

“No more’n a needle in a haystack”: The City as Style
and Destructive Underworld in John Dos Passos’
Manhattan Transfer

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Abstract

This article discusses how John Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) uses the fragmented Manhattan of the early twentieth century both as a style for writing an urban tale and as a symbol of a suffocating, all-consuming fiery inferno, where the only chance for success and redemption is by leaving. Taking its point of departure in theories on city literature and historical writings on the city of the early twentieth century, the article discusses Dos Passos’ cryptic and fragmented style and links it to the portrayal of a fragmented and destructive city.

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In 1925, John Dos Passos wrote to Robert Hillyer: “New York last week was like being rolled naked in metal filings” (Carr 209). He wrote to Rumsey Marvin three years earlier describing how he was driven away from New York because people wanted to make him into a prize cow (Carr 189).

Dos Passos’ ‘New York Minute’ partly became the basis for his novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) in which he portrays New York City in the first two decades of the twentieth century. He offers his vision of the new urban landscape with all its tendencies – good or bad, but mainly bad. Dos Passos saw himself as a chronicler more than a novelist and felt that it was the writer’s responsibility “to reveal, and exercise moral judgment upon, the social tendencies of his times” (Hook 39).

If we consider the history of the city in literature, we find that “Since there has been literature, there have been cities in literature” (Pike 3). The image of the city has always reflected the times in which the literature was written, and the image has not always been a pleasant one. In ancient Hebrew, the word “city” could also mean “enemy”. Also, “related words for ‘city’ carried [. . .] the meanings of watching angel, vengeance and terror” (Pike 5).

In *Manhattan Transfer* the city of Manhattan becomes an underworld and a place of emotional and personal terror. The majority of the characters living there become subhuman beings striving for success. Dos Passos manages to use the city itself as a form of writing as he uses fragmentation and surfaces to tell his urban tale. The city takes on an overwhelming role, as it is protagonist, antagonist, hero, and villain. For the people living there, it becomes survival of the fittest in the urban jungle. In Dos Passos’ Manhattan, success equals destruction, and the city eventually consumes those so hungry for success. In the end, they *become* the city – metallic and hollow beings. But Dos Passos also shows that while there is hope, it requires failure. If you are willing to fail, the sun will shine on as you leave the city and go out to seek happiness elsewhere.

In order to understand the setting of the novel, it is necessary to take a look at the city of the early twentieth century. The vision of skyscrapers and the desire to build upwards escalated in the last part of the nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth. At one point, a real estate agent in the novel says: “We are caught up [. . .] on a great wave [. . .] of expansion and progress” (MT 26). According to historian David Nye, “Skyscrapers had symbolic uses as landmarks and icons of progress” (Nye 89). This was a way of showing off what you could do in your particular city. The intention behind the World Fairs at the time was similar. Here people came to experience the sublime and to be awed by the lights, the spectacle, and the man-made creations. But skyscrapers did not just serve an entertainment or tourist purpose. They also became corporate landmarks and ways for companies to show who ruled the city – the higher the building, the more power you supposedly had. David Nye notes that, “buildings became perpetual advertisements for their owners...” and symbols of corporate icons (Nye 94, 108). Moreover, Nye mentions the argument that skyscrapers became, “the artist’s shorthand description for the concept ‘modern’” (Nye 96). This becomes an important point because Dos Passos’ experimental narrative style can easily be classified as modern. As I will return to, Dos Passos uses his very own style in *Manhattan Transfer* with fragmentation and mainly flat characters.

In the early stages of this ‘skyscraper mania’, the idea was for people to stand next to the skyscrapers and look up, thus being awed and overwhelmed by the dominating presence of such an impressive

construction towering over them. Quickly, the opportunity came for people to be elevated all the way to the top which gave them the chance to look down on the city and survey the masses. This, in turn, enabled a person to become the ‘watching angel’ mentioned earlier.

While the skyscrapers were seen as incredible accomplishments, everything was not glorious in connection with the new urban landscape. For instance, the skyscrapers hindered sunlight from reaching the streets. People argued that it turned the street into, “a dark canyon subject to winds and downdrafts” and “a city full of skyscrapers seemed massive, cold, crowded, and impersonal...” (Nye 97). Some also felt that the skyscraper was the evil and “saw the skyscrapers of New York and Chicago as cities of the damned” (Nye 99). In Dos Passos’ cityscape, those who achieve success are doomed, so this vision of cities of the damned becomes very relevant.

