

Dos Passos' Movie Star: Hollywood Success and American Failure

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When a nubile, curly-haired Mary Pickford look-alike enters the stage to the sound of *Everybody's Doing It* in John Dos Passos' *The Big Money* (1936), she signals not only the birth of a new American icon but also the death of traditional American ideals. In a gloomy, despairing portrait of the 1920s, Dos Passos chronicled in *The Big Money* a nation in blind pursuit of wealth, power and pleasure at the expense of original American dreams of equal opportunity, dignity and happiness. The movie star emerged as the major symbol of the alienated America of Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy.¹ Margo Dowling rises in *The Big Money* from rags to riches, but the nation's newest sweetheart achieves success at the cost of integrity and authenticity. Like other radicals of his time, Dos Passos saw the film star as the epitome of bourgeois decay, yet, like the majority of his contemporaries, he was at the same time not a little fascinated with his golden-headed fantasy woman.

At a point in American history characterized by uncertainty and confusion, the Star functioned as an easily readable cultural sign. Like social observers from de Tocqueville to Beaudrillard, Dos Passos employed the language of type in attributing to familiar images and signs "American" meanings and codes. The idea of "Woman" was, as Martha Banta demonstrates in *Imaging American Women* (1987), particularly central to the American mind in the early twentieth century, when the fragmentation and alienation of modernity stimulated a desire for clear sign systems.² In a re-writing of the American

1 John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (New York: Modern Library, 1938). Since the three *U.S.A.* novels are paginated separately in the Modern Library edition, I will give both the novel and the page number, with the abbreviation *BM* for *The Big Money*.

2 Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), xxviii-xxxii, 21.

Girl type, on whom Banta focuses her discussion, Dos Passos thus imagined the flamboyant Movie Star as the representation of postwar American dreams and disillusion. Furthermore, as Georg Lukàcs argues, the type is essential to the social interpreter in that it fuses the general with the individual, the extraordinary with the typical. The typical character commands our attention "not because he is different from his contexts ... but because he embodies them. The characteristic occasions of his historical period are immanent in his life."³

Dos Passos' use of the Star as type originated as well in the satirical technique of his contemporary chronicles. The vitriol of satire flows richly over most of the pages of the U.S.A. trilogy and secretes a series of two-dimensional, cliché-ridden characters, who themselves constitute an accusation of the society responsible for their existence. As Dos Passos writes in an article on the German "artist-satirist" George Grosz, "Looking at Grosz's drawings you are more likely to feel a grain of pain than to burst out laughing ... Grosz makes you identify yourself with the sordid and pitiful object."⁴ Dos Passos thus produced a mercenary, phony Star image in order to present to his contemporaries a distorted mirror that would highlight their own shortcomings.

Margo Dowling's climb to stardom is an ironic inversion of the American Success Myth. With the narrative clichés of a poor, but golden-haired orphan, a teenage rape and elopement, a dead child, pursuit by a millionaire's son, the period as an airplane magnate's mistress, modeling, and obscurity before discovery, Margo's story conforms to the paradigm of the American Dream. But, as Donald Pizer points out, Margo's Hollywood apotheosis "is achieved not by hard work and good luck but rather by the open exploitation of her sexuality and by her ability at every stage of her rise to achieve an effective level of phoniness."⁵ By short-cutting the road to success through the prostitution of body and beliefs, the star devalues original American visions of opportunity and justice and takes her place among "your betrayers America" (BM 437).

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3 Banta, *Imaging American Women*, p. 328; Georg Lukàcs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, 1937 (London: Merlin, 1962), p. 34.

4 "Grosz Comes to America," *Esquire* 6 (Sept. 1936), p. 131.

