of didacticism was offered by filmmaker Leo Hurwitz, as he explained the unambiguous montage used by the League's film *America Today*: "The newsreel shots are sure: President Roosevelt signing a state paper looking up at the camera with his inimitable self-satisfied smile, and a shot of fleet maneuvers By virtue of splicing the shot of the warships just after Roosevelt signs the paper ... a new meaning ... is achieved – the meaning of the huge war preparation program of the demagogic Roosevelt government." (1979: 92)

The negative view of the media as agents of confusion and

disorientation in the USA trilogy is compounded by their function as mass deceivers. Some headlines in the newsreel segments, for example, scream blatant half-truths, while others convey the damaging effect of the printed word: "Redhaired Youth Says Stories of Easy Money Led Him to Crime." (150) Occasional news communiques retract and amend previous statements: "... a report printed Wednesday that a patient in a private pavilion in St Luke's Hospital undergoing an operation for the extirpation of a cancerous growth at the base of the tongue was General Grant was denied by both the hospital authorities and Lieut. Howzes, who characterized the story as a deliberate fabrication." (120) In addition, editorial notes justify tampering with the news by appealing to public duty: "Has not the time come for newspaper proprietors to join in a wholesome movement for the purpose of calming troubled minds, giving all the news but laying less stress on prospective calamities?" (737) The recurrence of similar passages throughout the text has the cumulative effect of demonstrating the slippery character of truth in the public sphere.

This notion is prominently embodied in J. Ward Moorehouse's career, which spans the three volumes of the trilogy. Moorehouse is a public relations specialist who serves the moneyed interests by carefully engineering their image, and thus trying to soften the social impact of their harsh policies. As he tries to convince a number of industrialists that they need his expertise, he formulates a statement of purpose containing his own view of class conflicts:

Capital and labor ... those two great forces of our national life neither of which can exist without the other are growing further and further apart Well, it has occurred to me that one reason for this unfortunate state of affairs has been the lack of any private agency that might fairly present the situation to the public. The lack of properly distributed information is the cause of most of the misunderstandings in this world
(Dos Passos 1981: 229)

From the perspective afforded by later glimpses at the labor struggle and at the workers' brutal repression – most notably, in the narrative of Mary French's involvement in strike relief work and in the efforts to stay Sacco and Vanzetti's execution in *The Big Money* – Moorehouse's words seem phenomenally cynical. He is perhaps the maximum exponent of what critic Miles Orvell has regarded as the driving concern of USA: the

corruption of language in a civilization dominated by the totalitarian, exploitative machinery of big business. (Orvell 1989: 270-72) This is most clearly articulated in an oft quoted section of "The Camera Eye (50)": "America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul" (1105) Reversing this process of corruption is the overt purpose of *USA*; and this reversal will supposedly take place by recharging and revaluing the words of those commonly silenced by the powers that be: "... but they do not know that the old words of the immigrants are being renewed in blood and agony tonight do they know that the old American speech of the haters of oppression is new tonight in the mouth of an old woman from Pittsburgh of a husky boilermaker in Frisco ... the language of the beaten nation is not forgotten in our ears tonight" (1105-06) This objective is prominently featured in *USA's* brief foreword, which ends with the proposition: "USA is the speech of the people." (7) The common speech is presented here as the main means for opposing the forces that control social life and falsify language – an idea echoed much later in "The Camera Eye (51)": "we only have words against" (1155) – and also as last bond of solidarity in the bleak landscape of empty streets, indifferent crowds, and alienated individuals described in the preface. In the midst of this desolation, "[o]nly the ears busy to catch the speech are not alone... it was the speech that clung to the ears, the link that tingled in the blood ..." (6)

It is in moments like these that Dos Passos's work comes closest to the political project of left media activists in the 1930s. Both his trilogy and left workers' newsreel were attempts to restore a measure of truth and authenticity to the aesthetic idioms of literature and film. Yet at the same time Dos Passos's text and the newsreel movement differed sharply in their attitude towards the possibilities for such a restoration. For the newsreel movement, the impediments to this project were merely external – a matter of access to equipment, technical knowledge, circumventing the unofficial censorship of the mainstream media, or finding theatrical outlets. In Dos Passos's work, on the other hand, the difficulties were "internal," resulting from a certain aporia built into the structure of the trilogy: while *USA's* main aim is restoring the speech of the people, it painstakingly chronicles instead the growing instrumentalization of this speech; its public corruption, as we have seen

with regard to the "Newsreel" sections; and its increasing remoteness from any realm of public effectiveness. Witness to this aporia is the implicit contradiction between the growing political involvement of the subjectivistic "Camera Eye" sections and the dwindling possibilities for this commitment to result in action in the character-centered narratives.

