

# Newsreels and Camera Eyes: A Mirror of America's Intellectual Life in John Dos Passos's USA

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## الملخص:

تحمل ثلاثية الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية العناوين الآتية: خط عرض 42 (1930)، (1919) (1932) والثروة الطائلة (1936)، على أن هذه الروايات الثلاث ترسم لوحة بانورامية بأبعادها المختلفة لأحوال المجتمع الأمريكي خلال العقود الثلاثة الأولى من القرن العشرين حيث شهدت تلك الفترة إصلاحات جذرية من خلال سعي الأمريكيين إلى فهم الواقع بطرق وأساليب جديدة ومناسبة وفي ميادين كثيرة ومتشعبة. كما شهدت تلك الفترة انغماس أمريكا بعمق في العالم الرأسمالي المنتصر، وكان لزاما على الكاتب الأمريكي وقتئذ أن يقوم من خلال كتاباته بعمل تنويري إزاء قراءه وذلك لتعريفه وفضح الممارسات الخاطئة في كل ميادين تلك الحياة الجديدة. كما حاول الكاتب أيضا اللجوء إلى إيجاد أساليب فنية جديدة يتحدى بها المذهب المادي الذي أقحمت أمريكا نفسها فيه، وبكل تأكيد كانت جذور (أصول) هذه الأساليب موجودة في نمط الحياة العصرية للأمريكيين.

نحاول في هذا المقال إظهار كيفية توظيف الكاتب للتقنيات العصرية في ثلاثيته "الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية" التي تعكس النمط الأمريكي في تلك

الحقبة موضحين أن هذا الكاتب لا يريد فقط معالجة الأزمت من وجهة نظر تاريخية بل من خلال الاتكاء على وسائل جمالية أخرى كاستعماله للمونتاج السينمائي الذي لجأ فيه إلى استخدام العناوين الرئيسية للصحف والإعلانات والكلمات المأخوذة من الأغاني الشائعة للإحاطة بالحدث الروائي والشخصيات، وكذلك لجأ إلى وسيلة عين الكاميرا، وهي أسلوب يعطي رأي الكاتب حول موضوع روايته وذلك لرسم الصورة في كامل أبعادها الزمانية والمكانية. ولقد اعتبر الكتاب والفنانون أن هذه التقنيات ما هي إلا بمثابة قنوات رئيسية لنشر وإرساء الأفكار والمعلومات.

**Mots clés:** Newsreel, Camera Eye, Juxtaposition, modernist technique, capitalism, materialism, America, Twenties, Dos Passos, USA.

In the history of literary and cultural transfer, there are a number of interesting cases where translation accounts for the stature an artist achieved. In American literature, a well-known example is John Dos Passos. Misunderstood or neglected by his American contemporaries, he rose to international fame after he had been discovered and translated into several languages, mainly French. It ought to be admitted that the role of the French in paving the way for American writers is equally evident in the Twentieth Century. In the Thirties, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre and other French writers developed a predilection for some Twentieth Century American writers, mainly John Dos Passos. Even if they relied on translations for their judgement rather than on the American source text, the impressions these authors made on Dos Passos's novels – which they considered as a kind of “spiritual Baedekers”- were enormous. They praised his deep concern for the preservation of America's cultural and historical heritage and they were marvelled by his success in fictionalizing the political and social events that dominated America in the first decades of the Twentieth Century through the use of many modernist techniques, mainly in his Trilogy USA.

The Twentieth Century will be American [...] the regeneration of the world, physical as well as moral has begun ...” (Dos Passos,

**the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel**, p.21). John Dos Passos starts his **USA** trilogy with such a significant sentence uttered by Albert. J. Beveridge, a Republican U.S senator during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. Indeed at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, America was open to progress. Her democratic social order, her technological innovations, her advanced life-styles, her industrial capacities made her ready to lead the way into the modern world politically as well as artistically.