5 Donald Pizer, "John Dos Passos: U.S.A." *Twentieth Century Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 53.

The cinema queen had made her first appearance in the young writer's work in the early 1920s. A poem in *A Pushcart at the Curb* (1922), Dos Passos' only collection of poetry, commemorates the celebrated Olive Thomas, who swallowed poison in a Paris hotel room in September 1920. As a preview of Dos Passos' later star portraits, the poem deserves quoting in full:

Says the man from Weehawken to the man from
 Sioux City
 as they jolt cheek by jowl on the bus up Broadway:
 —That's her name, Olive Thomas, on the red
 skysign,
 died of coke or somethin'
 way over there in Paris.
 Too much money. Awful
 immoral lives them film stars lead.
 The eye of the man from Sioux City glints
 in the eye of the man from Weehawken.
 Awful ... lives out of sky-signs and lust;
 curtains of pink silk fluffy troubling the skin
 rooms all prinkly with chandeliers,
 bed cream-color with pink silk tassles
 creased by the slender press of thighs.
 Her eyebrows are black
 her lips rubbed scarlet
 breasts firm as peaches
 gold curls gold against her cheeks.
 She dead
 all of her dead way over there in Paris.

O golden Aphrodite.

The eye of the man from Weehawken slants
 away from the man from Sioux City.
 They stare at the unquiet gold dripping sky-signs.⁶

Dos Passos' writing the Star as type surfaces in the movement from Olive Thomas to "awful lives" to "golden Aphrodite," while the detailed description of room decor points to the materialism associated with success. The luxury and light surrounding Thomas merges with the star herself, who is fragmented into "curls," "mouth," "breasts." This dehumanization, combined with "pink

6 Pp. 181-82.

silk fluffy troubling the skin," suggests the exploitation and discomfort of stardom, evident again in the last stanza, where the star is reduced to "the unquiet gold dripping sky-signs" of Broadway. Imagined by and represented through the eyes/I's of Broadway tourists, the movie star exists exclusively as a mirror of masculine desires. Throughout the poem, Dos Passos' repetition of "gold" and "dead" moreover establishes the connection between dollars and destruction.

Like Olive Thomas, the sex goddess of Dos Passos' first major novel, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), becomes the golden victim of success. From an impulsive, talented child, Ellen Thatcher develops into a lifeless symbol of modern materialism: a golden skyscraper. With her chaotic sex life and superficial social life, the popular Broadway actress foreshadows the Hollywood movie star of *U.S.A.* Dazzling and deceptive as the American Dream itself,⁷ Ellen exchanges self for success and pays the price of emotional and artistic sterility.

As early as in *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos had adapted his technique to reflect a society dominated by mass communications and taught by the media "to 'consume' an endless stream of events and sensations."⁸ In *U.S.A.* the cinema influenced Dos Passos' innovative method, with devices such as the Newsreel, the Camera Eye, and the simultaneity and jump-cutting of lives in the Biographies and the narrative sections. The form of *U.S.A.* allows thematic repetition in structural variation and thus enables Dos Passos to prepare the star's entrée in the narratives of *The Big Money* in each of the three other structural frameworks. The unity of cinematic structure and theme places Dos Passos' movie queen among his most successful fictional characters.

Camera Eye 46, which separates a section on Mary French from the beginning of Margo Dowling's story, sets up the contrast between the two major feminine types in *The Big Money*: the revolutionary idealist and the mercenary pragmatist. The autobiographical Camera Eye introduces the division between "underdogs" and "topdogs" in American society and depicts the author's hesitation between Marxists and merchants. As the young Dos Passos, at this point a failed political agitator, returns to his room, he contemplates his desire to "make/money" in the varnished offices of corporate America. Significantly, he couples his materialistic fantasy with a sexual one: "dollars are silky in her hair soft in her dress sprout in the elaborately contrived rosepetals that you kiss become pungent and crunchy in the

7 Eleanor Widmer, "The Lost Girls of U.S.A.: Dos Passos' '30's Movie," *The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, ed. Warren French (Deland, Fla.: Everett Edwards, 1967), pp. 18-19.

