Parallel Narratives

The Railroad as Cinematic Camera Eye in
John Dos Passos’ The 42nd Parallel

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Introduction: Fiction and the Railroad | The railroad, a potent and enduring symbol of industrial capitalism, is critical in man’s conception of trauma as capable of occurring not merely to the body but also to the mind. Train crashes and derailments of the mid-nineteenth century engendered a wealth of evidence attesting to mental and emotional aftereffects that coalesced to add a neurological perspective to Western medicine’s age-old biological one. Citing Fischer-Homberg, Ian Hacking writes of the railroad as “an epic symbol of the psychologization of trauma. […] [The] official history of traumatic neuroses, which traces them back to railway accidents, is itself something of a metamyth about the power of the railroad to change the nineteenth-century vision of […] the life of the mind” (185, my italics). In fact, during this era, even casual, uneventful train journeys seemed to produce psychotic effects in those who experienced them. “[In] the Lancet in 1862, Lord Shaftesbury is quoted to the effect that ‘the very power of locomotion keeps persons in a state of great nervous exciteme” so much so that many […] ‘have been obliged to give it up in consequence of [its] effect on the nervous system’” (Daly 43). This would effectively support an anti-industrialist view of the railroad as innately traumatic—namely, that its very nature renders trauma an inevitable outcome of the train ride.

History demonstrates that fiction as an art form, in its modern state, has integrated the technology of the railroad into its own operation. Nicholas Daly recognizes the existence of the “‘railway novel’ (cf. the airport novel) or ‘yellowback’” (37). That cheap pulp novels were solicited in railway stations in the 1800s as they are in airports today hints at a long-term symbiotic relationship between fiction and the train that renders the narrative arc (with its beginning and end) cotemporaneous with the mundane train journey (with its source and destination). Both turn out to be equally inescapable, in theory. Daly continues: “The [train] traveller, like the reader of sensation fiction […], is thought to be harnessed into a particular
apparatus. The novel threatened [and still threatens] to couple the reader to its mechanism, the
reader being ‘compelled to go on to the end, whether he likes it or not’, as Mansel puts it, by its
powerful narrative motor” (44). The novel is thus at once an escape from the tedium, if not the
inherent trauma, of the train ride and a reflection of its firm, one-dimensional linearity.
Simultaneously, the railway novel is the passenger’s means of adapting him/herself to the
railroad as a necessary modernist vehicle of transit. “[In] the sensation novel there is not only an
attempt to describe the speeded-up railway age, but also [an] […] attempt to accommodate that
world. The sensation novel […] provides a species of temporal training: through its deployment
of suspense and nervousness [it] synchronizes its readers with industrial modernity” (Daly 37).
From this viewpoint, the novel is a means by which a reader may gain an idea of the railroad
environment and thus potentially confront it without being traumatized by it.

Cinema, as a fictional medium, is arguably an even more effective means of adapting to
the railway. In her Parallel Tracks, Lynne Kirby argues that the railroad played an instrumental
role in the initial developments of cinema—namely, that it was “a social, perceptual, and
ideological paradigm providing early film spectators with a familiar experience and familiar
stories, [and] with an established mode of perception that assisted in instituting the new medium”
(2-3). A critical facet of Kirby’s thesis involves reconstituting the railroad itself as a
“protocinematic phenomenon” that provided the film camera with a foundation for its basic
technological functions: “the cinema finds an apt metaphor in the train, in its framed, moving
image, its construction of a journey as an optical experience, […] its ‘annihilation of space and
time.’ […] Like film’s illusion of movement, […] the railroad is based on a fundamental
paradox: simultaneous motion and stillness. In both cases, passengers sit still as they rush
through space and time” (2). Hence, the train may be interpreted as a filmic apparatus mediating
the visual capacities of its passengers towards a cinematic archetype. During its advent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, film relied on the railroad for footage and tendentious purposes, and the railroad in turn exploited film for its broad promotional potential. “In a most elementary sense, shooting a moving train, the fastest vehicle in the world in 1895 [the year of film’s inception], gave filmmakers an opportunity to show off film’s powers of registration, its ability to *capture* movement and speed. [...] [The] idea [was] that the vehicle must be in motion to be properly represented” (Kirby 19-20). The *mise-en-abyme* of a motional film recording and preserving upon itself a motional train was irresistible to most early silent filmmakers. Given the ability to liberate the image from the stasis of the photograph, such filmmakers felt impelled to use the motif of the railroad to constantly reinforce the essence of film as a motional being.

In confronting the influence of the railroad on literature and film, John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* trilogy—as a distinctly filmic literary text—is worth scrutiny. Written across the 1930s, *U.S.A.* spans the first three decades of the new century and navigates between four modes of storytelling, one fictional, the other three nonfictional: prose poems that offer brief biographies of historical figures from the day; “Newsreels” that collect news headlines, news excerpts and song lyrics from the day in filmic montages; and “Camera Eyes,” in which Dos Passos recollects his life in stream-of-consciousness prose poems that are fraught with cinematic connotations. The author’s use of film *qua* industry to condemn the railroad is not hypocritical; rather, it is meant to expose and emphasize the inner workings of the railroad and its impact on the human psyche, so as to engender critique of it, and of the ideologies that support it. David Rando quotes North: “Dos Passos was [...] mistrustful of the very techniques he put to such innovative use [...]. His ambivalence presents an opportunity, however, to investigate the complex relationship of aesthetic modernism to the larger modernity of which it was a part” (85-6).
Much critical precedent exists to support the perception of *U.S.A.* as a railroad-like machine that aims to self-reflexively show its own inner mechanisms. Michael Denning, in *The Cultural Front*, quotes Dos Passos admitting that his vocation is far from immune from the connotations of industry, assemblage and economy. Dos Passos “fashioned an aesthetic ideology around the figure of the writer as ‘technician,’ the writer as engineer or machinist: ‘a writer is after all only a machine for absorbing and arranging certain sequences of words out of the lives of the people round him’” (Denning 178). Rando views the trilogy as a mimicry of media—namely, the machineries of journalism, newsreels, propaganda and consumerist advertisement—that underscores the ensnarement of its characters in history. All become “represented through the reportorial style of news discourse. In this way, the novel estranges readers from its characters’ intimate experiences and critiques the overall vision [...] that news discourse slowly overlays upon reality” (Rando 75). Lastly, William Solomon adds to Daly’s perspective of how the train includes its passengers’ bodies within its functions by depicting how Dos Passos traces the obverse—namely, how the war machine constantly includes its own technology within the bodies of the soldiers living in it, with the effect of making them its dehumanized instruments. The author’s goal in forging this motif is “to invert the existing power relations between human beings and technology, to master the machines that have achieved the status of oppressors over mankind. Only by becoming self-conscious of [...] the machine [...] may technology be subordinated to the human [...] once again” (Solomon 186). These interpretations of proletarian assembly, media manipulation and industry in wartime are all deeply intertwined with the railroad. Yet, beyond John Lennon, a study of the railroad’s symbolism in *U.S.A.* is lacking.