When discussing the notion of ‘the city’ in literary terms, we must turn to the theories of Blanche H. Gelfant, who divides the city into three types: “the ‘portrait’ type, which reveals the city only through the struggles of an individual protagonist; the ‘synoptic’ novel, in which the city itself [. . .] functions as hero [. . .] and the ‘ecological’ type, ‘which focuses upon a small spatial unit such as a neighborhood or city block and explores in detail the manner of life identified with this place’” (Pike 10). The focus in *Manhattan Transfer* is not really on a small unit and this eliminates the ‘ecological’ type in this connection. The number of characters is great and out of all of them, Ellen and Jimmy stand out as the two most prominent. The interesting thing about the novel is that these two supposed main characters live and operate in what becomes the *real* main character of the story, namely the city itself. On one hand, if you must point to one single protagonist, it thus has to be the city. On the other, everything about the city is ambiguous. The city is, indeed, the protagonist, but it also takes on other roles. Thomas West states: “The city dominates the novel: it is stage, protagonist, and villain” (West 65). Throughout the novel it is hard at times to determine which specific role the city has taken in various situations. Although it can be argued that *Manhattan Transfer* does have small elements of the ‘portrait’ type city, the one protagonist, being the city, has so many other roles as well. The novel is not about the struggles of one individual but more about a group of individuals, or perhaps an entire generation, against that which surrounds them: the city. Using Gelfant’s definitions, there is no doubt

that *Manhattan Transfer* is a synoptic novel with the city as the main character.

John Dos Passos likes the cinematic technique of writing where he uses expressions and surfaces to show emotion and he also brings in “abrupt cuts, flashbacks, and close-ups” (Carr 215). Furthermore, the use of montages is seen both in *Manhattan Transfer* and *The Big Money* (1936). In *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos takes snapshots of people and incorporates them into the story. Sometimes they have a function and reappear, but mostly they are just another face or another flash of a person or his/her clothing on the journey through the streets of Manhattan. Dos Passos, in a sense, stands on top of a skyscraper, along with the reader, and surveys the masses on the streets of Manhattan. This again points to the theory of the ‘watching angel.’

The overwhelming number of characters in the novel is, of course, a way of depicting urban life at the time. Thomas West argues that the characters, “are the city, a cluster and tangle of lives compacted into a single object” (West 66). Some of the characters have prominent roles such as Jimmy Herf and Ellen while others appear briefly and then disappear. The minor characters become “the stereotypes found on any street corner...” (Mizener 19), and can be labeled as ‘flat’ characters. Overall, the characters, major or minor, are “no more’n a needle in a haystack”—the haystack that is Manhattan (MT 28).

However, this needle in a haystack is not just a reference to the people in the city. The needle also becomes the plot and/or meaning for the reader to find. There is no obvious red thread in the novel and at times it can be very cryptic and even confusing. Writing in the tradition of the Lost Generation, Dos Passos makes *Manhattan Transfer* about the quest for identity and meaning – not just for the characters but for the reader as well.

Desmond Harding quotes critic Marshall McLuhan when he states: “The reader in Dos Passos is not required to have much more reading agility than the reader of the daily press. Nor does Dos Passos make any more serious demands than a good movie” (Harding 107). Certainly, as stated above, one can see Dos Passos’ style as cinematic, thus the comparison with the movies is justifiable. The quote from McLuhan is from an essay comparing Dos Passos and James Joyce, and, granted, the reader will probably find Dos Passos easier to read and understand than Joyce, but the notion that *Manhattan Transfer* does not require much of

the reader is false. The reader becomes an important active participant in finding the plot and message of the novel. It is eventually up to the reader to connect the dots, so to speak, and figure out what the relationship between the characters is, and what kind of message Dos Passos is sending in the end when Jimmy Herf tries to leave the city.