8 E. D. Lowry, "The Lively Art of *Manhattan Transfer*," *PMLA* 84 (Oct. 1969), p.1630.

speakeasy dinner..." This stimulating scene continues into a presentation of Margo Dowling's world of sex appeal and show business, in which dollars "make loud the girlandmusic show set off the laughing jag in the cabaret swing in the shufflingshuffling orchestra click sharp in the hatcheck girl's goodnight" (BM 150-51). In their emphasis on social rebellion and social rise, respectively, Mary and Margo epitomize the clash of radical visions and American Dreams in U.S.A.

Superficially, this distinction is blurred in Dos Passos' biography of Isadora Duncan, which also precedes the first Margo Dowling narrative. Isadora combines defiance of the bourgeoisie with a love of "lobster and champagne and fruitsoutofseason" (BM 156), but her Bohemian revolt is naive and anachronistic. The unconventional dancer may wave "red cheesecloth under the nose of the Boston old ladies in Symphony' Hall," but faced with the Russian revolution, Isadora decides "it was too enormous, it was too difficult: cold, vodka, lice, no service in the hotels..." (BM 160). Despite her personal energy and integrity, Isadora is controlled by money and power ("Art was the millionaire life" (BM 158)) and thus constitutes an appropriate introduction to a Hollywood bombshell in the grips of big wealth and big words.

"Adagio Dancer," Dos Passos' biography of the celebrated Rudolph Valentino, further zooms in on Margo Dowling's thirst for fame and fortune. Propelled into the public eye by Hollywood's image-making power, the vapid, but decorative gigolo is elevated into a mythical vessel for a nation's dreams and spends his short life "in the colorless glare of klieg lights" (BM 190). By devoting half of the biography to Valentino's death and his "highlypublicized funeral" (BM 192), Dos Passos highlights both the mass hysteria of the manipulated crowds⁸ and the movie star's victimization by his screen image. As a public commodity to be consumed and discarded, the dead Valentino "arrived in Hollywood on page 23 of the New York Times" (BM 194).

The Newsreel sections provide a similar commentary on Dos Passos' cinema queen. Newsreel LII, for example, sandwiched between "Art and Isadora" and Margo Dowling's first narrative, presents the world of the woman's page and Margo's movie career. "ARE YOU NEW YORK'S MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL STENOGRAPHER" blazes a headline, followed by items on love, dancing, fashion and sex. The bright lights in "SKYSCRAPERS BLINK ON EMPTY STREETS" lead up to the final entry, in which a magazine star blends with her elegant surroundings: "it was a very languid, a very pink and white Peggy Joyce in a very pink and white boudoir who held out a small white hand." Underneath the fashion magazine's polished surface, however, an undercurrent of loneliness and aimlessness suggests the need for

9 Iain Colley, *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), p. 114.

escape into mass-produced fantasy which nurtures Hollywood star idolatry: "No one here can love and understand me/Oh what hard luck stories they all hand me"; "learn dancing at home without music and without a partner"; "MAD DOG PANIC IN PENN STATION"; "UNHAPPY WIFE TRIES TO DIE" (BM 162-63). Upon this background of fashion, fantasy, and frustration, little Margie enters the scene.

The accompaniment of *Everybody's Doing It* at the young girl's début suggests the sexual basis of her future life and career, determined as well by a traumatizing rape. The combination of innocence and experience that makes Margie's performance a hit proves irresistible also to Frank Mandeville, her stepfather and manager. In a new association of sex with the stage, the future star takes a job in a children's play and coolly makes love with the male lead during a dark rehearsal. The budding star further embraces her destiny of sexual and emotional sterility by marrying a long-lashed Cuban, whose connection with middle-aged benefactors results in the blindness and sudden death of the couple's baby, as well as whispered hints of "a secret disease" (BM 248). In an interesting association of sterility and alienation with America, Margo's only concern throughout her ordeal in Cuba is to "get back to God's Country" (BM 249). An operation, apparently a hysterectomy, soon after her return to New York, consolidates the sterility she shares with what Dos Passos designates "the conquering nation" (BM 464) and marks the beginning of her rise to stardom.