The three volumes of **USA – The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel** (1930), **1919** (1932) and **The Big Money** (1936) - are a kaleidoscopic portrait of this nation buzzing with history and life. They tell – in several languages- the story of the American people over nearly three decades, starting from the early 1900's and ending in the late 1920's. This period was referred to as a period of radical reform. In all fields, Americans were engaged in a quest for new and appropriate ways of apprehending reality. It was also a period during which America was corrupting itself, disturbing its citizens psychologically, immersing itself deeply in the triumphant capitalist world. The American writer of this period was trusted with the duty of enlightening the reader by exposing malpractices in all fields of this new life through his writings. He was thus compelled to invent new artistic forms to challenge the materialism in which the new America threw itself. Assuredly, the roots of such forms were to be found in Modernism, as the Americans were living in a 'modern' era.

In **USA**, Dos Passos does not deal simply with the history of a crisis; he also wants to relate his aesthetic activity to the American historical process. That is why he resorts to some modernist techniques, such as 'Newsreels' and 'Camera Eyes, sometimes even 'juxtapositions' to recreate the collective mind of the time. These techniques – initially used in films – are given a great importance in the trilogy because they are linked to that documentary vogue that spread in the Thirties' culture through the use of the sound film, radio and photography, the vividness and immediacy of which the literature of the time attempted to assimilate. These means were considered by artists /writers as the main channels for the spread of ideas and information.

There are 68 Newsreels in the trilogy. They are a collage of found texts, including snatches of songs , journalistic prose,

political speeches and headlines which narrate the history and 'Zeitgeist' of the period as they document the reader on the American life between 1900 and 1929. The topics of these Newsreels are not chosen at random; they are meant to show how the serious business of the world is carried on. They are a reproduction of what Americans used to read at the period Dos Passos dealt with. They are concerned generally with politics, society, labor, disasters and scandals, the U.S nationalist expansion, the struggle of the 'good' American against the 'bad', the adaptation of the old American values to selfish and material exigencies and the drama of the American involvement in World War One.

The opening 'Newsreel' in the novel thematizes conflicts through references to wars in South Africa and the Philippines (Newsreel 1. pp.20-21), but it is really a prelude to U.S appropriation of the Twentieth Century itself. Thus Senator Albert Beveridge is quoted as declaring that the Twentieth Century will be American (p.21), as already mentioned. In this Newsreel, the writer establishes the global theme to which all the other Newsreels will return constantly.

Though the theme of war is presented first in non-fictional elements (in biographies), it is taken again in several Newsreels, "Czar loses patience with Austria" (Newsreel 15, P.223), "General War Near" (p.223), "Assassin Slays Deputy Jaures" (p.223). Just after this Newsreel, we have the biography of the wealthy Scottish American industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, 'prince of peace' and then another Newsreel which repeats the refrain "It's a long way to Tipperary" after which we find headings like "Joffre asks Troops Now" (p.292). Such Newsreels give authenticity to the fictional action and structure the chronology of the novel by marking constantly the historical date of the general action while synchronizing the individual development of the characters with the purely social/historical time.

Most of these Newsreels represent the public voice of the media and popular culture. They introduce different sections with bits of newspaper headlines corresponding to the actions of the characters described. The second segment of Mac - the typical figure of pre-war working-class capitalism in **the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel**- which contains the biography of the political leader Eugene Debs - opens as follows," in his address to the Michigan to the State Legislature the retiring

governor, Hazen S. Pingree, said in part [...] there will be a bloody revolution in less than a quarter of a century in this great country of ours” ( **The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel**, p.35). And to report the emotions of the time, Dos Passos resorts to poetry, as in:

On a moonlight night  
You can find them all  
While they are waiting  
Banjos are syncopating  
What’s that they’re all saying  
What’s that they’re all singing (p.205)?

He even uses popular songs, advertisements and slogans (p.292). These elements inform the reader on the general atmosphere of the episode dealt with. The private action is related to the public one: the writer reminds us how things were in general when a character was facing a given situation in his own life. The Newsreels show then that private life is part of the culture in which it is embedded and that the spirit of the citizen is colored by the world in which he lives.

