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John Dos Passos and Cinema by Lisa Nanney (review)

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Modernism/modernity, Volume 27, Number 1, January 2020, pp. 189-191
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2020.0016>



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Rue Blomet and included Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille, Joan Miró, and Antonin Artaud. This results in a persuasive analysis of the processes of “bifurcation” in early paintings by Miró and of Leiris’s notion of the “*jeu des choses*” as it plays out in Giacometti’s *tables de jeu* sculpture-assemblages (226). Laxton compares these latter works to game boards, which “close the distance between subject and object upon which the auratic work of art depends” and seem to assert that “[t]he world of things . . . cannot be sorted out cleanly into useful or artistic objects, but must acknowledge the threshold that both joins and separates the two” (244).

Laxton’s closing postlude situates surrealist play in relation to four key twentieth-century accounts of the ludic, by Johan Huizinga, Émile Benveniste, Roger Caillois, and André Breton himself. The various paradoxes and culs-de-sac of these theories are laid out with acuity and lead to the conclusion that “[t]aken together, these texts signal play’s final break with aesthetics in the postwar period: from the 1950s forward the discursive field would grasp play as a signifier of sociological, psychological, and representational indeterminacy rather than as a metaphor for autonomy, originality, authenticity, and mastery” (268). This is surrealism’s legacy, in part, and Laxton’s decision to end with this theoretical discussion rather than begin with it serves her claim that it is surrealism’s most marginal, ephemeral, non goal-directed and “unproductive” practices that retain the greatest critical power. This is not a controversial claim, but in making it, Laxton’s sharp, well-informed, and incisive study offers a rich exploration of the serious business of surrealist play.

Notes

1. A similar approach is taken, for example, by Jonathan P. Eburne in *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008) and by Gavin Parkinson in *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

2. In this Laxton aligns herself with influential works on surrealism published in the 1990s, notably Hal Foster’s *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) and Margaret Cohen’s *Profane Illumination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

John Dos Passos and Cinema. Lisa Nanney. Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2019. Pp. 256. \$120.00 (cloth).

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In 1936, John Dos Passos reflected on one of the myriad changes to the social, technological, cultural, and economic life of the U.S.A. over his lifetime, the story that was essentially his career-long fictional theme. He noted that his parents’ generation “had hardly any direct visual stimulants at all,” but that, by the 1930s, the U.S. had transitioned “from being a wordminded people [to] becoming an eyeminded people.”¹ Cinema was central to that change, for although it might “dull the wits, [it] certainly stimulate[s] the eyes” (“Grosz,” 174). As with so many leftist artists, writers, and theorists of that era, Dos Passos was both excited by cinema and wary of it; keen to harness its obvious power to raise political consciousness but also aware of the commercial and conservative ideological forces it had been welded into by a vertically integrated industrial Hollywood. Famously, he built that ambivalence into his own prose innovations; he decided early on that he must “record the fleeting world the way the motion picture film recorded it,” using “contrast, juxtaposition, montage” (Nanney 63).

While the story of Dos Passos’s engagement with cinema is well-established within the scholarship on his major texts—*Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and the *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930–36)—Lisa

190 Nanney's fine book adds considerable new detail and chronological range to the account of Dos Passos's lifelong relationship with cinema. In addition to discussing his absorption of the aesthetics of some of the great montage directors and theorists of the 1910s and 1920s—D. W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and V. I. Pudovkin—the book covers the impact of cinema on his earliest fiction, and also attends to his lesser-known work as a screenwriter. This included a short stint in Hollywood in 1936, an anti-Hollywood script treatment called “Dreamfactory” from the same year, work on the controversial Spanish Civil War documentary *The Spanish Earth* with Joris Ivens and Ernest Hemingway in 1937, and a later, de-radicalized screen treatment of *U.S.A.*

The book opens by examining two apprentice novels often overlooked in such discussions—his war fictions *One Man's Initiation: 1917* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921). These novels, Nanney persuasively demonstrates, were closely involved with Griffith's films—both by adapting Griffith's formal innovation of cross-cutting and by critiquing his role in war propaganda, especially his war epic *Hearts of the World* (1918). This is followed by chapters on Dos Passos's 1920s immersion in the medium which initially drew him to the Soviet Union in 1928—the theater. He had co-founded the New Playwrights Theater in 1927 with the partial intention of re-invigorating for proletarian art what he called a medium of “direct contact” which was in danger of being rendered obsolete by what he called the “vast milliondollar ineptitudes of the billiondollar movies” (15). That mission attracted him to Vsevolod Meyerhold's Constructivist aesthetic, and its home in Moscow—a theater that embedded the collision of numerous mass-cultural forms in a “theater of attractions” that celebrated machine technology against a backdrop of unconventional set design. Yet Dos Passos would soon be just as eager a student of the montage editing and proletarian cinema of Eisenstein, Vertov, and Pudovkin, while writing off the New Playwrights as a quixotic failure. Perhaps wisely, Nanney does not dwell on Dos Passos's classic texts to showcase how he embedded those directors' theories into his prose. Such discussion of how cinema informed what Dos Passos called his “four way conveyor system,” *U.S.A.*'s collation of four styles of chapter including Newsreel and Camera Eye modes, has been very ably done elsewhere by critics such as Carol Shloss, Michael North, and David Seed, among others.² Instead, these early chapters often chart compelling intellectual biographies of the pioneers of mass visual media in the brief flourishing of Soviet modernism, and show how thoroughly Dos Passos embedded himself within the debates they laid out. As Matthew Josephson wrote during his travels in the Soviet Union in 1933, the two most discussed foreign writers there were Dos Passos and Shakespeare.³