At this point, a Newsreel interrupts Margo's narrative and, with thematic jump-cutting, establishes the connection between the barren actress and the empty words of the post-war power elite.¹⁰ In Cuba, Margo's major handicap had been loss of language, a disadvantage she recognizes soon after her arrival. During her period of incapacity, Margo is, significantly, speechless, but letters to America demonstrate her latent skill at verbal manipulation. When Margo more actively begins to plan her escape and enters the American Embassy, her physical recovery is paralleled by a verbal recovery. She consolidates her new-found freedom and power by manipulating the Embassy official with a tall tale, told with calculated "honesty" (BM 251). Back in New

10 David L. Vanderwerken, "U.S.A.: Dos Passos and the 'Old Words,'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 23 (May 1977), pp. 195-228. Amidst the roar and the meaninglessness of boom headlines, items on abandonment and betrayal also parallel Margo's departure from romance and marriage: "Although we both agreed to part/It left a sadness in my heart"; "I'm brokenhearted"; "ABANDONED APOLLO STILL HOPES FOR RETURN OF WEALTHY BRIDE" (BM 255-56). More importantly, however, a lengthy clipping on a psychic working with lights and electricity foreshadows Margo's success in the bright lights. Like the star, the psychic demonstrates a remarkable talent for leg pulling and mind control.

York, Margo rearranges her Cuban sojourn for maximum effect and "confesses" that her young husband's relatives are "pretty well off and prominent and all that but it's hard to get on to their ways" (*BM* 253). As it turns out, Margo's sexual and verbal sterility pays off in Dos Passos' barren, inauthentic U.S.A.

Margo has early discovered that her blue eyes and golden curls can be a means of social ascent and consistently cashes in on the success and admiration inspired by her looks. At the beginning of her career, she lands a millionaire's son, and when a crack in her virginal mask sends her wealthy boyfriend running, the enterprising gold-digger expertly strikes another vein. Margo drills the affluent Charley Anderson, Dos Passos' Veblenian entrepreneur, for money on every possible occasion, most notably after his car accident in Florida, when she manipulates him into signing a check for five thousand dollars at the hospital. Significantly, she appears to her dying benefactor as unreal as a screen star (*BM* 375). In preparation for a new gold hunt after Charley's death, Margo arranges her Miami household according to the best principles of conspicuous consumption to create an effect of leisured elegance. Her next find is Judge Cassidy, whose metallic appearance suggests a promising mine:

There was a glint of a gold tooth in the smile on the broad red face under the thatch of silvery hair the same color as the gray linen suit which was crossed by another glint of gold in the watchchain looped double across the ample bulge of the judge's vest. (*BM* 382-83)

But though the Judge seems susceptible to Margo's charms, he remains unsusceptible to her claims. In the spirit of American prospectors, Margo decides to go west in search of better opportunities.

Margo's inauthenticity, coupled with plain luck, leads her to the myth-makers of modern America. During her fling with Tad Whittlesea, the millionaire's heir, Margo flaunts a fur cape "that wasn't silver fox but looked like it at a distance" (*BM* 258) and supplements the phoniness of her outfit with the role as Clean American girl to please her wealthy, but simple boyfriend. Professionally, Margo's fraudulence proves equally useful. Early on a casting director asserts that she has "mystery," and Margo immediately constructs an appropriate image, involving a childhood on a Cuban sugar plantation, fast success in England, and an unfortunate marriage to a Spanish nobleman. When Sam Margolies, an influential Hollywood director, after more months than Margo cares to remember, offers her a screen test, she looks "bored" and acts the role of spoiled heiress on vacation. As for a stage career, "the family were so horrid about it" (*BM* 399). Only with seeming

reluctance does she consent to an appointment at the film studio the following morning. Margo's expert construction of a star image is evident as well in her early name change from Margery to Margo. The similar names of the star and her director moreover suggests an overlapping identity, as well as the fact that Margo-lies.