These Newsreels are unstructured. They are often presented in the form of headlines and citations from newspapers which the writer sometimes starts in mid-phrase or even breaks off in mid-word. They form a kind of ‘literary montage’ collected from the flow of thoughts of a newspaper reader whose eye jumps from one headline to another. Dos Passos wants to make the reader feel that he is not involved in the selection of these Newsreels which in fact set up the boundaries of the novel. One of their characteristics is that they are dominated by the absurd, especially in the titles of the U.S press.

All America is in the Newsreels, but a falsified America. The American people are submitted to a big pressure. Dos Passos reveals the background of the social consciousness led by the interests of the big businessmen. The Newsreels hold responsible the press for its propaganda in the trial the writer makes on the new American way of life. Its working method makes possible the triumph of the oppressors whose hypocrite and tyrannical domination they must reject. Hence a fierce satire of the nice sentences that convert facts naturally horrible and absurd into inept slogans and stupefying narratives: “Want Big War or None” (Newsreel 15 p.223).

The Camera Eyes, for their part, are used as a tool for the exploration of reality. They are a device through which Dos Passos completes the lives of his characters. Expressing an autobiographical viewpoint of sorts, they offer a fluid, first person look at the world. They are a kind of 'personal memory bank'. In **the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel**, they are extremely allusive autobiographical sketches whose full intelligibility often depends on an intimate knowledge of Dos Passos's biography. They trace his early childhood and develop his personal reactions to social and historical events. Camera Eye 1 describes that feeling of insecurity Dos Passos was seized with when, as he was having a walk with his mother, a demonstration started. The demonstrators, mistaking them for British citizens, threw stones at them. The young Dos and his mother fled to the postcard shop,

Quick darling quick in the postcard shop its quiet the angry people are outside and can't come in non nein nicht englander amerikanich american Hoch America Vive l'amérique. She laughs My dear they had me right frightened (p.21)

The theme of this Camera Eye, ostracism, is most hated by Dos Passos. We feel it in several other Camera Eyes in which the writer expresses his longing to become part of a group, a community, a larger social force. In Camera Eye 7, he portrays a "skating party on the pond" (p.81) near Choate, a boarding school he attended as a child. In this party, he depicts himself as not belonging to the social class that separated itself from the "muckers" and working class boys:

We clean young American Rover Boys handy with tools Deer slayers played hockey Boy Scouts and cut figure eights on the ice Achilles Ajax Agamemnon I couldn't learn to skate and kept falling down (p.81).

The difficulty of being accepted by his classmates in Choate School is continued in Camera Eye 8 in the depiction of a fight scene (pp.83-4).

In Camera Eye 3, Dos Passos moves to another theme. He tells us about his childish fright when, one day, he saw from the window of a train the black smoke and flame of potteries at night, and his mother telling him that people work there all night, "working men and people like that laborers travailleurs greasers" (p.37). Then she tells him the story of the greaser who had been shot in Mexico (p.37). Just

after this, as a perfect example of his ironic juxtapositions, Dos Passos introduces the biography of the “Lover of Mankind”, the Socialist union leader Eugene Debs, the defender of the workers.

In Camera Eye 26, by the end of the novel, the writer deals with an explicit social theme. He reports on the repression the socialists were submitted to at that time, a theme he will develop fully in the next volume of the trilogy, **1919**. He describes his experiences at a political event in the Madison Square Garden and then at an anarchist rally in the Bronx Casino with the anarchist activist, Emma Goldman as one of the speakers. His aim is to retrace the importance of what he calls “Old Words”, that is, the moral values on which the founding fathers built America, values like democracy, the pursuit of happiness, equal opportunity for all, the American dream, to name only these, and to describe the trouble that comes after the speech:

they [the police] charged the crowd with the Fords and the searchlights everybody talked machine-guns revolution civil liberty freedom of speech but occasionally somebody got into the way of a cop and was beaten up and shoved into a patrol wagon and the cops were scared and they said they were calling out the fire department to disperse the crowd (pp. 290-1).