Thus, what follows is a study of the railroad in the trilogy’s first entry, *The 42nd Parallel*, as a filmic technology that incorporates itself into its passengers’ bodies with the effect, as Kirby
theorizes, of turning their perceptions of space and time panoramic and filmic, a process that Dos Passos, who is more pessimistic than Kirby, views as a traumatic distortion. Thus, he turns his own industrial “Camera Eye” against the railroad in an effort to establish a conception of space and time beyond the railroad’s control, and to expose the fallacy of the filmic view from the train. (The other two volumes, 1919 and The Big Money, focus more on more advanced, international means of transit, such as the steamboat and airplane.) The most critical hermeneutic technique of this essay will involve viewing crucial events from the characters’ lives as twists on stories that were traditional in the railroad-themed films of early cinema—which I hereafter term “paradigms” of the railroad narrative; on these paradigms, Kirby will be the primary source of historical information. Donald Pizer writes that Dos Passos “suggest[s] by the […] often superficially flat language of the narratives the underlying failure of understanding of those who approach life without independent vision and who are therefore ‘strangled’ by the hold of the conventional upon their minds” (49). One example of the “conventional” frameworks in which the characters are trapped, I suggest, are the paradigms that the cinema of the age rendered cliché. Dos Passos’ use of genre conventions is well documented; Denning interprets U.S.A. as “a ‘new clean construction,’ a series of formal solutions to the problem of building a novel that culminates in the magical unity of the title itself, U.S.A. […] [It] encompasses the lives of the nation by becoming a library of American novels: a war novel, a Hollywood novel, a novel of the returning vet, a working-girl romance, a proletarian novel” (169-70). Alone, each of these paradigms appears tired and unoriginal, yet together, they form a panoramic mythology of the railroad that facilitates Dos Passos’ critique of the filmic vision with which it infects its riders.

**Dos Passos’ Cinematic Development** | John Dos Passos was born in January 1896, the very month after the Lumière brothers premiered their new invention—a short film titled *L’Arrivée*
d’un train en gare de la Ciotat—at a café in Lyons, France. “Spectators were said to have jumped from their seats in terror at the sight of the train coming toward the camera and running beyond its purview […], logically ‘into’ the space of the spectator” (Kirby 62, Cf. Daly 55). The trompe l’oeil was a success; the audience was enamored of the brothers’ ability to make images move; and the arrival of this train was effectively, simultaneously, the arrival of cinema. This temporal coincidence gives Dos Passos ample privilege to parallel the first three decades of his life with the cotemporaneous development of film as a narrative art form. The visual organs of the author-to-be hence merge with filmic technology to foster the “Camera Eye,” in which life and filmic narrative tropes turn more vulnerable to conflation. This fulfills “the possibility of conceptualizing the psyche cinematically as an optical and aural apparatus […], a principle function of which is to fabricate a sense of self” (Solomon 204). History’s very first films were actualities: “Taken from the French term actualités, which, roughly translated, means ‘things happening now,’ ‘actualities’ referred to documentary, newsreel-type footage of current events, famous people, entertainments, disasters, cities, expositions, novelties, and landmarks” (Kirby 19). Film in its inchoate state was unable to capture the complex narratives that it casually does today; no filmmaker yet knew how to do it. A technology in gestation, its confinement to such actualités suggests a mere step up from the photograph with its limited ability to capture singular moments in time; actualités were motional photographs, and not much more. Likewise, the young Dos Passos of the novel’s initial Camera Eyes, just emerging from infancy, does not yet have the aesthetic resources he will gain as an adult to construct stories. The early Camera Eyes are thus no more than actualités that lie at the mercy of the author’s early sensory memories.

The child, silently absorbent of knowledge and experience in the relative absence of it, is the most optimal example of the “subjectivized figure,” who “provide[s] a materialized image of
the mind as a receptive surface on which impressions from the outside world are registered and saved” (Solomon 204). That Dos Passos seeks to preserve memories from his child self is thus a testament to the nonjudgmental, even at first apolitical, naturalism of his prose. Quoting the author, Michael Clark views the youth of the Camera Eye as “passive, and this is a fitting quality for the artist, for he must […] ‘record the fleeting world the way the motion picture film recorded it.’ The emphasis […] falls on the direct, unmediated experience […]: he attempts to present his fictive world ‘always as seen by some individual’s eyes’” (138). Such passivity makes the youth more susceptible to, but also capable of capturing, elements of the effort by military and industry to manipulate his political outlook through propaganda, while it is still in an early developmental stage. One instance of such an effort occurs in Camera Eye (2):

they were little brass cannons and were bright in the sun on the platform of the Seventh Street Depot and Scott hoisted us all up and the train was moving and the engine bell was ringing and Scott put in your hand a little handful of brass tiny cannons just big enough to hold the smallest size red firecracker at the battle of Manila Bay and said Here’s the artillery Jack (42P 9)