Margo's love of illusion destines her for Hollywood success. Despite her stage fright, Margo has from early childhood been drawn to the spotlight. At her debut with the Musical Mandevilles, for example, she had run "from the grimy wings into the warm glittery glare of the stage" (*BM* 178). This early association of security with light has prepared her for stardom,¹¹ if not, perhaps, for the illusory nature of success. At her introduction to the Hollywood film world as Margolies' latest discovery, Margo views the room "in the huge mirror over the fireplace," and the "warm, lively look" on Margolies' countenance is caused by the "firelight playing on his face." As in the New York crowd scenes of *Manhattan Transfer*, the description of Hollywood luminaries suggests atomization and alienation: the other dancers are merely "blond heads, curly heads, bald heads, bare shoulders, black shoulders ..." (*BM* 409). In another manifestation of a decreased sense of reality, Margo loses all sense of direction as she joins Margolies and Rodney Cathcart, a successful actor, after her Hollywood performance. Not surprisingly, the ultimate destination turns out to be Margolies' territory.

In the role of "the nation's newest sweetheart" (*BM* 426), Margo loses her own identity. At Margolies' apartment, the self-important director scripts a ready-made film personality for his golden discovery. Margolies lets Margo know he doesn't "believe in freewill" and, like a mute, mechanical doll, she "let[s] him lead her into the bedroom and carefully take her clothes off and lay her between the black silk sheets of the big poster bed" (*BM* 423).¹² Only

11 Vanderwerken, "USA: Dos Passos and the 'Old Words.'"

12 Such scenes compel Bud Schulberg to classify Dos Passos' novel in "the phallus school of Hollywood fiction." Apparently blind to Dos Passos' satirical technique, Schulberg notes that the "Hollywood sections of *The Big Money* were unworthy of the author of the monumental *U.S.A.* Dos Passos presented the sexual acrobatics of an egocentric genius, a sex-mad matinee idol and his novel's heroine in a fit of two-dimensional writing which convinces us that even major writers should stay away from a scene and an experience of which they obviously have no firsthand knowledge" ("The Hollywood Novel: The Love-Hate Relationship Between Writers and Hollywood," *American Film* 1.7 (1976), p. 31). "Phallic" or not, *The Big Money* shares with the traditional Hollywood novel the mixed reaction to the Dream factory and its employees, the emphasis on Hollywood illusion, and the cast of recognizable stereotypes: "the corrupt, mercenary producer," "the narcissistic, nymphomaniacal star," "the crazy-genius director," etc. (See Nora Johnson, "Novelists in the Dream Factory," *New York Review of Books*, 4 November 1984, 1, pp. 38-39.)

Margo's unconscious puts up a fight. The new-born star relives in a dream, in which Frank Mandeville appears in a vampire's costume, the rape of self which makes up the bloodsucking side of success. And Margo's marriage to Margolies seals the star's association with the Big Money. "I suppose it's no worse than signing a threeyear contract" (*BM* 419), Margo declares when* considering the influential producer's proposal. But after the wedding ceremony, the movie queen is reduced to her screen image. Walking from the plane into the whirl of cameras, Margo "wore her smile over a mass of yellow orchids" (*BM* 425). Immediately, she is ushered to the film lot and spends her wedding afternoon in synthetic love-making under the glare of klieg lights. Emptied of emotional, moral and personal content, the nation's newest sweetheart is a mere vessel of America's dreams. In a demonstration of "the anonymity of success," Margo's final narrative closes at the beginning of her career as a Hollywood idol:¹³ "All right ... hold it ... Camera" (*BM* 426, DP's ellipses). As the myth takes over, Margo disappears.

Though the new star merges with the New America and is rewarded with fortune and fame, a final glimpse of Margo forebodes a future fall. The incarnation of American beauty, Margo is "a small woman with blue eyelids and features as regular as those of a porcelain doll," but not only the dehumanized image suggests her eventual defeat. "It seems she's through; it seems that she's no good for talkingpictures," whispers a guest to Mary French as Margo leaves through the sliding doors (*BM* 553). Sparkling, but speechless, America's sweetheart epitomizes the decline of a nation which has forgotten the Old Words amidst the Big Money.