David Nye made the claim that skyscrapers became a way for artists to describe the modern. Peter Brooker states that “European modernism was linked with the environment and conditions of the city” and also associated with “the fleeing and fragmentary, and even more importantly with disparity and division” (Brooker 7). In *Manhattan Transfer* we see great fragmentation and the majority of the characters and inhabitants in the city are alienated from each other – either because they choose to, or because there is no other way in the city. It can be argued that Dos Passos is also alienating the reader with his cryptic and modernist experimental style. If the reader is not motivated to find the needle in the haystack and connect the dots, it is doubtful that he or she will get much out of *Manhattan Transfer*. It is very demanding to successfully understand the novel and actually a little bit ironic since those who achieve success in the novel are doomed. Of course, this could be Dos Passos’ dark message to the reader who achieves success by understanding the book: now you are doomed as well.

On Dos Passos’ work on the novel, Townsend Ludington states: “Dos Passos had jotted down observations, slogans, bits of information, and snatches of dialogue on scraps of paper, from which he began to piece together the several narratives that would make up the novel. The ideas seem to have been a swirl when he started, increasing the difficulty of sorting them out and properly relating various themes to the narratives” (Ludington 229). So essentially, Dos Passos faced the same problems the reader of *Manhattan Transfer* faces seeing as it is difficult to piece the story together because of its fragmentation. In the end, all the pieces, hopefully, come together for the reader and make up a completed puzzle that is Manhattan and the novel itself. The style is as cryptic, fantastic, intriguing, confusing, and ambiguous as the city itself. Essentially, it is possible to say that the style *is* the city.

Dos Passos uses the fragmented style to show the fragmentation of America at the time. The fragmented style is one that has been used by other American writers as well. One example is Don DeLillo with his massive *Underworld* (1997). Similar to *Manhattan Transfer*,

Underworld contains a vast number of characters that appear on and off as DeLillo tells his story about America and sheds light on his vision of Americana backtracking from 1992 to the early 1950s. When reading *Underworld*, the reader becomes a detective trying to piece the puzzle together and make sense of all the characters and lapses in time. The same can be said about *Manhattan Transfer* and I will argue that Manhattan functions as an “Underworld” in Dos Passos’ urban tale.

The early Puritans wanted to be a model for the world. David Nye writes that with New York’s new skyline the metropolis was elevated and magnified into a new version of the “city on a hill,” and the new massive structures became a symbol of destiny and national will (Nye 90). Whenever the various peoples and nationalities with America are mentioned, the term ‘melting pot’ usually pops up. Dos Passos also draws on this tradition in *Manhattan Transfer*. As one character says: “This is certainly the city for everyone being from somewhere else” (MT 67). For the characters, coming to New York is necessary in order for them to become successful, because after all, “if a man’s a success in New York, he’s a success!” (MT 114). A vicious circle is created then, because once you come to this new “city on a hill,” you can never leave. Dos Passos uses this to demonstrate, as he has done again and again throughout his oeuvre that the ‘American Dream’ can easily turn into the ‘American Nightmare.’

Examining this duality of success and destruction associated with the modern city, we can turn to Burton Pike, who notes: “In Christian thought, the city came to represent both Heaven and Hell” (Pike 7). The problem in *Manhattan Transfer* is that even though the skyscrapers of the era were getting taller and taller, getting ever closer to heaven and God, the people living in the city (on the street level) are living in Hell or a Purgatory of sorts. Sharon Mizener calls it “the choking whirlpool of Manhattan” (Mizener 21). The many characters we meet once or twice in the duration of the novel, and then never again, are sucked down into the city. In fact, all the characters more or less somehow disappear at the end of the novel.

Furthermore, on the subject of New Yorkers, Bob Hildebrand, one of the minor characters, says: “Those people’ll fade out gradually...” (MT 357). In his book *American Technological Sublime*, David Nye mentions the Flatiron Building of New York which was triangular and looked like a ship or “the bow of a monster ocean steamer” (Nye 95). It presents a

great image, since the buildings in *Manhattan Transfer* engulf the characters and run them over much like a monster ocean steamer. The images of the ferry are clear throughout the story and make up the beginning and ending of the book. Essentially, Manhattan is all about arrival and the difficulty of departure. After you arrive, you are in a constant 'transfer' and you can never leave. Once you get off the ferry or the ocean steamer, if you do not watch out, it will come at you and run you over. Here it would be plausible to claim that the characters are forced down into the underworld of Manhattan. The city simply consumes them to the point of destruction or obliteration. In the montage at the beginning of the chapter "Nine Day's Wonder", it says: "elevators go up empty, come down jammed" (MT 158). This becomes a symbol of the few people, if any, that make it in the city and are elevated to the top. However, successful or not, eventually everyone comes down into the doom of the urban jungle.