Military and the railroad share deep technological interests, not least because “the internal combustion engine—bullets propelled by gunpowder—was a product of warfare” (Mumford quoted by Solomon 185)—and the association between cannons and trains is pertinent. While still in the rhizomic, gestational train station, young “Jack” is targeted with miniature faux-“artillery” that reduces warfare, such as that found in the Philippines during the U.S. invasion, from a trauma to a kid’s toy that makes war appear fun and thus potentially indoctrinates kids into supporting pro-American imperialism without understanding its repercussions. The psychical damage of which a real cannon is capable means nothing to Jack. What is significant to him instead is the superficial “bright[ness] in the sun,” the uncanny miniature scale, and perhaps too the richness of the “brass” of these toy cannons. Though this actualité lacks a traditional story, its “sum [total] of empirical data” (Clark 143) does imply a dangerous political mentality
that instills militaristic interests in children. Three Camera Eyes later, Jack is seen “play[ing] the battle of Port Arthur in the bathtub” with such intensity that “the water leaked down through the drawingroom” (42P 43). His reduction of Port Arthur into a bathtub, and of the Russo-Japanese War into an infantile water sport, suggests a naïve, overarching perspective of war as merely a game that can be traced back to the influence of the toy cannons on Jack in the depot.

The trauma of the railroad is experienced more acutely by the character Fenian McCreary, a.k.a. “Fainy” or “Mac,” who, as a youth, is migrating with his family via train from rural Connecticut to Chicago, a path that roughly follows, and ends immediately on, the titular line of latitude. The initial leg of this journey is also depicted as an actualité: “Smoke rolled white in front of the window shaking out of its folds trees and telegraph polls and little square shingle-roofed houses and towns and trolleycars, and long rows of buggies with steaming horses standing in line. […] ¶ Fainy’s eyes are following the telegraph wires that sag and soar” (42P 10). Herein, the scope of Mac’s vision is limited and controlled by the industrial waste that the locomotive emits; the smoke itself is personified to “shak[e] out of its folds” entire cityscapes, which is implicative of industry’s influence on urbanity. Mac’s eyes eventually fix on telegraph wires—technologies of verbal communication that constitute a stark counterpoint to the blindness that the smoke induces. Nonetheless, the wires are parallel and peripheral to the central train tracks and hence remain in their control. Moreover, the repetitive motion of them “sag[ging] and “soar[ing]” suggests the reiterative nature of film stock, with its string of oblong frames. Kirby provides this insightful anecdote: “Peering out the window while riding [on a train], [Albert E.] Smith saw an analogy to screen flicker in the repetition of telegraph poles the train swept past. […] ‘This gave him the notion of dividing up the flicker of the motion picture by adding blades to the then single-bladed shutter. […] [By] multiplying the flicker he in fact
eliminated it in effect”’’ (quoting Ramsaye 47) The cyclical appearance of the telegraph wires thus has the effect of further obscuring Mac’s vantage point and rendering it more filmic.

The fallacious vision of the wires “sag[ging] and soar[ing]” also introduces another irony to Mac’s constrained filmic perception: the perception that, as in a cinema theater, what is being viewed is in motion, while the spectator is static. Kirby writes:

Hurtling through space in the body of a train […], travelers experience the loss of the foreground, and thus the homogeneity of space between them and the view outside the window. This was experienced as a loss of depth perception […]. With his/her view mediated by a framed glass screen, the passenger’s visual perceptions multiplied and became mobile, dynamic, panoramic. […] [The] traveler sees the objects, landscapes, etc., through the apparatus which moves him/her through the world. (45)

The interference of the train’s motion on its passengers’ visual capacities, which become shallow and flat as a reel of film, signals the extent to which the railroad embeds itself into its passengers; I will elaborate on this later. For now, it is crucial to emphasize that this process has a reciprocal, in that the railroad also embeds its passengers into its industrial framework. Daly continues Shaftesbury’s medical critique of the railroad hence: “The rapid series of jolts […] were seen to have damaging physical effects, as the traveller’s body was forced to absorb the ‘small regular concussions’ […] produced by […] the rapidly moving train […]. Since the railway carriage was envisaged as ‘a framework of bones without muscles’ […] the traveller’s body was imagined as supplying the missing shock-absorbing connective tissue” (43). These effects are particularly traumatic to Mac’s young, still-developing body, as is evident in this excerpt:

Fainy’s eyes smarted; in his ears was the continuous roar, the clatter clatter over crossings, the sudden snarl under bridges. It was a tunnel, all the way to Chicago it was a tunnel. […] [T]he light was smoky and jiggly […] and his eyes hurt and wheels and rails roared in his ears and he fell asleep.

When he woke up it was a town [Syracuse, New York] and the train was running right through the main street. It was a sunny morning. He could see people going about their business, stores, buggies and spring-wagons standing at the curb, [etc.] (42P 11)

This train journey embodies a movement from a dark liminal period of sensory assault, to a somewhat optimistic vision of a semi-urban environment in daytime, and Mac’s subsequent
mistaken but critical assumption that he has arrived in Chicago. This foreshadows Mac’s later appreciation of and adaptation to the train as an instrument of motion, in his coming-of-age when he is a vagabond: “Mac embraces this type of mobility, and Dos Passos romanticizes the young hobo’s experiences. The deafening ‘roar’ and chaotic clatter […] on Mac’s terrifying first journey as a child is transformed into ‘singing’” (Lennon 111). Such a vicissitude underscores the feeling that Mac has inured to the railroad; he is now part of it, and it is now part of his life.