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Dos Passos' selection of the movie queen as the symbolic representation of an idolatrous nation manipulated from Wall Street and Sunset Boulevard was motivated by the synthetic nature of the film medium itself. Like the theatre in *Manhattan Transfer*, the motion picture provided the author with a metaphor for illusion, role-playing and acting which naturally suggested the illusory values of an age and a nation dominated by sex and stocks.

The importance of the film star in Dos Passos' chronicle of the 1920s was, moreover, the result of the author's awareness of the "eyeminded" culture surrounding him. "In the last twenty-five years a change has come over the visual habits of Americans," noted Dos Passos in 1936. "From being a word-

13 Cp. Claude-Edmonde Magny, *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction Between the Two Wars* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972), pp. 112, 119.

minded people we are becoming an eyeminded people... Display advertising and the movies though they may dull the wits, certainly stimulate the eyes."¹⁴ Ads for America's new leisure time activity emphasized the rich possibilities for extra spice to a dreary life:

Go to a motion picture ... and let yourself go. Before you know it you are *living* the story—laughing, loving, hating, struggling, winning! All the adventure, all the romance, all the excitement you lack in your daily life are in—-Pictures. They take you completely out of yourself into a wonderful new world... Out of the cage of everyday existence! If only for **an** afternoon or **an** evening—escape!¹⁵

While Dos Passos was still working on *The Big Money*, he "signed up to serve a term of five weeks in Hollywood"¹⁶ in order to pay the debts incurred by repeated illnesses and to take a look at "the world's great bullshit center." Dos Passos' assignment was to write a script for Joseph von Sternberg's Paramount production *The Devil Is a Woman*, based on Pierre Louys' *Femme et le Pantin* and starring Marlene Dietrich. "I need some of this stuff in my business," Dos Passos wrote to Hemingway from Hotel Hollywood Plaza, and although his letter emphasized that "its [sic] all very educational," Dos Passos confessed that "the look of this lousy suburb kind of gives me the sick."¹⁷

Dos Passos' exposure to Hollywood make-believe contributed to his satirical use of the movie industry as a symbol of the inauthentic America of *The Big Money*. Von Sternberg, for example, though born Joe Stem in Brooklyn, played his role as Austrian nobleman so convincingly that Dos Passos found himself discussing the Spanish riding school and the old country's wine festivals with the film director, "though I'd never been to Vienna either."¹⁸ At his hotel, Dos Passos was fed by "phoney Russian waiters who bring up phoney Russian food," and the pretty girls had all "put on those Hollywood faces."¹⁹ Marlene Dietrich "was just the nicest German hausfrau you ever met,"²⁰ but other people seemed to Dos Passos to "great

14 Dos Passos, "Grosz Comes to America," p. 105.

15 Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), p. 265.

16 Dos Passos, *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (London: André Deutsch, 1968), p. 214.

17 Townsend Ludington, ed., *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos* (Boston: Gambit, 1973), p. 437.

18 *The Best Times*, p. 215.

19 Ludington, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p. 438.

20 *The Best Times*, p. 215.

you with a nasty leer like the damned in Dante's *Inferno*."²¹ In a final ironic twist to Dos Passos' venture into the land of illusions, he realized at the end of his stay in Hollywood that a young screenwriter named Nertz had secretly been writing the script for *The Devil Is a Woman* all along. As Dos Passos wrote to Edmund Wilson, "I was merely in the position of Queen Marie endorsing a vanishing cream."²² Though the rheumatic, bedridden author of *The Big Money* admitted he was "dam sorry [he] wasn't able to stagger round the studios some more," he later had to conclude that "It was an instructive few weeks."²³

The works of Thorstein Veblen contributed to the educational effect of Dos Passos' Hollywood experience. Veblen had influenced Dos Passos already in *Manhattan Transfer*, but during his California confinement, Dos Passos renewed his interest in Veblen's writings. "I admire his delicate surgeon's analysis more and more," Dos Passos told Wilson. "There certainly seems to me to be more ammunition in his analysis than in any other for us, because he seems to have been the only man of genius to have put his mind critically to work on American capitalism."²⁴ In his own satirical portrait of the mercenary go-getters in *The Big Money*, Dos Passos was thus inspired by Veblen's "diagram of a society dominated by monopoly capital" (*BM* 101). As Walter Rideout notes in *The Radical Novel in the United States*, Margo Dowling's "apotheosis in the movie 'industry' of Hollywood is a legend of conspicuous consumption, a living proof of the theory of the leisure class."²⁵