In general, the Camera Eyes, which appear 51 times in the trilogy, tell much about Dos Passos’s interests and life history. He talks about himself travelling with his mother in Europe, at school in England and later, his four years in Harvard and his participation in protest meetings in New York on the eve of America’s entry to World War One. He uses this device also as a means to demonstrate the ability of the private consciousness to survive in that modern world; that is why he resorts to the stream - of - consciousness prose poetry which is not a pure interior monologue but rather the combination of an exterior event with an interior reflexion on this event. Again, the world outside determines the consciousness of the individual. It is for this reason that the consciousness depicted in the Camera Eye changes according to the socio-historical events the writer witnesses.

Indeed, the Newsreels and Camera Eyes Dos Passos uses in **the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel** give much information on the intellectual life of the period in America, a life dominated by speculation, materialism and loss of values. These new literary devices are further developed in **the Big Money**, the third volume of the trilogy, where the writer

disregards again conventional style and resorts to new forms to make his message understood.

The most important innovation is that fusion of poetry and prose. Many Camera Eyes are not punctuated. In Camera 49, for example, there are only six question marks in 60 lines of text. To indicate other poses, Dos Passos uses indentation and enlargements of spaces between words. Sometimes, he capitalizes some words to indicate the beginning of an utterance. However, in many cases, we find difficulties in separating sentences. Through this technique, the writer wants these pieces to be read as inner dialogue; it is also a means to give multiple meanings to his text. In Camera Eye 49, the question,

[h]ow can I make them feel how our fathers our uncles haters of oppression came to this coast how say don't let them scare you make them feel who are your oppressors America [...] or that this fishpeddler you have in Charlestown Jails one of your founders Massachusetts? (**the Big Money**, pp.1084.5)

illustrates this point quiet well: the extra spaces can be considered either as commas or as full stops and in each case we obtain a different meaning. The narrator here alludes to the obvious betrayers of America: J. Ward Moorehouse, the 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, Richard Ellsworth Savage, his successor and Woodrow Wilson, the U S President who drove America to World War One. These 'traitors' - according to him – draw their energy from the "old words" of the founding fathers which they use to soften the social impact of their harsh policies.

The Newsreels of **the Big Money**, for their part, are marked by confusion and incoherence. They treat several major themes like the pursuit of jobs, the passion of the Americans of the 1920's for life, the dangers of the machine 'murderous' days in business, stupid songs, personal tragedies. In general, they express the collective mentality of the 1920's. Their precise function is to reveal social time which is at the heart of American life.

Stylistically, the techniques of Camera Eyes and Newsreels are over-reactions from Dos Passos against the aestheticism he had



inherited from the 1890's, from the "Genteel Tradition". What he reproached this tradition for was that, it was dominated by 'Anglophiles' who wanted to impose English class-values upon a pluralistic, inspiringly Democratic native culture. Down to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, American art and literature were still dominated by provincialism, 'innocence' as well as by a sense of cultural seclusion that persisted till after World War One. However, in the 1920's, the Genteel Tradition was confronted to raw social fact, to a society divided between the material and the cultural, the provincial and the cosmopolitan. There was a conflict between the Old and the New, a conflict dramatized by many events, such as the Red Scare and the Sacco-Vanzetti execution. So, writers needed new forms to express these events.

In fact, the author wanted also to write the history of a collective man. He resorted to another new technique, that of juxtaposition. Indeed, if we take the stories of the main characters of **the Big Money**, Charley, Margo and Mary separately and entitle each with the name of its hero, we can obtain three autonomous short novels or long novellas. But the lives of these characters interact; such is the case of Charley and Margo who become lovers after the former's divorce; or Eveline and Mary who are closely related to each other (it is Mary who informs us about Eveline's suicide because she attended her party the night before). Likewise, from the moment Margo becomes a Hollywood star, we no longer know anything about her directly. It is only in the last segment centred on Mary that we come to know about the final failure in her career caused by the advent of the spoken film in which her voice is not strong enough to be recorded.