More crucially, though, Mac’s childish perspective conveys his field of vision through the window as “it,” a protean signifier that encapsulates both the isolationist “tunnel” of night and the “town” and “sunny morning” that follows it. As a single Gestalt unit, this fluid “it” can be interpreted as a cinematic panorama: according to the prose, it is not the train but rather the urban landscapes Mac sees outside that is in motion. Charles Birkel, in his thesis, writes on the influence of Cubism on Dos Passos, with its concrete “flattening” of images operating as a useful corollary to the typical “flatness” of the author’s characters. “Rejecting the illusions of three-dimensional space, Cubism created a means by which multiple perspectives […] could be combined on a single canvas and represented simultaneously. […] ‘[Multiple] views on the figure had been combined and flattened out upon the two-dimensional canvas surface’ (Birkel quoting Walz 19). From the Cubist angle, Mac’s filmic “loss of depth perception” effectively flattens his 3D view through the window into a 2D image that facilitates the apparent movement of the cityscapes, and that renders his senses unable to register that it is actually the train that is moving and the cityscapes that are static. The youth effectively remains in a limited sensational “tunnel”—and, perhaps too, a state of “sleep”—throughout the journey.

Dos Passos confirms this notion at the ride’s end, when “the towns and the farmhouses and the factories all started drawing together, humping into warehouses and elevators, and the
trainyards spread out as far as you can see and it was Chicago” (42P 12). Years later, an adult Mac, fleeing political chaos in Mexico City for Vera Cruz and an uncertain fate, will have a similar experience: “Mac looked out […] and watched the two huge snowy volcanos, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihatl, change places on the horizon; then there was another goldenbrown cone of an extinct volcano slowly turning before the train; then it was the bluewhite peak of Orizaba in the distance growing up taller and taller into the cloudless sky” (42P 252). Dos Passos herein uses Cubism to convey Mac’s window perspective and the extent to which the railroad has distorted it, depriving it of depth and making it filmic and 2D. The reader should know that of course the buildings young Mac perceives as moving are static, but Mac does not yet have the mental faculties to detect the buildings’ immobility. Even when he is an adult, when one may presume that he knows the volcanoes cannot move, it is implied that he still has the physical sensation that he in the train is static, as in a film theater, and the volcanoes are switching places. Hence, the dearth of developed narratives in the early Camera Eyes and Mac’s actualités is constructed to parallel the psychic underdevelopment of its young characters and the resulting vulnerability of their visual capacities to the railroad’s traumatic influence.

**Railroad Time versus Mythic Time** | The collusion of the narrative’s *fabula* with its characters’ mental growth indicates Dos Passos’ intense concern with temporality; with how stories and media develop across time; and with how the railroad exerts control over our conception of time and thus over our lives, as well. The still-popular narrative paradigm of the race-against-time—namely, of the struggle to accommodate a deadline—is indeed a useful display of the railroad’s extreme power over temporality. Both Daly and Kirby elaborate on the railroad’s pivotal, even central, role in the abolition of multiple, conflicting municipal “local times” in favor of a singular, hegemonic national time by which trains could arrive and depart precisely on schedule:
Before the railway’s advent, numerous local times flourished: ‘London time ran four minutes ahead of time in Reading, [7:30] ahead of Cirencester time, [14:00] ahead of Bridgewater time.’ The railway depended on standardized time and strict timetabling, and these ushered in a new time consciousness […]. The modern traveller needed to have a watch, and anxiety about missing trains became a recognizable medical complaint[.]

(Daly quoting Schivelbusch 45-6)

Standard time zones are taken for granted today; in the era of the railroad’s burgeoning, they were controversial. “Clearly […] regulation of time by the railroads was not simply a mechanism to ensure efficiency; it was a way of expressing power. […] ‘People will have to marry and die by railroad time [one editorial wrote]…banks will open and close by railroad time’” (Kirby 52).

It is not difficult to see how cinema was able to exploit the anxiety that railroad-enforced punctuality produced on psychic and sociopolitical levels, for the sake of suspenseful narrative: “The principle of suspense was inherited from the […] novel, but the extent to which a plot unfolded according to […] a ticking clock—the amount of time allowed in a two-, three-, or four-plus-reel film […]—was unique to the cinema” (Kirby 56). The way in which Dos Passos utilizes railroad time to induce anxiety and tragedy and to ensconce themes of economy in his fictional narratives is well demonstrated in Mac’s arc, which links concerns about railroad time to those about “historic time” and potentially historic and traumatic circumstances.

One telling example of a cinematic race against time in the novel concerns Mac in his coming-of-age years as a flâneur, roaming the Midwest and north Great Plains via hitching rides on the railway in search of labor, money, food and women, joined most of the time in his endeavors by fellow flâneur Ike Hall. The climax of Mac’s brief friendship with Ike is thus:

Among the bushes back of the station they found an old tramp[…] […] He was going to take a chance on a freight that stopped there to water a little after sundown. Mac dozed off to sleep while Ike and the old man talked. When he woke up Ike was yelling at him and they were all running for the freight that had already started. In the dark Mac missed his footing and fell flat on the ties. He wrenched his knee and ground cinders into his nose and by the time he had got to his feet all he could see were the two lights on the end of the train fading into the November haze.

