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‘To See Clearly’: John Dos Passos and Vision

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Abstract:

The work of John Dos Passos has been recognised for its acute visual qualities, and for the revolutionary use of the Camera Eye sections of his U.S.A. trilogy to capture subjective seeing. Most scholarship emphasises the role that cinema and modernist art played in the development of Dos Passos's unique approach to vision, yet this essay argues there is a more fundamental source for vision in his novels: the author's treatment for visual impairment. The essay traces the influence that W. H. Bates's method for correcting visual impairment had on Dos Passos's novelistic craft, drawing on hitherto unexamined notes of the novelist on visual training.

Keywords: Dos Passos, Eyesight, Vision in Literature, Disability

‘To See Clearly’: John Dos Passos and Vision¹

In his 1967 acceptance speech on receiving the Feltinelli Prize from the National Academy of Lynxes in Rome, John Dos Passos concluded that his challenge as a novelist had been to offer clarity of vision: ‘to see clearly and to express clearly what he sees is still the writer’s aim’.² The modernity of Dos Passos’s perspicacity has, for many critics, been tied to his use of montage and reportage as models for his idiosyncratic approach to the novel. In this same lecture Dos Passos declared of his method at the time of *Manhattan Transfer* (1925): ‘Rapportage was a great slogan. The artists must record the fleeting world the way motion picture film recorded it. By contrast, juxtaposition, montage, he could build into his narrative. Somewhere along the way I had been impressed by Eisenstein’s motion pictures, by his version of old D.W. Griffith’s technique. Montage was his key word.’³ Dos Passos’s novel innovations were, he intimates, dependent on those works’ aspiration to the condition of cinema. Yet the critical tendency to follow Dos Passos’s suggestion that his novelistic vision was inherently cinematic can have an obscuring effect. Dos Passos’s interest in vision as a process was sustained and profound, tied to his own quest to treat his myopia. Recollecting his friendship with John Dos Passos, the journalist and expert in South American politics and culture Carleton Beals wondered ‘how Dos, with his poor eyesight, could see so much, for his prose reeks with the richest sensitivity of sight, colors, shapes, laid on lavishly’.⁴ Beals’s answer is rather mundane and limited: that Dos Passos regularly uses opera glasses to look at the world. In fact, the relationship between imagination and sight in Dos Passos’s prose was directly tied to his myopia. Dos Passos rarely depicts blindness in his writing; there is no clear attempt to connect his attempt to ‘reshape narrative to deformity’, which as Maren Tova Linett suggests is a key feature of modernist explorations of physical disability.⁵ Rather, like his near-contemporary Aldous Huxley, Dos Passos used the treatment he received for an eye condition as a model for one of his most important literary innovations – the

¹ Research for this essay was carried out at the University of Virginia in 2016 where I was the Lillian Gary Taylor Visiting Fellow in American Literature at the Harrison Centre. My thanks go to all at the Harrison Centre for their generous support and to the Dos Passos Family for permission to quote from the unpublished writings of John Dos Passos.

² John Dos Passos, ‘What Makes a Novelist [1967]’ *The Major Nonfictional Prose*. Donald Pizer, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988. 268-275: 275.

³ Dos Passos, ‘What Makes a Novelist’, 272.

⁴ Carleton Beals, *Glass Houses Ten Years Of Free-lancing* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1938), 247.

⁵ Maren Tova Linett, *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 2.

Camera Eye of the U.S.A. trilogy. As I will argue, one of the key inspirations for this technique was the work of the radical American eye physician William Bates.

The ‘Bates Method’, as it came to be known, is a much-criticized series of exercises for curing impaired eyesight without the aid of spectacles. The exercises included ‘palming’ (placing pressure on closed eyes with your hand), ‘sunning’ (staring directly at the sun), and ‘shifting’ (the rapid movement of the eyes). Perhaps the most important feature of the Bates method was the emphasis it placed on memory and on relaxation. For Bates, as I explore below, so much of seeing was a mental process rather than a visual sensation; we recall or imagine what we see, and if patients were able to train themselves to recall or imagine what they were seeing they would place less stress on their eyes as the need to visualize was reduced. Most forms of myopia were exacerbated by anxiety and pressure, for ‘when the mind is under a strain the eye usually goes more or less blind’.⁶ It was the conditions of modernity that, according to Bates, were directly responsible for the exacerbation and proliferation of refractive visual impairment that had been poorly treated by the ‘optic crutches’ of eyeglasses:

A generation or so ago books were scarce and expensive. To-day, by means of libraries of all sorts, stationary and traveling, they have been brought within the reach of practically everyone. The modern newspaper, with its endless columns of badly printed reading matter, was made possible only by the discovery of the art of manufacturing paper from wood, which is a thing of yesterday. The -tallow candle has been but lately displaced by the various forms of artificial lighting, which tempt most of us to prolong our vocations and avocations into hours when primitive man was forced to rest, and within the last couple of decades has come the moving picture to complete the supposedly destructive process.⁷

The eye, as an organism, had not been unable to adapt to these changes, and so it was necessary to reduce stimulation and increase relaxation to avoid strain. Bates’s treatment was popular in the 1920s, yet his methods were routinely disparaged by ophthalmologists and other medical professionals who declared it at best ineffectual, at worst dangerous (staring directly at the sun causes solar retinopathy). Yet Bates had, and still has, many passionate and committed followers

⁶ W.H. Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight By Treatment Without Glasses* (New York: Central Fixation Publishing, 1920), 116.