This juxtaposition of events is also one of the new techniques Dos Passos uses to avoid the traditional linear novel which is too limited to satisfy a writer who wanted to cover the whole life of the Americans of the 1920's. Moreover, in a traditional novel, the writer could not have mixed his fictional characters with his new literary fragments: the Newsreels and Camera Eyes which are closely related to the personal narratives which they accompany and interrupt.

The first chapters of **the Big Money** illustrate that close relation between narration and the Newsreels. The essential themes are already announced when Paul Johnson – a secondary character who is on the point of disembarking on the American harbour after World War One,

says, “[w]ell we’re back in God’s country” (p.734). This self-satisfaction which is purely American is soon destroyed by the campaign of inflation which is being prepared on the eve of the Americans’ return from War. The silencing of the workers by the Trusts, the moral break of the rescued soldiers, all these are announced in the first chapter by Olie - another secondary character, “we could stand the war, but the peace has done us in” (p.734). This idea is repeated in Newsreel 44, “only survivors of crew of Schooner Onato are put in jail on arrival in Philadelphia” (p.737).

Juxtaposition is also an excellent opportunity for Dos Passos to use irony, humor and emphasis. The juxtaposition of the closing words of Camera Eye 51, “he lifts his hands towards the telephone the deputies’ crowd in the door we have only words against” (p.1155) and the title of Samuel Insull’s biography “Power Superpower” (p.1155) illustrates the effect obtained through the careful ordering of the sequences of the different sections.

There is irony when Dos Passos juxtaposes the biography of the Wright Brothers, those faithful American inventors to the story of Charley Anderson who gives his genius up for money. Margo’s career as a prostitute is juxtaposed to that of Isadora Duncan, the pioneer of the Free Dance’, the great artist who gave so much to American culture; Eleanor the interior decorator who turns her career into a mere means of enrichment is juxtaposed to Frank Lloyd Wright, the great interior designer who renovated American architecture by the creation of the Lusonian City. The biography of the famous American theoretician and economist, Thorstein Veblen is followed by the segment of Mary who uses her leisure time – when she visits her mother – to read Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class. This is in turn juxtaposed to Mary’s bourgeois mother who inherits some stock and lives luxuriously.

Indeed ,there is discontinuity in the trilogy, but Dos Passos succeeds in establishing unity through the frequent use of Newsreels and Camera Eyes which Claude Edmund Magny (1948) compares to that music which accompanies films, a music nobody listens to but which everybody hears and which prepares the spectators’ sub-conscious to the coming images. These devices present to the reader/spectator the film of life, actual life. The Newsreel informs us on the events happening in the world and which have a great influence

on individual destinies. The Camera Eye which is indeed the writer's interior monologue could easily be the monologue of a collective consciousness. It is constituted of all the elements that give an epoch its historical colour: all the anonymous fragments floating in the consciousness of the common man, all the news this man collects from his daily life.

It is true that the writer's materials are all taken from his study of American society and history – as well as from some painfully -remembered events from his own life. But it is through the use of his imagination that he built from these materials an organic unity, which described the nation he made his own. He is indeed a kind of artist-reporter. Nathan Asch's distinction between the artist and the reporter can easily be applied on him:

[t]he usually vague distinction between the artist and the reporter [...] consists in the artist having more depth and comprehension and sympathy, may be more love for humans living. He has many functions, but when he recreates something that really happens, he does a better job than would an apparently cold, objective, will-not-take-sides reporter. Events in his head become a part of life and place themselves in time's duration (cit in Aaron, 1961 ,p.347) .

**USA** is a groundbreaking work of experimental fiction which, with its unique melange of fact and fiction, creates a compelling, tragic vision of America at the down of the Twentieth Century. Even in translation, Dos Passos's vitality, his observation, his honesty and his passion persist. The devices he uses in this trilogy are primarily meant to develop the theme of the novel and to carry the characters forward in their conflict with the machine. Most importantly, they create an atmosphere of fragmentation, agitation, confusion and sham; they also ascertain a progressive political potential which stems from a deep-rooted sense of refusal, a bitter turning away from dominant orders.

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