That was the last he saw of Ike Hall. (42P 61)
The irony of this passage is that to a certain degree, Mac and Ike exist outside the economic order of the railroad, boarding it as they do without paying fare and thereby challenging the train’s symbolism as an upper-class privilege. (One scene before this sees Mac and Ike crossing into Canada via train and being spotted by a brakeman who then extorts them, charging them fare without punishing them for their vagrancy.) Even then, though, they remain at the mercy of the railroad’s temporal tenacity; the time of departure is impervious to all challenges. Mac takes this for granted in failing to accustom his sleep rhythms to the railroad’s schedule, and as a consequence, the train’s temporality overwhelms him—causing him to fall on the tracks and become immersed in its “cinders”—and his friendship with Ike comes to an abrupt, unfortunate end. As a result of his travels, Mac makes it to the West and joins the International Workers of the World (IWW), a labor union that was historically, paradoxically, set against the capitalistic interests of the railroad yet dependent on it for its national scope. “Train hopping was an important tool to propagandize the organization, and, consequently, […] ‘Many I.W.W. militants were skilled hoboes’” (Lennon quoting Foster 115). Thus, any historical relevance that Mac may have in combating industry through left-wing ideology is a direct result of the railroad and its power over the time structures by which he lives: “Mac’s desire to remain politically active by his connection to the movement is embodied in his physical movement” (Lennon 124).

Indeed, most of the novel is marked with and constrained within narrow temporal measurements such as those refined by the railroad, with one notable exception:

The Biographies are strung on the line of specific months and years. The Newsreels depend on the objective headlines, which suggest the passage of historical time. The Camera Eye is even further removed from the objectification of the years—and […] actually tends toward a mythic time, only to question whether it is a useful, workable mythos. In the Narratives, the basic structural device is […] historical time, for clearly identifiable historical events impinge on the characters’ lives. (Clark 132)
Clearly, of the four, the Camera Eye functions best as Dos Passos’ retaliation against railroad time, and—for the reader—as a welcome hiatus from the train-like propulsion of the three other modes. Kirby recognizes a “formation, in reaction [to public time], of multiple private times—symbolized most notably by [Marcel] Proust’s figuration of memory in Remembrance of Things Past” (52-3). Likewise, the Camera Eye is Dos Passos’ manifestation of memory, yet his novel is entrenched in the trappings of cinema insofar that it cannot escape its summoning of an industrial technology to facilitate its encapsulation of the past. For instance, as one may watch a film more than once, and as one urban citizen certainly takes multiple train rides, one often reflects upon a significant memory multiple times over the course of life, in particular if that memory is traumatic. Sigmund Freud, in his Beyond the Pleasure Principle, coins the term “repetition-compulsion” to refer to the act of a traumatic memory continually protruding from the unconscious to reassert itself on the conscious before it is once more repressed. Such a memory “has no other endeavor than to break through the pressure weighing down on it, and force its way either to consciousness or to a discharge through some real action” (Freud 19). The Camera Eye is indeed such a “discharge through […] action,” yet it hosts enough repetition-compulsions to suggest that Dos Passos is not manifesting a cathartic unleashing of his memories inasmuch as he is conveying a cyclical repression and resurfacing of trauma.

Camera Eye (11) depicts young Jack at a church service insistently asking the question, “who were the Molly Maguires?” Denning identifies this segment as “a memorial connecting the Molly Maguires, coal-miners martyred in 1877, and Sacco and Vanzetti, the fish peddler [sic] and shoemaker martyred in 1927,” the latter being the incident that most immediately inspired Dos Passos to begin the trilogy (171). In a way, the Molly Maguires amount to young Jack’s first introduction to a historic legacy of injustice faced by laborers that will be reconfirmed with the
execution of the two Italian-Americans several years later. Jack does not receive a satisfying answer to his question; the deacon merely characterizes the miners as no more than “thoughts, bulletholes in an old barn abandoned mine pits black skeleton tipples weedgrown dumps who were the Molly Maguires? but it was too late you couldn’t talk in church” (42P 86). Herein, the miners are deprived of their personhood, dismissed as mere “thoughts,” and turned into empty signifiers, the only evidence of whose existence are the “bulletholes” left by the bullets that may have killed them, and the industrial “mine pits,” “tipples,” and “dumps” where they died. Thomas Strychacz writes of Dos Passos’ world: “Systems of words signifying systems of power infiltrate every aspect of this society, forming interlocking hierarchies of wealth and class” (118). The deacon’s choice of words is hence meant to display power over the historical account, which denies the miners, viz. history’s “losers,” their humanity, and reduces them to figures of myth. Before Jack can debate this interpretation of history, the deacon silences him. Of course Jack is unsatisfied with the deacon’s answer; in sustaining his inquiry, he elicits an even more harrowing recollection that demonizes the Molly Maguires as “masked men riding at night shooting bullets into barns at night what were they after in the oldtime night?” (42P 86). Critically, the deacon’s “bulletholes” are now attributed to the miners rather than their murderers, which effectively imbues both this account and the perspective that the miners were heroic martyrs with doubt and thereby fractures the mythos. One can appreciate how the Camera Eye sections “are more deeply historical than the apparently historical Newsreels, as [the former] seek to unite private memory and public history” (Denning 171). Dos Passos, in his childhood as well as in his literate maturity, shows the struggle to accumulate “empirical data” to the effect of dredging up the trauma of the Molly Maguires from the unconscious of memory into history. Yet, the repression of that memory by the deacon and other authorities (who are obviously on the side of the
strikebreakers who defeated the miners) transmogrifies it into an unreliable myth stalled by a series of repetition-compulsions that young Jack is forced to endure time and again.