⁷ Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 4.

who swore by his techniques, with his books are still in print and his methods are the basis for a number of alternative treatments.⁸

Dos Passos was treated by Bates in 1922, and in reading Bates's *Perfect Sight Without Glasses* (1920) came across a theory of vision as imagination and memory that would be the catalyst for his novelistic innovations. In the late 1940s, possibly as a result of the terrible automobile accident in 1947 in which his wife, Katy, was killed and he suffered permanent blindness in his right eye,⁹ Dos Passos undertook extensive research on recent advances in ophthalmology, discovering that many aspects of Bates's much-ridiculed method were now being advocated by leading scientists. In tracing his interest in ophthalmology and the 'science' of vision, this essay argues that Dos Passos's visionary fiction was profoundly influenced by an understanding of vision as an imaginative and subjective process rather than as a stable sense, and that the cinematic explanations of his novel craft need to be augmented by an understanding of the radical and unconventional methods of Bates as foundational in his approach to writing. Despite the dubious medical impact of the Bates Method, his revolutionary understanding of vision had a profound impact on John Dos Passos and Aldous Huxley, and recasting vision through Bates and the role memory plays in his understanding of vision can enhance our understanding of the relationship between literary modernism and visuality.

Dos Passos, Cinema, and Modern Art

Of all of his innovations, it is Dos Passos's development of the 'cinema eye' technique that has been regarded as the most important. The method is found in embryo in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), before being formally adopted in *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) and deployed throughout the *U.S.A.* trilogy. As Donald Pizer noted 'the camera eye in *U.S.A.* has usually either been read casually – almost as an awkward interruption – or for its occasional references to narrative events elsewhere in the trilogy.'¹⁰ For more recent critics the Camera Eye has taken on a load-bearing weight in readings of the trilogy. Seth Moglen argues that the Camera Eye 'traces the emergence

⁸ David B. Elliott, 'The Bates Method, Elixirs, Potions and Other Cures for Myopia: How Do They Work?' *Ophthalmic & Physiological Optics*, 33:2 (2013), 75-77.

⁹ Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 455-7.

¹⁰ Donald Pizer, 'The Camera Eye in *U.S.A.*: The Sexual Center' *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 26.3 (Fall 1980): 417

of a radical political consciousness that remains precarious and conflicted because the abhorred structures of social inequality have been internalized so deeply that political commitment feels, to some degree, false and self-indicting'.¹¹ Moglen's complex reading of the motif through the fraught nature of political commitment in Dos Passos treats the Camera Eye as an elaborate metaphor. Other critics have approached the camera eye as being fundamentally cinematic, a reading that has a great deal of both biographical and textual weight behind it.

Around the time he was writing *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos wrote a fantastical dialogue – never published – between an earnest, aesthetic young man and the statue of Aphrodite that stands in the fountain at Plaza Square in Manhattan (incidentally the same 'civic fountain' in which Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald had an infamous drunken dip).¹² The 'Nude Lady' climbs down from her plinth and has a cigarette with the young man who wants to quiz her on art in America, specifically on the films of W. D. Griffiths. While finding it difficult to get to the movie theatre, being a statue, the nude lady relates a conversation she overheard in which a Japanese gentleman had described Griffith's films in the most rhapsodic of terms. The young man is unconvinced, claiming that 'the movies aren't permanent enough. Art is eternal', before extolling the eternal values of art as embodied in the Venus de Milo. The nude lady rejects such a view of art: 'Those are just the sentimental mummy-bands you wrap about art's corpse. Now, you listen to me. If you want art in America, - I don't believe you do with all your prating; my private opinion is that all you want with art is something to talk about at studio teas – But if you want to, all you need is to do in other fields what Mr. Griffith has done in the movie. You paint a painting or write a play as pertinent and as beautiful and as exciting as *The Birth of a Nation*, and you'll have great art.'¹³ The cinema, Dos Passos intimates, provided a model for the dynamism and vitality that was essential to the development of a new art of American modernity. Justin Edwards identifies Dos Passos's development of the Camera Eye in the *U.S.A.* trilogy as having been inspired by the novelist's interest in the films of Sergei Eisenstein: 'By joining and intercutting the subjectivity of the Camera Eye fragments with the objectivity of the narrative sections, Dos Passos was able to use Eisenstein's theory of montage to create a new textual form based

¹¹ Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 221.

¹² F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'My Lost City' *The Crack-Up* Ed. Edmund Wilson (New York; New Directions, 1993), 24-33, 27.

¹³ John Dos Passos, 'Art and Mr Griffith – A Dialogue' Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 113, MSS 5950.

on juxtaposition, conflict and ideology.¹⁴ Analogously, Stephen Hock argues that the Camera Eye sequences actually allow for a greater documentary realism that anticipates Bazinian cinema.¹⁵ One of the central challenges in evaluating Dos Passos's Camera Eye is whether or not it is a vehicle for subjective impression and vision, or for a democratizing, pluralizing collective gaze. Zoe Trodd has argued that Dos Passos 'moved beyond the aesthetic of a one-shot photograph to reach for a *multi-focal camera-eye*', and that within this the Camera Eye sections 'function as close-ups'.¹⁶ The Camera Eye and Dos Passos's investment in cinema offers both an aesthetic and political framework for grasping his innovation.

Dos Passos's ocular-centrism is at odds with the majority of modernist literature in which there is a skepticism towards the eye as a locus of truth and vision. In *Downcast Eyes* (1993) Martin Jay traces the multifarious uses of visuality and visual metaphors in French thought, from Foucault's panopticon, to Debord's society of the spectacle, the intimate relationship between photography and Death in Barthes work, Sartre's savage critique of the debilitating power of 'the look', and Lacan's investigation of ego development at the mirror stage, amongst others. In all Jay identifies a sustained critique of ocularcentrism that is intrinsically linked to the critique of Enlightenment ideas of visual certainty. As Jay suggests, this turn against the visual, while in many ways part of a larger critique of the enlightenment project, can in itself become problematic: 'when the visual is cast out of the rational psyche, it can return in the form of hallucinatory simulacra that mock the link between sense (as meaning) and the sense of sight.'¹⁷ Following Jay, Karen Jacobs argues that modernism's disavowal of vision was the product of three interrelated early twentieth century phenomena: 'newly skeptical philosophical discourses', which included psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Existentialism; the visual technologies fuelled by the new consumer culture; the new visual techniques developed by the emerging academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology. The precipitation of new cultural and epistemological practices led to a fundamental shift in attitudes to visuality in writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, and Ralph Ellison producing a 'diminished faith' in 'the capacity of vision to deliver reliable knowledge, as they critique the

¹⁴ Justin Edwards, 'The Man with a Camera Eye: Cinematic Form and Hollywood Malediction in John Dos Passos's "The Big Money"' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 27: 4 (1999), 245-254, 248.