The book's more eye-opening second half focuses on a short but crucial moment in Dos Passos's career, 1934–1937, which encompassed both his most intensive involvement with screenwriting and his decisive break with communism. This period saw Dos Passos briefly employed in Hollywood, where he co-wrote the Josef von Sternberg film, *The Devil is a Woman* (1935), starring Marlene Dietrich; his publication of the final novel in the U.S.A. trilogy, *The Big Money* (1936), which has one narrative strand devoted to a critique of Hollywood; and two projects undertaken with the Dutch communist filmmaker Joris Ivens. His experience of Hollywood was predictable—his modest novel sales made him appreciate the fat salary, but he was displeased with the piecemeal, industrial nature of his work with Paramount; indeed, the final version of *The Devil is a Woman* bore little relation to Dos Passos's work adapting what he called Pierre Louÿs's “silly” source text (94). More impactful were his two projects with Ivens; the first was a never-realized screen treatment called “Dreamfactory” which focused on the malign influence of Hollywood cinema on American society, and the second was *The Spanish Earth*, a documentary narrated by Ernest Hemingway, shot in Spain, and designed to bolster global support for the Republican side in the ongoing Spanish civil war. Nanney's work on “Dreamfactory” is particularly revelatory; culled from the archive and reproduced here in full, it is a script that skewers the Hollywood star system for promoting materialism and selfishness at the expense of both collective organization and a respect for artisanal skill. It also suggested an innovative

series of metafilmic devices to keep the audiences' attention on the medium as much as on the message, a formal critique of the ideological force of Hollywood's continuity editing achieved by shattering its effects of mimetic transparency.

That metafilmic approach partly explained his beef with Ivens on *The Spanish Earth*, as Ivens's fidelity to the party doctrine of socialist realism rubbed against Dos Passos's commitment to exploring how the techniques and economies of mediation shaped the politics of cultural discourse. The more immediate reason Dos Passos walked away from this project, however, was Ivens's (and Hemingway's) unwavering support for the activities of Stalinist forces in Spain, forces which had been responsible for the summary execution of Dos Passos's good friend José Robles, who had been working as a translator/intermediary between Russian military officials and Spanish Republicans. As is well-known, this incident was the occasion for Dos Passos's final break with communism, but Nanney does an excellent job of showing how the political disputes between Dos Passos, Ivens, and Hemingway refract through the aesthetics and ethical choices of *The Spanish Earth*.

The final turn of Nanney's book is an examination of Dos Passos's attempts to bring *U.S.A.* to the screen, which came closest to happening in 1952 when a full adapted screenplay was produced to transform *The Big Money* into a TV serial on NBC. Six years later Dos Passos worked up the same idea as a film screen treatment entitled "One Life is Not Enough," which transformed the formally and politically radical novel into a version wherein "[n]either the melodramatic narrative arc nor the conservative ideological framework of the treatment is surprising for a Hollywood film of the 1950s" (173). This version even changed one of the trilogy's most famous sections—"The Body of an American" biography that closes *1919*, a scathing attack on the sentimentality and hypocrisy surrounding the interment of the American Unknown Soldier at Arlington after World War One—into a version where the soldier survives the Armistice.

This is a rich and engrossing book. In addition to Nanney's focused and engaging literary history, the extensive appendix provides previously unpublished documents such as Dos Passos's screen treatments and key correspondence with Ivens, documents which showcase how Dos Passos envisaged bringing his formally experimental principles to a filmmaking practice of proletarian cinema. The book expands the sense of Dos Passos's relationship with cinema from a singular epiphanic encounter with Soviet cinema to a lifelong preoccupation; by the end of his life, he was incensed with Hollywood less for its effectiveness as an engine of capital than he was for its uninterest in adapting his novels. *John Dos Passos and Cinema* will be the authoritative work on this aspect of Dos Passos's career and aesthetics for some time. But it also provides fresh insights into the perennial topic of his political biography and his shift to the right, as well as providing superb detail on the specifics of the networks and aesthetics of transnational, intermedial experiment on the left that galvanized modernist culture in the 1920s and 1930s.

Notes

1. John Dos Passos, "Grosz comes to America," *Esquire*, 6 (Sept. 1936), rpt. in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1988): 173–78, 173.

2. John Dos Passos, *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, ed. Townsend Ludington (Boston, MA: Gambit, 1973): 487.

3. Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 69.