Kirby continues: “As Kern points out, the new consciousness of time effected by the railroads can be described as ‘simultaneity’ and ‘synchronicity.’ Clearly, the turn to national […] standards of time involved a turn to ‘simultaneous’ thinking: one’s own time was […] [related] to concurrent times in faraway places” (53). The irony of the Camera Eye is that the repetition-compulsions inherent in it achieve their own “simultaneity,” in that each of the recollections therein entails reiterations of the same filmic memory, the fabula of which remains preserved and ossified. If time qua dimension is conceived as a place, then Dos Passos’ “simultaneous thinking” constantly stalls his present self in past time. Memory somehow becomes “concurrent” with the present, and time loses its distinctions and definitions, and collapses. Camera Eye (25), which depicts the author’s tenure at Harvard, opens with an image of “those spring nights the streetcar wheels screech grinding in a rattle of loose trucks round the curved tracks of Harvard Square dust hangs in the powdery arclight glare allnight till dawn can’t sleep” (42P 236). If the streetcar can be included in the railroad’s urban network as a minor version of the train, then its appearance in the Camera Eye suggests that Dos Passos’ “mythic time” has failed to release him from the scepter of the railroad’s technology. In fact, that he has progressed from being inside the train in Camera Eye (2) to outside the streetcar here indicates that his present self has become yet another “flat” character ensnared in the panoramic film that the streetcar records. With past and present conflated, he finds himself isolated in an event that has already become past memory by the time of its recording, whether on film or on paper. This dovetails with the intellectual constraints that the author felt in his time at the university. Seth Moglen writes that in his letters, he “persistently condemned the education he was receiving and the narrow, exclusionary culture
of which it was a part. He derided his elite education as ‘nothing but a wall that keeps [people] from seeing the world” (95-6). His admissions herein of lacking “the nerve to break out of the bellglass” and to halt his “four years under the ethercone” confirm these notions (42P 236).

In the Camera Eye, the railroad—with its monopoly on time—is the only figure firmly in the present; Dos Passos trenches himself and everything else around him in his mythic past. His insistence on his mythic past thus has the effect of detaching himself from his mnemonic apparatus, disembodying him and prompting him to try to return memory to the tantalizing present in a series of repetition-compulsions that are doomed to fail. In seeking through the past to restore a mythic time, he struggles to resurrect memories that the railroad industry, as the purveyor of present time, would prefer to remain repressed. This induces Dos Passos to reiterate the detail of his insomnia, as induced by industrial paraphernalia and detritus:

[...

The Camera Eye hence can be configured not merely as a display of mythic time, but as a verbal manifestation of the cyclical crises between mythic and standard times, viz. between memories of industrial trauma and the inertial railroad interests that actively repress them. Unable in the end to sustain his mythos amidst such crises, Dos Passos stagnates on images of the technologies that at once permit and control his work, turning his Camera Eye inward on its own physical-industrial manifestations, viz. on the streetcar and train, and on the traumatic legends that they have produced, such as the Lawrence strike. Harvard is thereby compared to the Magdeburg hemispheres, which “demonstrate [air] pressure”: “When they are fitted together and the air has been exhausted [from between them], great force is required to separate them” (OED). That the
author facetiously refers to these devices as fused “spheres” depicts them, and Harvard, as inseparable by any force, trapping its students in an airless “vacuum” just as the railroad traps its passengers in its inexorable temporal perspective. The Camera Eye, in its capacity to convey narrative and report memory, cannot but come off as formally limited. In her study of the function of the “arclight”—which blinds Dos Passos and his characters—throughout the trilogy, Angela Frattarola writes that the mode “represent[s] Dos Passos’s own limited visual arc and the experiences that have constructed his particular perspective. In drawing attention to the artist’s limited vision, [he] asks his readers […] to look beyond their narrow scope of comprehension” (87). The author’s failure to escape the repetition-compulsions of a narrative that relies on industrial technology to preserve memory thus urges the creation of an alternate critical platform.

**Heterotopias and Narratives of Spatial Dislocation |** As his characters mature and confront critical junctures in life, Dos Passos shows how their life memories fracture and lose meaning within the framing of the railroad. Kirby recognizes the train as the “quintessential heterotopia. Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as sites of temporary relaxation […] that also ‘[…] [are] in relation with the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect” (82). It has already been studied how the train inverts perceptions of movement and stasis, and of present and memory, inside and outside of it. Furthermore, the train, in its very essence as a swift-moving juggernaut, is a force of destabilization that defies all secure sensations of place, of which time is a corollary. Kirby continues: “that [these sites] are outside all places, difficult or impossible to locate in reality, is what qualifies them as heterotopias. Foucault’s classic example is the ‘honeymoon train,’ where […] the bride’s deflowering takes place ‘nowhere,’ on a train or in a hotel, sites without clear geographical markers” (82). In the prism of Dos Passos’ pessimistic outlook, the train ride, in its
fundamental transitivity, makes space loose and intangible and defies the human impulse to place memory in a fixed, sturdy location. No one can know where one truly is on the course of a train journey; if a passenger attempts to grasp a sense of place, it is instantly lost thereafter, and not unlike with Dos Passos at Harvard, any perception of stable, localized place becomes of the past, even when it seems present. Hence, traumas experienced on the railway defy recovery because there is no concrete place at which to stake memory; the repression of trauma is thus exacerbated, and its cathartic return to consciousness delayed if not rendered impossible.

One consequence of the train as heterotopia becomes clear later in Mac’s travels. As he is aiming for San Francisco, he meets an unemployed old man dying of a pulmonary disease, who would like to see the West Coast and whom Mac assists in boarding a train. In the tragic interlude that follows, Mac seeks a brakeman with whom to help the old man, but by the time he has returned to his car with the brakeman, it is too late; the old man is deceased:

The brakeman said they’d have to get the body off the train. They laid him down flat in the ditch beside the ballast with his hat over his face. Mac asked the brakeman if he had a spade so that they could bury him, so that the buzzards wouldn’t get him, but he said no, the gandywalkers [railroad constructors] would find him and bury him. (42P 89)