Like satirists such as Veblen and Grosz, Dos Passos' indignation was moral as well as political. Towards the end of the 1920s, Dos Passos regretted in "A Great American," a review of Paxton Hibben's biography of Henry Ward Beecher, the loss of "national consciousness" in "the sudden gusher of American wealth" and observed that "Any agglomeration of people trying to live without a scale of values becomes a mindless and panicky mob."²⁶ Following a discussion of the rise to power of "a class of ill-assorted mediocrities," Dos Passos continued:

In all that welter there is no trace of a scale of values. The last rags of the old puritan standard in which good was white and bad was black went under in the war. In the ten years that have followed the American mind

21 Ludington, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p. 437,

22 *Ibid.*, p. 443.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 443; *The Best Times*, p. 215.

24 Ludington, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p. 443.

25 Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 162.

26 *New Masses* 3 (Dec. 1927), p. 26.

has settled back into a marsh of cheap cosmopolitanism and wisecracking, into a glow of odorless putrescence.²⁷

In his fictional account of the 1920s, Dos Passos emphasized the same lack of moral consciousness. Critics have frequently commented on Dos Passos' use of alcohol and sex as metaphors of moral deterioration; in a letter to Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair labeled *The Big Money* "a temperance sermon."²⁸ With her shrewd distribution of sexual services, Margo Dowling is potentially just another "amoral slut rising by pussy-power," as Iain Colley bluntly puts it.²⁹

With her frank sexuality, her platinum blond hair, and her zesty personality, Margo Dowling is a conglomerate of the earthy screen bombshells who stimulated dreams and desires in Depression America. Like Jean Harlow, Margo is tough, resilient, shrewd and vulgar. Dos Passos' fictional star shares with Mae West an undeniable weakness for studs such as Rodney Cathcart. Both of them broad-hipped and big-mouthed, Margo Dowling and Mae West combine "good humor" and "genuine amorality" in their calculating, but disarming exploitation of the male sex.³⁰ But the influence of Hollywood surfaces most concretely in the similarities between Marlene Dietrich and Margo Dowling. (The initials M. D. establish the connection). Dietrich was the daughter of a major in the Uhlan cavalry, and, after her father's death, she was brought up in the household of her mother's second husband, Colonel Eduard von Losch of the Hussars. In Margolies' script, Margo is the daughter of "an old armyofficer" (BM 412). Margo's posing as the wealthy heiress whose family was "so horrid" about her stage career evokes the von Losch family's opposition to Dietrich's theatrical ambitions, a disapproval which forced her to enroll under the name of Marlene Dietrich in Max Reinhart's school of dramatic art in Berlin. Both the German movie queen and her fictional counterpart worked as extras at the outset of their careers, and both become the wives of the film directors who helped them to their first film roles. (Dietrich married Rudolph Sieber, an assistant casting director at Universum-Film Aktien-Gesellschaft, on May 13, 1924.) Apparently, Marlene Dietrich allowed von Sternberg, who propelled her into the limelight, to mould her public image much in the style of Margolies'

²⁷ *Zbid.*

²⁸ Robert Rosen, *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 81.

²⁹ Iain Colley, *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), p. 109.

³⁰ Pizer, "John Dos Passos: U. S. A.," p. 50.

publicity buildup of Margo.³¹ In a parallel to von Sternberg, Margolies brings out in Margo "the latent mystery" (*BM* 399) and finds in her face "the spirit of comedy, the smile of the Mona Lisa" (*BM* 400). Like the German hausfrau turned sex goddess, the blunt, boisterous Margo Dowling is transformed into an inscrutable symbol of sex and success.