The autobiographical "Camera Eye" sections counterbalance the factual style of the main narrative with subjective, lyrical impressions seemingly written "from the inside". (Orvell 1989: 268; Cowley 1936: 5) These episodes then vastly differ from what Dziga Vertov's "Camera Eye" was taken to mean in America—a type of film of maximal objectivity and direct testimony. With their elliptical, fragmentary style and idiosyncratic punctuation, they are closer in form to the Joycean interior monologues and similar varieties of radical modernist experimentation. To establish a cinematic correlative, they are evocative of the 1920s lyrical avant-garde, a cinema of fleeting impressions and evanescent states of mind, formally sophisticated, and detached from collective projects and public concerns. The lyricism of the "Camera Eye" is progressively tinged with political indignation as the book advances, to the extent that these segments make up a "novel of education" of sorts, describing their narrator's growth into social commitment. Two of these interludes can be offered as milestones in this trajectory. "The Camera Eye (26)," placed at the end of *The 42nd Parallel*, is one of the earliest with an explicit social theme. It describes the narrator's experiences at a political event in the Madison Square Garden, and then at an anarchist rally in the Bronx Casino with Emma Goldman as one of the speakers. As the police tries to suppress the rally by blocking access to the hall, there are charges, scuffles, beatings, and arrests. After the fight, the defeated activists and speakers adjourn to the Brevoort Hotel in the Village, then a famous bohemian haven, for dinner, drinks, and "talk about red flags and barricades." Eventually, the revolutionary day's work over, the narrator recalls, "we paid our bill and went home, and opened the door with a latchkey and put on pajamas and went to bed and it was comfortable in bed." (291) Involvement is here followed by withdrawal, and, while it lasts, it is controlled and ironically detached, almost a planned romp previous to a quiet evening at home and a sound sleep. This attitude can be contrasted with "The Camera Eye (49)", near the end of the trilogy, where the impending execution of

Sacco and Vanzetti allows the narrator no withdrawal, no outside of commitment, a commitment which provides in turn the overarching project for the work: to "rebuild the words worn slimy in the mouths lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges." (1084)

This trajectory of gradual involvement developed in the "Camera Eye" segments has no parallel in the character-centered narratives, where the revitalization of "the speech of the people" should take place. Instead, one finds only a counterpoint of exhaustion; personal and political failure (particularly upon the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the murder of activist Eddy Spellman in the very last section of *The Big Money*); and bureaucratization – with Mary French's youthful devotion to the workers' cause increasingly ground down by the petty Party machinery. From our perspective, Mary French's fate is particularly significant. The author of journalistic exposes of working-class poverty in midwestern industrial towns, she can be seen as a print counterpart of the committed film documentarists. Her initial failure to publish her accounts or to bring about any change through them may then be regarded as a biting comment on the efficacy of left newsreel practice. The style of the narrative passages in which Mary French's story is told is, in Alfred Kazin's words, "hard, lean, mocking," driven by "the rhythm of the machine," and transmitting a sense of irrevocable defeat that augments as we approach the end. (Kazin 1970: 355-56) Hence the most forthright proposal of USA, recharging language with critical and political effect, is confined to the subjective realm of the "Camera Eye" interludes. Exiled into interior speech, it remains a utopian memory seemingly unrealizable in the public idiom of the "Newsreels" or the popular one of the character accounts.

We can then conclude that Dos Passos's USA deflates the progressive potential attached to the ideologies and practice of the newsreel and camera-eye aesthetic in 1930s left media culture. Rather than instruments of knowledge and agitation, USA's "Newsreels" and "Camera Eye" fragments embody respectively confusion and sham, and solipsism. Whatever progressive political potential may be ascertained in them stems from a deep-rooted sense of refusal, a bitter turning away from dominant orders and their languages, rather than from the cognitive maps these sections provide or from the degree of political effectiveness they restore to "the common speech." The utopianism of the left

newsreel/camera-eye film tradition is then a road not taken, a possibility of the cultural system not actualized in Dos Passos's trilogy.

Projected against this absent possibility, *USA*'s refusal to echo film's progressive promise throws into relief the cultural politics of Dos Passos's text. It is symptomatic, first of all, of Dos Passos's ambiguous relationship with the radical left, a relationship which mutated from identification to widening distance and eventual break-up. (Aaron 1977: 343-353; Wagner 1979: 110-123; Ludington 1980) To this ambivalence we could attribute other central features of the trilogy. Among them is the rejection of straight realism, the aesthetic of immediate impact and intelligibility practiced by 1930s left documentary, and the adoption instead of a blend of realism and modernist experimentation – and this at a time when modernism was being increasingly questioned in left quarters as elitist and escapist. In turn, mistrust of the liberating potential of the camera evidences suspicion of technology as a totalitarian force, a view that contrasts with contemporary attempts to enlist the machine into the social revolution. Such suspicion extends as well to the possibilities for individual fulfilment available in the public life of industrialized modernity. Consequent upon this is the subjective withdrawal manifest in the "Camera Eye" segments – in some ways the ethical center of gravity of the trilogy – and the stories of individual defeat that punctuate the narratives.

Once Dos Passos's break-up with the official left became final, right about the time when his novel sequence was reissued in one volume as the *USA* trilogy, his departures from left orthodoxy were belatedly spotted and chastised, by critics like Malcolm Cowley, Mike Gold, and Granville Hicks, as harbingers of the author's inability, or unwillingness, to live up to revolutionary ideals. (See, for example, Hicks 1938) They were also invoked much later to explain retrospectively Dos Passos's eventual lapse, from the 1940s onward, into a nostalgic Jeffersonianism (Cowley 1972). Such critical revisions had the virtue of explaining, to an extent, the abrupt decline of Dos Passos's critical esteem in left quarters, from favorite social novelist to bourgeois-minded defeatist in less than a decade, and his subsequent conservatism. But while the usual route to these appraisals was through Dos Passos's writings and biography, we have arrived at them here by analyzing the missing traces of the radical documentary film tradition in the trilogy, and in the process, we have

sought to expand somewhat the contextual horizons of reference for this major work.

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