To the extent that this scene corresponds to a paradigm, it can be read as an inversion of the story of the “switchman […] fall[ing] dead at the switch,” necessitating the rescue of the train, sometimes even by a relative of said switchman, before it derails (Kirby 70). Herein, the responsibility of keeping the train in motion supersedes the humanistic need to address the death of one of its employees. Likewise, in Mac’s narrative, the passenger’s death is a burden on the train’s economic progress rather than a tragedy in its own right, hence the quick, undignified disposal of the old man’s cadaver. Significantly, it is the brakeman—the switchman’s opposite—who Mac tasks with helping the hobo, as he technically has the power to halt the train, but not even he can keep it stopped for too long, for obvious capitalistic reasons.
Moreover, the train’s heterotopic qualities emphasize the truth that this old man’s death cannot be located in any setting. Upon the beginning of the train journey, “The old man sat with his eyes closed and his head thrown back. Mac didn’t know whether he was dead or not” (42P 88). The next morning, Mac still cannot confirm the old man’s status; ultimately, it is the brakeman who pronounces him dead. For this particular hobo, the train’s departure evokes his departure from life, and the train becomes a liminal medium by which he transitions gradually, not instantly, between life and death (Cf. Mac’s earlier transition from trauma to adaptation). In slowly erasing his earthly presence, the train—as the controller of present time—detaches him from all concrete notions of time and place. His life fails to be bounded by a certain time and place of death, and he is thus dehumanized. Abandoned in a shallow grave with no tombstone to name him or mark his hasty anti-burial, he is absorbed into the railway line, with a “face [that] looked white and grave like the face of a statue of a Civil War general” and a chest “cold and lifeless as a board” (42P 89) that renders him indistinct from the stones and wooden boards that typically underlie a railway. In theory, blended into the landscape as he is, the old man could be buried anywhere on the line; his body is thus nowhere, and he becomes lost to the railroad, its “buzzards,” and the “gandywalkers” who will decide what to do with him.

Another character who directly experiences the trauma of the heterotopic train is John Ward Moorehouse, the advertising journalist who emerges from his middle-to-lower-class background to become a vacuous, selfish public relations specialist. The first substantial turning point of Moorehouse’s tragedy is a romantic encounter set on a train:

The ride was hot and sticky […] under a blazing slaty sky that flashed back off sandy patches[,] […] Johnny had taken off the jacket of his gray flannel suit and folded it on the seat beside him to keep it from getting mussed and laid his collar and tie on top of it so that they’d be fresh when he got in, when he noticed a darkeyed girl in a ruffled pink dress and a wide white leghorn hat sitting across the aisle. She […] looked like the sort of fashionably dressed woman who’d be in a parlorcar rather than in a daycoach. But
Johnny reflected that there wasn’t any parlorcar on this train. Whenever he wasn’t looking at her, he felt that she was looking at him.

The afternoon grew overcast and it came on to rain, big drops spattered against the car windows. The girl in pink ruffles was struggling to put her window down. He jumped over and put it down for her. [...] “Oh, it’s so filthy on this horrid train.” She showed him her white gloves all smudged from the windowfastenings. [...] She turned her full face to him. It was an irregular brown face with ugly lines from the nose to the ends of the mouth, but her eyes set him tingling. (42P 142-3)

As a Cubist text, U.S.A. is mostly meant to be read as a surface—namely, as “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what [...] has length and breath but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through” (Birkel quoting Best and Marcus 11). A verbal image herein has not much more substance than the presence of a word in ink on the page. As he does to demonstrate the shallowness of Mac’s perspective through the train window, Dos Passos exploits surface reading to reflect Johnny’s intense, if not exclusive, focus on superficial images and looks. He keeps his clothes as tidy as he can amidst the train’s conditions and pays attention mainly to external details such as the fashion choices of the girl, who will be identified as Annabelle Strang. This is in direct contrast to the Camera Eye, which means to turn the technology of film inward onto the railroad so as to scrutinize its internal mechanisms. Johnny’s perceptions are hence convenient to the railroad qua symbol of industrial capitalism. Crucially, though, if this narrative were entirely of surface detail, it would be told from a viewpoint mediated entirely by capitalist interests and thus unable to critique the railroad as Dos Passos means to. This is why the author on occasion diverts from his narrative machine to focus on more intimate details that cannot be noticed on a filmic surface; this allows him a platform on which to challenge the railroad in his fiction as much as he does in his Camera Eye. Rando writes of how Dos Passos performs this feat with the novel as media machine:

The narrative is constituted as reportage shot through with often grim notes of experience and sensory detail; this describes the effect [...] of a trickle of cold sweat running down
the back of a character who is in every other way distant from us. To meet with such an anecdotally rendered detail [...] in a news report would be out of the ordinary; to find it [...] among the character reportage in *U.S.A.* [...] is arresting or shocking. Dos Passos writes [...] *U.S.A.* in the language of the newspaper, but shot through with the very language of experience that news discourse [...] threaten[s]. (78-9)

I herein argue that the author does likewise with the novel as railroad machine, as well. More to the point, the break from surface detail in these railroad scenes announces parts in the narrative wherein the railroad itself is, as a cinematic technology, challenged and dismantled.

The excerpt above, in particular, shows elements from the panoramic view through the train window intruding upon the spectators’ domain in the railcar. The barrier that the window-as-screen means to represent the separation between 3D-reality and 2D-cinema actually turns out to be permeable, and what does permeate that barrier often elicits the individual perspectives that break through the surface of Dos Passos’ deistic third-person. Two-dimensional images are given three-dimensional weight and thus engender a deeper level of narrative. It is, for instance, the “blazing slaty sky” “flash[ing] back off sandy patches” into the railcar that influences Johnny’s decision to take off his clothes and assure their neatness. His motivations for doing so are revealed bluntly in the prose, whereas in a strictly journalistic or filmic mode, the audience would be left to assume his intentions merely from what is evident in the image. This contributes and opens the text to the depiction of Johnny’s intuitions that the train lacks a “parlorcar”—with the class distinction between the “parlorcar” and the “daycoach” acting as another barrier lifted from this train—and that Annabelle “is looking at him.” In the next paragraph, the boundary is not made porous inasmuch as it is erased, since Annabelle’s open window is causing rain to sprinkle her inside the railcar. This is the immediate cause of Johnny and Annabelle formally meeting, and hence of Johnny’s observation and blunt opinion of her facial appearance—which, ironically, focus on surface details but which he nonetheless keeps internal, to himself. A film of this scene would be unable to convey as adequately as the text does how Annabelle’s eyes keep
Johnny from rejecting her otherwise ugliness. Kirby quotes Benjamin writing: “The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to life which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. The film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus” (63).