The paradox in the novel is, though, that Manhattan *is* the underworld. It has grabbed its inhabitants (and its reader) and it is not letting go. When little Martin hears the sounds of the street, it is described this way: "From outside above the roar of wheels comes a strangling wail clutching his throat" (MT 333). Already as a child, he is grabbed and virtually strangled by the city as a way of indicating trouble ahead and highlighting the fact that he is doomed just like everyone else. It is survival of the fittest and the expression 'urban jungle' was never more accurate.

Looking at all the snapshots taken by Dos Passos throughout the novel, we find a lot of facial features and it is generally the way Dos Passos describes a character when we stumble upon him or her. Mizener claims: "Many characters' facial features capture their spiritual quality immediately by describing them in animallike terms in order to emphasize their subhuman existence" (Mizener 24). This is similar to the technique of Flannery O'Connor, Southern master of the grotesque, who also liked to apply animal features to the faces and presence of her characters. Also, Erskine Caldwell would do something similar to Dos Passos a few years later in novels such as *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933) where he depicted the conditions of poor whites by portraying them as grotesque subhuman beings driven only by primal instincts and greed. In *Manhattan Transfer* the characters are all animals

driven by instinct as well; only to them, the instinct is to strive for success.

Although Dos Passos’ sympathy is with the working class people, it is not a guarantee that they are facing a more promising future than those who strive for great success. One of the working class characters in *Manhattan Transfer* is Anna Cohen who is nothing but a simple worker. Eventually, she is burned and disfigured in a fire and is described as nothing but garbage when the incident is referred to as, “Just a little blaze in a pile of rubbish” (MT 355). With this in mind, it seems nobody actually succeeds in Dos Passos’ urban landscape. Not even the working class people can survive this hot metallic inferno known as Manhattan without being marked by it for life or destroyed.

The images of fire and metal are extremely important in the novel. Often the fire is described as appearing in all the windows of a huge skyscraper showing that the city is constantly on fire, and there is no way to stop it or escape it. Eventually, you will be consumed and destroyed by the flames. In other words, “The novel shows Manhattan changing through the decades from an ideal of a modern metropolis [. . .] to a disordered world of vice and destruction that sets the mad tramp raving at the end of the novel with a vision of urban doom” (Hook 49). In connection with this, we can look to Sharon Mizener who claims: “New York City becomes the modern Babylon which will be destroyed by a wrathful God for its wickedness” (Mizener 34). The wickedness of the city is everywhere, and it can be argued that, indeed, that is what Dos Passos essentially wants to highlight with the story. The corruption of the city, the people, and the old values will lead to the downfall and destruction of everybody and everything. But, as I will return to, Dos Passos is not solely pessimistic but does, in fact, bring in an element of hope in the end.

Returning to the many images of metal in the novel, a very good example of how the metal of the city puts a strain on the characters is when Cecily’s head is aching “as if it were bound with hot wire” (MT 171). Metal is mostly mentioned in connection with agony. At one point, Jimmy lies in bed, and “his body glowed in a brittle shivering agony like redhot metal” (MT 179). The metal structures surrounding the people make up the cold and massive city that David Nye talks about. However, in *Manhattan Transfer* the cold city is turned into a red-hot city where the metal and fire consume and suffocate its inhabitants.