¹⁵ Stephen Hock, "'Stories Told Sideways Out of the Big Mouth": Dos Passos's Bazinian Camera Eye' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 33:1 (2005), 20-27.

¹⁶ Zoe Trodd, 'Hemingway's Camera Eye: The Problem of Language and an Interwar Politics of Form' *The Hemingway Review* 26, no. 2 (2007): 7-21, 12.

¹⁷ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Degeneration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 589.

forms of violence that vision inevitably seems to entail.¹⁸ From the telescope, to cinema and the x-ray, technology was, as Linett claims, ‘demonstrating that what we see with the naked eye is far from the whole or true picture’.¹⁹

For other modernist writers their approach to vision was transformed by their engagements with avant-garde art. Virginia Woolf’s linguistic and narrative experimentation was inspired by her immersion in post-impressionist painting and the influence of the art criticism of Roger Fry.²⁰ As Woolf put it in an essay on Proust from 1925: ‘we are all under the dominion of painting’. The formal developments of Proust and other novelists of the early twentieth century, she suggests, would have been unthinkable without the generative influence of modern art: ‘Were all modern paintings to be destroyed, a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cezanne, Derain, and Picasso; he would be able to say with those books before him that painter of the highest originality and power must be covering canvas after canvas, squeezing tube after tube, in the room next door.’²¹ John Dos Passos’s fiction could also claim something of the same relationship with Cubism and Fauvism.

As a young man at Harvard, Dos Passos had been deeply influenced by the literature and art of the *fin de siècle*, and the discovery of modern art was transformative. In an essay on George Grosz he wrote: ‘My generation in college was full of literary-snob admiration for the nineties. I can still remember the fashionable mood of gentle and European snob-melancholy the Whistler pastels produced, with their little scraps of red and tallow and green coming out of the dove-coloured smudge.’²² Dos Passos, like so many other artists and writers of his generation, cited the Armory Show, the International Exhibition of Modern Art in New York in 1913, as the catalyst for shaking off the ‘snob-melancholy’ of the Victorians. Where Whistler’s paintings conveyed maudlin introspection, the paintings of European modernism offered something far more radical; Dos Passos memorably characterized Grosz as ‘representing the cirrhosis of nineteenth century civilization’.²³ In a longer version of that essay, collected and published as ‘Satire as a

¹⁸ Karen Jacobs, *The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2, 3.

¹⁹ Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, 61.

²⁰ See Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²¹ Virginia Woolf, ‘Pictures’ *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 243.

²² John Dos Passos, ‘Grosz Comes to America’, *Travel Books and Other Writings 1916-1941* (New York: The Library of America, 2003), 600-617, 611

²³ Dos Passos, ‘Grosz Comes to America’, 613.

Way of Seeing', Dos Passos makes a broader case for a shift in the very way in which Americans approached the visual arts: 'In the last twenty-five years a change has come over the visual habits of Americans as a group ... From being a wordminded people we are becoming an eyeminded people.' Dos Passos used the example of his own parents, who he suggests that 'enjoying a view from a hill, say, were stimulated verbally, remembering a line of verse or a passage from Sir Walter Scott, before they got any real impulse from the optic nerve.'²⁴ While it is perfectly plausible to suggest that the 'Camera Eye' is inspired by the new aesthetic of cinema, and by this visual revolution of modern art, there is a far more fundamental process at work, one that is tied to the very nature of vision itself. The 'Camera Eye' sections of the U.S.A. trilogy are, in fact, not nearly as visual as current scholarship would have us believe. They are, rather, an interiorized psychological space, which, according to Bates's treatment, was precisely where seeing was located. Dos Passos's innovation then is not so much in approximating a cinematic style, so much as in shifting vision from the eye to what Bates would term the 'central fixation'. Instead of reading Dos Passos's 'Camera Eye' as immediate visual snapshots of modernity, we should rather focus on the complicated interplay of memory and imagination that underpin the Batesian theory of vision as a process. At the heart of Dos Passos's aesthetic is a valorization of individualism and the imagination, and it is Dos Passos's interest in the science of vision that is the foundation of the ocularity that lies at the heart of his literary endeavor.

The Bates Method and the Visionary Imagination

While corrective eyeglasses have a long history, the early twentieth century saw the birth of optometry as a profession and as a recognized branch of knowledge distinct from general medicine. The American Association of Opticians was founded in 1898, and in 1911 Andrew J. Cross's *Dynamic Skiametry in Theory and Practice* was published, a landmark book in the development of dynamic retinoscopy. The emergence of standardized optometry also saw the development of alternative treatments for myopia and other eye conditions, none more controversial or successful than William H. Bates, whose 1920 study *The Cure of Imperfect Sight By Treatment Without Glasses* became something of a gospel for those who felt that conventional optometry and ophthalmology was hindering rather than helping them treat their visual impairment. The most famous acolyte of Bates was the novelist Aldous Huxley who published in 1942 *The Art of Seeing*, his account of following the Bates method. When aged sixteen Huxley

²⁴ John Dos Passos, 'Satire as a Way of Seeing' Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 112, MSS 5950.