Dos Passos' account of Margo's career draws on a left-wing iconography representing movie stars as symbols of bourgeois decline. In "Mae West: A Treatise on Decay," printed in the *New Masses* in 1934, Robert Forsythe found it "obvious that Miss West, more than any of her associates, symbolizes the end of an epoch" by showing "in her frank cynical way the depths to which capitalistic morality has come." The embodiment of "the mean piddling lewdness of the middle classes getting their little hour of sin before the end," Mae West "could assume her position now as the Statue of Liberty," because, Forsythe concluded, she "so obviously represents bourgeois culture at its apex that she will enter history as a complete treatise on decay."³² "You can look out the window and watch the profit system crumble," wrote Dos Passos from Hollywood at the time of Forsythe's *New Masses* article.³³

Despite his obvious moral-political condemnation, Dos Passos is nonetheless intrigued by the golden-headed movie star of U.S.A. Unlike the similarly successful Eleanor Stoddard, the Great American Bitch of the trilogy, Margo is warm-hearted, generous, unselfish and likeable, despite and because of her shrewdness and her sex-appeal. In Colley's words, Margo is "Dos Passos' masterstroke of characterisation," "a real hybrid of the life-and death-instincts in her native civilisation."³⁴ Dazzling and deceptive, Margo floats to the top of American society and is washed ashore as a synthetic screen star and a symbol of the commercialized American Dream. But with her triumphant energy and enterprise, Margo Dowling personifies in addition Dos Passos' attraction to the U.S.A. which eventually became his chosen country.

In fact, the authorial and cultural desire that constitutes the Movie Star of *The Big Money* places her subversively on the side of social change.

31 Marjorie Dent Candee, ed., "Dietrich, Marlene," *Current Biography* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1953), p. 159. Recent biographies of Marlene Dietrich, of varying quality and scope, include Sheridan Morley, *Marlene Dietrich* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977); Charles Higham, *Marlene: The Life of Marlene Dietrich* (New York: Norton, 1977); Alexander Walker, *Dietrich* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Thierry de Navacelle, *Sublime Marlene* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984). See also Marlene Dietrich's autobiography, *Nehmt Nur Mein Leben* (München: Bertelsmann, 1979).

32 Robert Forsythe, "Mae West: A Treatise on Decay," *New Masses* 13 (Oct. 9, 1934), p. 29.

33 Ludington, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p. 444.

34 Colley, *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair*, p. 109.

"Woman," the post-structuralists remind us, is exactly the un-representable, that which does not (yet) exist. Thus, the very negativity of America's Newest Sweetheart as a mirror of a nation's dreams makes her an ideal revolutionary form. As a concept "always already" at odds with what is, she embodies desire, process, change. Julia Kristeva notes in "Oscillation Between Power and Denial" that this negative function situates women amidst explosions of social codes: "with revolutionary movements."³⁵ "Woman"—as American Girl, Warrior Queen, Movie Star—is thus an idea ready for service when called upon by socio-cultural commentators and critics.

Strategically, Dos Passos benefited from casting his political message in the popular form of the movie idol. Like the advertising industry of his time, Dos Passos sought to reach "the masses" on their own turf. Roland Marchand observes in *Advertising the American Dream* (1985) that copy writers of the 1920s and 1930s engaged in strategy speculations reminiscent of the intellectual Radical: idealism versus audience appeal. The advertising agencies often decided on "tabloid copy for tabloid minds."³⁶ In *U.S.A.* Dos Passos satirizes the yellow press and the corrupting influence of the advertising industry with the Newsreels and the characters of J.W. Moorehouse and Dick Savage, but like the copy writers he despised, he resorted to the movie star device in order to sell to his audience "who are your oppressors America" (BM 437). Whether Dos Passos' choice of form was motivated by desire or satire, his story of sexual and emotional prostitution thus served to identify America's enemies. If only in this sense, Margo Dowling is a pioneer woman of a New America.

35 Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation Between Power and Denial," *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), p. 166.

36 Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 52.