Jimmy has been living with an iron band around his heart but now “the iron band was breaking” and he begins to realize his true self (MT 309). He later says to Ellen: “life’s going to mean something to me now [. . .] God if you knew how empty my life had been for so many years. I’ve been like a tin mechanical toy, all hollow inside” (MT 336). Ellen responds with “a strangled voice” that they should not talk about toys. Here Dos Passos emphasizes the fact that Ellen does not understand what Jimmy is saying. One argument could be that she in fact chooses to strive for success, while Jimmy breaks the iron band in order to break away from the strangling clutches of the city. Although it seems correct that Jimmy chooses to break away from the city, it is hard to argue that Ellen chooses what she does. She is a product of her surroundings much like most of the characters in the novel. Out of all the characters populating Dos Passos’ Manhattan, Jimmy is just about the only one who manages to realize what is happening to him and he then decides to leave.

Ellen does not realize what the city is doing to her, but her changes are described thoroughly in the novel. Ellen’s dream of becoming “the greatest hit on Broadway” leads to a feeling of disgust that chokes her (MT 145). Later, “all her nerves were sharp steel jangled wires cutting into her” (MT 333-334). The city has grabbed her and is not letting go as the wires cut into her and, essentially, the city is about to destroy her.

Like Jimmy, Ellen is throughout the novel associated with metal. When she is born, the nurse holds the basket containing Ellen “as if it were a bedpan...” (MT 15). Dos Passos here uses the idea of ‘ashes to ashes’ but changes it so it becomes ‘metal to metal.’ Ellen goes from being born and associated with metal to becoming a metal structure such as a skyscraper near the end. Jimmy walks the streets of Manhattan while “a skyscraper has obsessed him,” and he sees Ellen, “absolutely lifelike beckoning from every window” (MT 327). He tries to find a door to enter the building but fails, in an example of how he can never reach Ellen in her current state of mind. Eventually, the building “[falls] onto him out of a scudding sky” (MT 327) and it becomes a reference to Babel that was “cast out of the sky...” (Harding 6). Jimmy cannot reach Ellen, but she is close to becoming the cause of his destruction as she, symbolizing the city, falls onto him.

Generally, Dos Passos hated corporate America and as mentioned above, people who succeed in his fiction are doomed. Donald Pizer sums it up very well by saying: “To fail is to be cast out but to preserve the

possibility of continuing to live inwardly as a seeker after meaning; to win is to die spiritually” (Pizer 17). Dos Passos sympathizes more with those who leave, like Jimmy Herf, rather than those succumbing to the pressure and the ways of corporate America and capitalism.

This is typical of the Dos Passos hero – he is one who takes his hat and leaves. He does not need to stay in a horrible situation trying to become a hero in the conventional way. The heroic act in Dos Passos’ fiction is failure, since that failure enables you to keep fighting and seek the meaning of life somewhere else. After the city falls onto Jimmy, he realizes that he has to leave. We are not sure if he succeeds, but at least the “sunrise finds him...” (MT 360) as it shines through the mist and Dos Passos finishes this dark and suffocating novel with hope and rays of light.

Manhattan Transfer is a very dark and somewhat pessimistic portrayal of the new urban city of the early twentieth century. Dos Passos is not concerned with the good things in New York, and it would be possible to read the novel as a satire on capitalism and the fragmentation of the city. However, I have chosen to look at the novel from a different perspective.

The ever-present city in *Manhattan Transfer* is essentially the novel’s main character. The other characters all function within it, as the city takes on various roles, including that of stage. Dos Passos has taken snapshots of all kinds of people and placed them all in this modern Purgatory as they strive for success in the urban jungle surrounded by fire and metal.

Ellen and Jimmy stand out as the two most prominent characters. Ellen symbolizes the doom of those who seek success, while Jimmy acts as a typical Dos Passos hero and he leaves as a failure. But the failure is just the beginning of something new and another chance at redemption and happiness somewhere else.

The fragmented and experimental style of writing symbolizes the city along with the surfaces of the flat characters Dos Passos introduces. All the snapshots of the faces, the clothing, and the people make up his vision of New York at the time. As a reader you end up like the characters searching for meaning and looking for the needle in a haystack. Most characters in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan* eventually just fade out and disappear. They become part of the city. In Ellen’s case it is clear

that she becomes a metal structure and falls onto Jimmy trying to destroy him.

Nevertheless Dos Passos believes in Jimmy, as he lets him live to fight another day and lets the sun shine on him. Failure brings hope along with it and that is the message to the reader from Dos Passos – even in this wicked city there *is* hope.

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