suffered from an acute case of *keratitis punctata*, and for eighteenth months was left near blind, forced to use braille to read and could only walk with the aid of a guide. While his vision partially recovered, he was forced to wear glasses – which required ever stronger lenses over time – and often suffered headaches while reading. In desperation, Huxley turned in 1939 to one of Bates’s followers in England, Margaret D. Corbett, and underwent intensive training in the Bates method. He found the results remarkable: ‘Within a couple of months I was reading without spectacles and, what was better still, without strain and fatigue. The chronic tensions, and the occasional spells of complete exhaustion, were things of the past. Moreover, there were definite signs that the opacity in the cornea, which had remained unchanged for upwards of twenty-five years, was beginning to clear up.’²⁵ Huxley, ever the evangelist for a cause in which he believed, undertook to writing *The Art of Seeing* to, as he put it, ‘repay a debt of gratitude’ to Bates and Corbett. Central among his concerns was to bring the Bates method into dialogue with developments in psychology and critical philosophy to simultaneously advocate for an alternative approach to vision, and to explain why the medical science of his day had got it so wrong. On the latter point he was unequivocal: ‘ever since ophthalmology became a science, its practitioners have been obsessively preoccupied with only one aspect of the total, complex process of seeing—the physiological. They have paid attention exclusively to eyes, not at all to the mind which makes use of the eyes to see with.’²⁶ Huxley’s conviction of the efficacy of the Bates method was strong, but as his friend Peggy Kiskadden noted it wasn’t so much the eye exercises that improved his eyesight, rather it was the link between memory and vision at the heart of the Bates method that changed his relationship with sight.²⁷

John Dos Passos, like Huxley, had suffered severe visual impairment from childhood. Like Ben Compton in *Nineteen Nineteen*, he was familiar with visits to the opticians as a child: after his teacher has noted that Benny squints, the young boy’s father takes him to the optician ‘who put drops in his eyes and made him read little teeny letters on a white card.’²⁸ His father is delighted with the diagnosis that his son needs glasses, hoping it will lead to him spending less time playing baseball and more time studying. Alas, Benny becomes a Communist activist, and his glasses become symbolic of the incommensurability between his appearance and his vocation: when he is arrested at the Everett Massacre in Washington State in 1916 the police officer goes to the

²⁵ Aldous Huxley, *The Art of Seeing* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), viii.

²⁶ Huxley, *The Art of Seeing*, x.

²⁷ Peggy Kiskadden in *Aldous Huxley Recollected: An Oral History*, ed. David K. Dunaway (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999), 52.

²⁸ John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (London: Penguin, 2001), 686.

trouble of taking his glasses off before punching him in the face.²⁹ Another character, George Hutchins, ‘a sulky little boy’ is afflicted with poor eyesight and is always breaking his glasses.³⁰ It is striking just how many characters in the *U.S.A.* trilogy are described as wearing eyeglasses: Sylvia Dalhart, Eveline Johnson, Mary French (and her father), G.H. Barrow, Alice Dick, Mr Oppenheimer, the little Italian who attacks Ed Schuyler at the theatre, Jim Anderson’s mother who asks him to pass her glasses in the nursing home so she can ‘take a look at the prodigal son’, before she drops them on the floor and breaks them.³¹ While this is not a disproportionate representation of the population, it is remarkable that Dos Passos focuses so much on eyewear, and that it is such an inconvenience to his characters, often rendering them ridiculous, or marking them out as unattractive. Dos Passos was himself embarrassed by his spectacles; in his memoirs he recalls bitterly how much he disliked school where he was called ‘Frenchy and Foureyes’.³² Later in life he would usually pose for photographs without glasses, such as on the 1936 cover of *Time* after the success of *The Big Money*.³³

Dos Passos’s eye trouble became more pronounced in the early 1920s, and at the end of 1922 the condition became so severe he was unable to read, having to leave New York to stay with friends in North Carolina to recuperate. As he explained in a letter to Arthur McComb he had ‘fled to attempt to escape a strange series of head aches culminating in my eyes turning to hard opaque pebbles in my head.’³⁴ As Carr explains, a friend recommended Dos Passos read Bates’s book for a possible cure. He did and was so taken by the alternative remedy he went as far as to move to Washington for a period in order to follow Bates’s course of treatment at his clinic. Having been received by Bates for treatment he was instructed to read fine print without his glasses to exercise his eyes, and to paint and sketch without lenses. Dos Passos continued to follow these exercises after he had returned to New York and would often be found in 1923 and 1924 reading aloud from a miniature pocket Bible as he walked the streets of Manhattan as a means of training his vision.³⁵ The results were, perhaps, not as profound as Dos Passos, or his friends, had hoped. In a letter to Ezra Pound, E.E. Cummings explained that Dos Passos had

²⁹ Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 697.

³⁰ Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 430.

³¹ Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 757.

³² John Dos Passos, *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966), 14.

³³ Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 348.

³⁴ John Dos Passos ‘To Arthur McComb, 23 October 1922, Letter 124’ *John Dos Passos’ Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*, ed. Melvin Landberg (Niwot, CO: University of Colorado Press, 1991), 199-200

³⁵ Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 193.

‘partially cured himself of nearblindness via Dr. Bates (takeoffyourglasses) exercises; have seen him walk across 5th Avenue while brakes screamed, cheerfully oblivious.’³⁶ In the summer and Autumn of 1923 when he was feverishly working on his ‘utterly fantastic and New Yorkish’ novel, as he described the nascent *Manhattan Transfer* to Germaine Lucas-Championnière, he was also religiously adhering to ‘the comical system of Doctor Bates for the eyes’.³⁷ To further improve his vision he moved to Rockaway Park in Queens a few months where he wrote to Rumsey Marvin that he had been ‘living a most hermit existence’, ‘practicing a new theory about my eyes. Haven’t worn glasses since October 24 and I think my sight has improved a little. It’s terribly tedious but worth spending years on if it works.’³⁸ In March 1924, while economizing by living in New Orleans, Dos Passos wrote to Rumsey Marvin again that he was working ‘continuously and spend the rest of the time doing voodoo on my eyes’.³⁹ Bates’s eye exercises were time consuming, and as far as the medical establishment was considered, no more effective than voodoo in treating myopia, but to Dos Passos the prospect of living without glasses made them a sorcery worth the sacrifice.

Dos Passos never did stop wearing glasses, but when he came to reflect again on the nature of vision thirty years in an unpublished lecture on ‘visual training’ he recalled his previous experience, explaining Bates’s method as follows: ‘Using his retinascope he had come to the conclusion that the shape of the eyeball, on which errors of refraction were deemed to depend, was not as stable as had been thought.’ On observing the function of the retina, Bates claims that he ‘saw the eyeball changing its shape under conditions of stress.’⁴⁰ Bates then hypothesized that if patients could reduce the stress they places on their eye muscles they could obtain perfect sight. While, as Dos Passos notes, ‘the scientific world wrote off Bates as a crank, or worse’ at the time, the developments of modern eye specialists in the 1940s and 50s such as Renshaw and Francke were in part a result of earlier scientists paying more attention to poorly functioning eyes as a means of proving Bates wrong. In the notes that accompany the essays he wrote under the heading ‘Personal Experience with Near Sightedness’: ‘most conditions get worse if merely

³⁶ E.E. Cummings ‘Letter 141 - To Ezra Pound October 29 1949’ *Pound/Cummings: The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings*. Ed. Barry Ahearn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 194-6.

³⁷ Dos Passos in Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), 228.

³⁸ Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 198.

³⁹ John Dos Passos ‘To Rumsey Marvin, March 1924’ *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, ed. Townsend Ludington (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973), 357.

⁴⁰ John Dos Passos, ‘The Truth About Visual Training - Notes’ Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 116, MSS 5950.

corrected by glasses. Old Bates' throw away your glasses quackery. Discovery that the oculists are using exactly the same methods in examining eyes to function as they did 50 years ago.⁴¹ At the heart of Bates's method was the belief that impaired vision was only in small part a problem of the eyes: 'the phenomena of vision depend upon the mind's interpretation of the impression upon the retina. What we see is not that impression, but our own interpretation of it.'⁴² It was in reading Bates that Dos Passos would have found the clearest explanation of the eye as a camera metaphor. Bates wrote: 'The eye is a miniature camera, corresponding in many ways very exactly to the inanimate machine used in photography.'⁴³ The book also included a diagram which gave a visual demonstration of the similarities between the function of the eye and the camera.

Yet as Bates went on to explain, there is a crucial difference between the two visual apparatus:

If two cameras are out of focus to the same degree, they will take two imperfect pictures exactly alike. If two eyes are out of focus to the same degree, similar impressions will be made upon the retina of each; but the impressions made upon the mind may be totally unlike, whether the eyes belong to the same person or to different persons.⁴⁴

In his 1937 essay on the art of George Grosz, 'Satire as a Way of Seeing', Dos Passos explained his understanding of vision in a way that was strikingly reminiscent of Bates: 'Your two eyes are an accurate stereoscopic camera, sure enough, but the process by which the upsidedown image of the retina takes effect on the brain entails a certain amount of unconscious selection.' Like Bates, Dos Passos ascribed a power to the imagination to transform what we look at into vision: 'What you see depends to a great extent on subjective distortion and eliminations which determines the varied impacts of the nervous system of speed of line, emotion of color, touch values of form. Seeing is a process of imagination.'⁴⁵ Vision then is far from mechanic, or even sensory, and therefore the process can be improved or degraded dependent on the capacity of one's imagination. If vision could be trained, it was painting, drawing and photography that was able to most effectively 'educate the eye', to 'furnish the frame of reference by which we invent nature as we look at it'. Dos Passos was not alone in developing the analogy between the camera

⁴¹ John Dos Passos, 'The Truth About Visual Training' Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 116, MSS 5950.

⁴² Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 148.

⁴³ Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 114.

⁴⁴ Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 150-151.

⁴⁵ John Dos Passos, 'Satire as a Way of Seeing,' *Occasions and Protests* (Washington, D.C.: Henry Regnery, 1964), 20-32, 20.

and the human eye. Christopher Isherwood famously had his semi-autobiographical character in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) declare: 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.'⁴⁶ Dos Passos, like Isherwood, may have technologized Emerson's 'transparent eyeball', but that does not mean that his camera eye was passive. In one of Dos Passos's notebooks in preparation for his essay he quotes from an unnamed source, most likely Francke, that 'the visual acuity of any myope is obviously influenced by the large subjective element, the individual interpretation of a blurred retinal image', and it was the 'subjective' lens of the myope that was to be the foundation of Dos Passos's novel perspicacity.⁴⁷

If the singularity of vision marked the difference between the eye and camera, that difference was exacerbated by Bates's corrective measure. He maintained that aberrations in vision are 'illusions', 'imaginary', and that once the patient 'becomes convinced that what he sees is imaginary it helps to bring the imagination under control; and since a perfect imagination is impossible without perfect relaxation, a perfect imagination not only corrects the false interpretation of the retinal image, but corrects the error of refraction.'⁴⁸ According to Bates our ability to see is directly tied to our ability to imagine what we see – retinal images are only a part of the process of seeing. Memory is an essential process in Bates's corrective method. As he explains: 'Imagination depends upon the memory, because a thing can be imagined only as well as it can be remembered. You cannot imagine a sunset unless you have seen one'.⁴⁹ It then becomes perfectly possible for those suffering from myopia to remember seeing a letter on an eye chart with complete clarity and then to imagine that they can still see it with clarity even when it may appear blurred by recalling their memory. Huxley offers a number of examples in which the memory supports the process of seeing, such as an old sempstress who is unable to read without glasses, but can thread a needle with the naked eye, or an office worker who can function all day without visual fatigue but suffers a splitting headache after spending an hour in a museum. In both of these cases routine and repeated vision leads to an ease of vision, the memory and the imagination doing a large part of the work of vision. Huxley notes that the 'truth that perception and vision are largely dependent upon past experiences, as recorded by

⁴⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London: Vintage, 1989), 9.

⁴⁷ John Dos Passos, 'Notebooks, n.d.' Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 126, MSS 5950.

⁴⁸ Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 151.

⁴⁹ Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 151.

memory, has been recognized for centuries, but it was Bates who first gave any real thought to the ‘utilitarian and therapeutic corollaries of this truth’.⁵⁰ The improved vision comes from using the imagination of a clear vision to stop the eye from straining after the vision. The relaxation of the eye as a result of avoiding stress then leads to an actual improvement in the vision. Bates would instruct his patients to read the Snellen test card every day, reading the smallest line they can make out from a distance of a foot, and then to imagine they were still seeing the line they remembered as they moved further away from the chart. Bates offered anecdotal evidence of a great many of his patients finding their vision rapidly improved. While Dos Passos’s myopia was not ‘cured’, he would find an even greater utility for Bates’s methods as he drew on them in his literary experimentation.

Novelistic Vision

Returning to New York from the Near East and Europe in 1920, Dos Passos was struck by the city’s contradictions and excesses: ‘It was marvellous. It was hideous. It had to be described.’⁵¹ Writing to Tom Cope he told him the city was ‘amusing. It has its hanging gardens of Babylon aspect. One talks to starving people on park benches. One eats eggplants squashed in oil of sesame in Syrian restaurants and drinks over overrich Californian chianti in backs of Italian cafes. There are the ferries of the Hudson and the palisades and in Stuyvesant Square the dry leaves murmur their deathrattle as softly as in the Luxembourg.’⁵² Dos Passos’s desire to capture this rich panorama of life in Manhattan was not commensurate with his novelistic craft. *One Man’s Initiation: 1917* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921) had been relatively conventional in form, focussing on small groups of individuals in the exceptional state of war.⁵³ The challenge of New York was how to capture the heterogeneous energy of the city and its population without losing the imaginative vision that would elevate its representation.

The genesis of *Manhattan Transfer* suggests that Dos Passos’s experimentation was not designed from the outset, but rather grew and developed in the drafting process. In the copious pink notebooks – most from the Comune di S Gimignano – on which he wrote the original draft of

⁵⁰ Huxley, *The Art of Seeing*, 180.

⁵¹ Dos Passos, ‘What Makes a Novelist [1967]’, 271-2.

⁵² John Dos Passos, ‘To Thomas Pym Cope, November 1920’ Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 2, MSS 5950

⁵³ I have left *Streets of Night* (1923) out of this account of Dos Passos’s early fiction. It was largely written before *One Man’s Initiation* and is, in truth, a novel that should never have been published.

the text of the novel the narrative is relatively straightforward, far more concerned with the life of Jimmy Herf and his Aunt Lillian, including a whole chapter on Jimmy's life prior to his arrival in New York.⁵⁴ The second draft of the novel introduces more parallel narratives, but has them separated out into discrete sections rather than alternated throughout in montage. For example, the novel begins (handwritten) with Ellen's birth, Ed Thatcher's arrival in the hospital, then departure for a bar where he gets drunk with Mr Zucher. The second section (typed) then moves on to Bud's narrative. At this point there is no italicized impressionistic paragraph that would open the novel. These, in effect, prose poems that appear at the start of each chapter in the published version appear nowhere in the copious folders of drafts. These passages are – in embryo – the Camera Eye of the *U.S.A.* trilogy and, I want to claim, were indirectly inspired by Dos Passos's treatment by Bates and the Batesian understanding of vision as a matter of imagination and memory. A great many of these passages revolve around different ways of seeing, often distilling the sensory confusion of characters. The start of chapter four, 'Tracks', captures the discombobulation of an unnamed arrival in New York who has just leapt off a freight train. In the darkness someone blinds him with a lamp and directs him out of the trainyard. Having regained his vision the man "Southward beyond the tracks the murky sky was drenched with orange glow. "The Gay White Way," he said aloud in a croaking voice. "The Gay White Way."⁵⁵ New York has become an indistinct haze of light in the sky, the man designating the entire city as "The Gay White Way", that section of Broadway around Times Square that was so dominated by light from artificial advertising; the great chronicler of New York, James Huneker, would call it the 'pleasure-ground of the world,' 'the incandescent oven of the metropolis.'⁵⁶ Vision here is disconnected from understanding, with the man possessing no imagination for processing what he is seeing into anything other than the clichéd vision of the city he has obtained from the national media. Yet as the novel progresses vision becomes a much more complicated, subjective, and imaginative process.

The impressionistic prose poem that prefaces the fifth chapter – 'Steamroller' – captures the way in which Dos Passos transmutes vision from an act of seeing to an act of imagination:

Dusk gently smooths crispangled streets. Dark presses tight the steaming asphalt city,
crushes the fretwork of windows and lettered signs and chimneys and watertanks and

⁵⁴ See 'Manuscript Drafts of *Manhattan Transfer*' Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 58, MSS 5950, folders 1-6

⁵⁵ John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (London: Penguin, 1987), 79.

⁵⁶ James Huneker, *New Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribners, 1915), 91.

ventilators and fireescapes and moldings and patterns and corrugations and eyes and hands and neckties into blue chunks, into black enormous blocks. Under the rolling heavier heavier pressure windows blurt light. Night crushes bright milk out of arclights, squeezes the sullen blocks until they drip red, yellow, green into streets resounding with feet. All the asphalt oozes light. Light spurts from lettering on roofs, mills dizzily among wheels, stains rolling tons of sky.⁵⁷

This passage ostensibly depicts the dramatic optical transformation of the city at dusk as the onset of darkness gives way to the artificial illumination of the city. With its portmanteaus and incongruous metaphors it is representative of the stylization of these paragraphs that are so productively juxtaposed with the jerky syntax and direct description of the chapters themselves. Yet the function of these passages is more than to merely gild the quotidian, rather they capture and condense the atmosphere of the chapter about to unfold. As suggested above they were not a feature of the novel in its draft form, and in fact could only have been added as afterimages. These are not attempts at verisimilitude, but a memory of an image transformed through the function of the imagination. Each of the phenomena described here will appear in some form in the chapter that follows, but the focus on character cannot convey the abstract energy of the city itself, which was part of Dos Passos's programme. Instead the affective machinic movement of the metropolis is recreated from a memory of the visual aspects of the city. These passages function as the novelistic equivalent of memorized aides that will help to prepare us, as readers, for the visual images of the chapter ahead.

If some of these images function as a memory of the chapter to come, others reflect on the very particular ways in which memory is itself inspired by vision. Take the opening of Chapter Two of the third section, 'Nickelodeon':

A nickel before midnight buys tomorrow . . . holdup headlines, a cup of coffee in the automat, a ride to Woodlawn, Fort Lee, Flatbush . . . A nickel in the slot buys chewing gum. Somebody Loves Me, Baby Divine, You're in Kentucky Juss Shu' As You're Born . . . bruised notes of foxtrots go limping out of doors, blues, waltzes (We'd Danced the Whole Night Through) trail gyrating tinsel memories . . . On Sixth Avenue on Fourteenth there are still flyspecked stereopticons where for a nickel you can peep at yellowed yesterdays. Beside the peppering shooting gallery you stoop into the flicker A

⁵⁷ John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (London: Penguin, 1987), 108.

Hot Time, The Bachelor's Surprise, The Stolen Garter . . . wastebasket of tornup
daydreams . . . A nickel before midnight buys yesterday.⁵⁸

Nickelodeons were the names given to the first establishments that charged audiences to watch films projected on to walls, and were popular in New York between 1905 and 1915.⁵⁹ They were also often home to stereopticons, slide projectors that were able to dissolve images into one another to create narratives, and which had begun to emerge as a popular entertainment from the mid-nineteenth century until they were overtaken by early cinema.⁶⁰ This paragraph then traces the relationship between visual technology and cultural memory; by the 1920s a nickel might be able to buy you the experience of modernity, whether that be buying a coffee in an automated café (the first automat arrived in Manhattan in 1912), a subway ride, playing music on a nickel-in-the-slot phonograph, or buying chewing gum from a vending machine. Yet at the Fourteenth Street Theatre New Yorkers could view the visual entertainment of the past. The 'wastebasket of tornup daydreams' suggest the obsolescence of vision that is not mediated by the imagination.

The final introductory paragraph of *Manhattan Transfer* that precedes 'Burthen of Nineveh' again reflects the paradox of vision with which Dos Passos is concerned. If so many of these passages have narrated vision at night, this final one takes place at sunset: 'Seeping in red twilight out of the Gulf Stream fog, throbbing brassthroat that howls through the stiff-fingered streets, prying open glazed eyes of skyscrapers, splashing red lead on the girdered thighs of the five bridges, teasing caterwauling tugboats into heat under the toppling smoketrees of the harbor.'⁶¹ Here vision has moved from the subjective to a process the entire city undergoes. The image here becomes one of revelation; the title of the chapter is from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem of the same name which was inspired by a winged lion in the British Museum which arrived at the museum in 1852. Rossetti's poem reflects on the violence of Imperial acquisition as he asks whether in the future the statue will 'In ships of unknown sail and prow,/ Some tribe of the Australian plough/ Bear him afar,—a relic now/ Of London, not of Nineveh!'⁶² The red twilight

⁵⁸ Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, 264.

⁵⁹ On the rise of the Nickelodeon see a number of the essays in Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer, eds. *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁶⁰ On stereopticons in early American cinema see David Robinson, *From Peepshow to Palace: The Birth of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁶¹ Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, 332.

⁶² Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Burden of Nineveh' *The Complete Poetical Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1910), 21-30, 29.

that is falling on Dos Passos's New York functions as a harbinger of doom, cloaking the city with an apocalyptic glow. Here vision belongs not to the imagining subject, but to the city itself, as the skyscraper windows become 'glazed eyes'. Whereas earlier literary models might see the destruction of a civilization as akin to Revelation, in Dos Passos it is the opacity of darkness. This final chapter of the novel is preoccupied, as numerous parts of the fragmented narrative had been, with the parallels between New York and the great decadent civilizations of the ancient world. A tramp explains that if it took God seven minutes to destroy Babylon and Nineveh, the five boroughs of the city stood little chance: 'There's more wickedness in one block in New York City than there was in one square mile in Nineveh', predicting that it will take God seven seconds to lay waste to Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx.⁶³

If Dos Passos believed vision to be subjective and based on the imagination, as it was according to Bates, it helps us to get a little closer to understanding why Dos Passos thought of The Camera Eye sections as so fundamentally different to the other narrative elements of the *U.S.A.* trilogy. As Dos Passos stated in an interview: 'In the biographies, in the newsreels, and even the narrative, I aimed at total objectivity by giving conflicting view – using the camera eye as a safety valve for my own subjective feelings.'⁶⁴ These subjective feelings regularly manifest themselves in elaborate impressionistic visuality in *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932). 'The Camera Eye' sections of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) are largely based around memories, conveying child-like experience, yet the middle novel of the trilogy, in moving in to the inter-war period, conveys the subjective seeing Dos Passos was attempting to formalize in its clearest manner. The opening 'Camera Eye 28' of that novel is a reflection on grief, seemingly narrating the experience of Dos Passos on hearing of the death of first his mother, then father:

and He met me in the grey trainshed my eyes were stinging with vermillion bronze and chromegreen inks that oozed from the spinning April hills His moustaches were white the tired droop of an old man's cheeks She's gone Jack grief isn't a uniform and in the parlor the waxen odor of lilies in the parlor (He and I we must bury the uniform of grief) ...

when the cable came that he was dead I walked through the streets full of fiveoclock Madrid seething with twilight in shivered cubes of aguardiente redwine gaslampgreen

⁶³ Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, 340.

⁶⁴ John Dos Passos, 'The Art of Fiction' *The Paris Review* (Spring 1969), 147-172: 161.

sunsetpink tileochre eyes lips red cheeks brown pillar of the throat climbed on the night
train at the Norte station without knowing why.⁶⁵

Here Dos Passos attempts to reject the ‘uniform of grief’ through transforming vision into a kaleidoscopic hallucination. The traditional grey and black palette of nineteenth century mourning, but also the Realism of the Victorian novel, has given way to psychedelic shock and to surreal seeing. Vision, in this moment, is eminently subjective, and cannot be contained by, or adhere to, any rational understanding of perspicacity. As in Bates’s theory, what the eye sees bears only a fragile relationship to the impression it makes on the mind. It is memory and the imagination that play the crucial role in developing visual acuity.

If we understand the Camera Eye as a Batesian mediation between seen and seeing, objective reality and subjective vision, we must also recognise the multi-sensory nature of these passages in *U.S.A.* Take, as an example, ‘The Camera Eye (39)’ from *Nineteen Nineteen*:

daylight enlarges out of ruddy quiet very faintly throbbing wanes into my sweet
darkness broadens red through the warm blood weighting the lids warmsweetly then
snaps on
enormously blue yellow pink
today is Paris pink sunlight hazy on the clouds
against patches of robinsegg a tiny siren hoots shrilly traffic drowsily rumbles clatters
over the cobbles taxis squawk the yellow's the comforter through the open window the
Louvre emphasizes its sedate architecture of greypink stone between the Seine and the
sky⁶⁶

Dos Passos’s vision here is seemingly synaesthetic, with sight bleeding in to sound, touch and taste. The Camera Eye doesn’t simply see, rather it is a comprehensive sensory immersion in a world. One of the key ideas that underpinned Bates’s understanding of vision was that of ‘central fixation’. Central fixation names the ability to distinguish the center of the eye, ‘the point of maximum sensitiveness is called the “fovea centralis,” literally the “central pit.”’ But the ability to distinguish and utilize this point it was necessary for the viewer to develop a state of balance or mental equilibrium that was necessary for perfect vision, and Bates hypothesized that impaired

⁶⁵ Dos Passos, *U. S. A.*, 350-1.

⁶⁶ John Dos Passos, *U. S. A.* 619.

vision 'must necessarily be accompanied by loss of central fixation'.⁶⁷ Central fixation though was not limited to a mental or vision, but was in effect 'health in all parts of the body, for all the operations of the physical mechanism depend upon the mind. Not only the sight, but all the other senses touch, taste, hearing and smell are benefited by central fixation.'⁶⁸ This principle of central fixation can then be seen at work in the Camera Eye sections in which vision is accentuated by other sensations, all of which are heightened and commingle in the mental equilibrium of central fixation.

Conclusion: From Vision to Voice

In the 1950s John Dos Passos returned to his earlier interest in the science of vision. In a file entitled 'The Truth About Visual Training' held at the Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia are three drafts of a lecture on visual training, and some two hundred pages of notes. There are also letters from N.C. Kephart, Professor of Psychology at Purdue University, and Amiel Francke, a leading developmental optometrist, alongside a copy of an unidentified paper outlining experiments in visual training, and an article on orthoptic training from the *American Journal of Ophthalmology*, among many other documents. Dos Passos was clearly taken with Francke's understanding of seeing and sight, and in the folder there are is an A4 Sheet with Francke's 'postulates'. The first is that 'seeing is learned'. The three versions of Dos Passos's essay on visual training synthesise the work of Francke and others, drawing on various narrative techniques to communicate complex scientific hypotheses in accessible language. One of the most striking points Dos Passos makes in all three versions of the essay is of the dramatic transition in 'the last fifty years' in our 'conception of the process of seeing'. Dos Passos had been treated by scientists who were still beholden to the nineteenth century view that 'likened the eyes to a pair of little cameras. The camera had just been perfected. People liked to think in mechanical analogies. They imagined something like a photograph being stored away in the brain.' While the nineteenth century was enamoured of such mechanistic analogies, so was post-war America, and now 'the process of receiving impressions through the optic nerve' was understood to be much closer to 'what goes on when you talk over the long distance telephone.' As Dos Passos explains, when talking on the telephone the tones of your voice are transformed into 'electrical impulses emitted from a microwave tower' which are then transformed into sounds in a receiver so your friend in San Francisco can hear your voice. In an analogous fashion

⁶⁷ Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 114, 116.

⁶⁸ Bates, *The Cure of Imperfect Sight*, 122.

what ‘travels through the optic nerve is not a tiny picture of a dog but a sort of coded message that you have learned to translate into the image of a dog.’ Seeing then takes place in the brain, in a process which Dos Passos likens to ‘a man watching blips on a radar screen’.⁶⁹ This shift in metaphors is clearly striking for a writer whose arguably greatest contribution to the novel form was the development of the ‘Camera Eye’. To suggest that the camera was no longer an apposite metaphor for understanding the process of visuality intimates the exhaustion of a particular formal-epistemological method, and it is unsurprising that the innovative understanding of vision as a process in his most successful experimental writing was abandoned as he began to work on *Midcentury* (1961), a novel that replaces the Camera Eye with the first person narrative of veteran Blackie Bowman whose story comes to us like a disembodied voice where once there was vision.

⁶⁹ John Dos Passos, ‘The Truth About Visual Training 2’ Papers of John Dos Passos, Special Collections University of Virginia Library, Box 116, MSS 5950.