Dos Passos expands on this theory: in allowing 2D film to impress on a 3D literary anecdote, he shows how cinematic shocks can affect their viewers concretely. In making his novel mostly filmic but ultimately literary, he uses industrial technology as a narrative device without succumbing to its trauma.

This train car can be read as a precedent to Foucault’s honeymoon train, when it is considered that Annabelle, the daughter of an affluent doctor, later marries Johnny and inducts him into a world of privilege and business knowledge. In fact, the excerpt may be reinterpreted as subtly matching the paradigm of the damsel in distress sexually threatened by “the train as a metallic, mechanical phallus” (Kirby 77) before being rescued by a heroic masculine figure. The most obvious exemplar of this story is the woman tied to the railroad tracks and saved just before being run over and killed—viz. raped (Cf. Daly 10-1). Dos Passos plays off the cliché of the train qua phallus with the image of the gun, another blatant phallus, sticking out of the train in Camera Eye (3), in which his father and company “went to Mexico on a private car […] and the men shot antelope off the back of the train and big rabbits jackasses they called them […] Mother was so frightened on account of all the rifleshots” (42P 19). Kirby confirms the verisimilitude of this passage when writing of railroad companies “encouraging white passengers to shoot buffalo […] for sport from train windows as they plowed through the West,” depriving Native Americans of a nutritional and cultural necessity (28). Following this, the rain that spatters Annabelle appears as a seminal symbol from which Johnny “Ward[s]” her (Cf. Clark 136) by closing the window and restoring her hymeneal seal, and the “smudge[s]” on her once-virginal “white gloves” appears as
a crude scatological-sexual stain (Cf. Kirby’s discussion of stains 97). Yet, just as the closing of the window cannot erase the shock Johnny feels at meeting Annabelle, the restoration of her virginity on the heterotopic train has little significant effect on her because she has no specific setting in which to plant it. She dismisses the entire train ride as “filthy,” “horrid” and making her “bored to death,” and both its source—Johnny’s hometown, Wilmington, Delaware—and its destination—Ocean City, Maryland—as equally “horrid” (42P 143). The train journey is mired in a mass of indistinct horridness, and as a result, her marriage to Johnny has little impact on her; she proceeds with an extramarital affair, and Johnny, outraged and agonized, leaves her.

His departure from her dovetails into an arrival by overnight train in Pittsburgh to seek a work opportunity in “realestate,” by which he hopes to “[link] himself by indissoluble bonds to the growth of his city or nation” (42P 161). Said arrival is detailed in this oft-quoted excerpt:

Ward pulled on his trousers, noticed with dismay that they were losing their crease, dropped from the berth, stuck his feet in his shoes that were sticky from being hastily polished with inferior polish, and stumbled […] to the men’s washroom. […] Through the window he could see black hills powdered with snow, an occasional coaltipple, rows of gray shacks all alike, a riverbed scarred with minedumps and slagheaps, purple lacing of trees along the hill’s edge cut sharp against a red sun; then against the hill, bright and red as the sun, a blob of flame from a smelter. Ward shaved, cleaned his teeth, washed his face and neck as best he could, parted his hair. […] “Cleancut young executive,” he said to himself as he fastened his collar and tied his necktie. It was Annabelle had taught him the trick of wearing a necktie the same color as his eyes. […] He […] went and stood on the platform. The sun was well up now, […] the hollows blue where the smoke of breakfastfires collected. Everything was shacks in rows, ironworks, coaltipples. Now and then a hill threw a row of shacks or a group of furnaces up against the sky. Stragglings of darkfaced men in dark clothes stood in the slush at the crossings. Coalgrimed walls shut out the sky. The train passed through tunnels […]. “Pittsburgh Union Station,” yelled the porter. Ward put a quarter into the colored man’s hand […] and walked with a brisk firm step down the platform, breathing deep the cold coalsmoky air of the trainshed. (42P 162)

The scene outside the train is one of traumatic environmental degradation, with the industrial waste of Pittsburgh’s signature coalmines polluting the land and air. As the train nears the city, its “shacks” and “coaltipples” accumulate, their coal-like blackness and the “dark[ness]” of the laborers slowly blotting out the sky before overwhelming the train in the tunnels. Herein, “the
real consequences of economic growth are witnessed but unappreciated by Moorehouse […]. Instead of Eden, a place for rejuvenation, America has become a wasteland, where an ugly red furnace fire is a literal equivalent of the sun as seen through Pittsburgh’s haze” (Clark 136). To the extent that Ward—like Dos Passos—is endowed with his own Camera Eye and the power to turn it inward onto the train, he merely turns it on himself, remaining obsessed with his clothes and likely using a mirror to refine his physical appearance. While evidence of the destitution of industry surrounds him, all he can care about is making a good surface impression; all outside the train may well strike him as “flat” and inconsequential, despite his previous train experience. Though separated from Annabelle, he has benefited and learned from her economic privilege; he now occupies the upper berth of a sleeping car rather than a train without a “parlorcar,” and he has a colored porter deferring to him. Unwilling to recognize the trauma of industry in his aim to become a successful “young executive,” Ward exposes his vanity and his corruption.

**Conclusion: The Mexican Railway and the Onset of War | The 42nd Parallel**

The 42nd Parallel climaxes with America’s entry into World War One in 1917, in which Dos Passos served as an ambulance driver, yielding experiences that he recorded mainly in the Camera Eyes of 1919. During that conflict, the author witnessed the violent extremes to which industrial capitalism led and grew to hold industrialism responsible for promoting war to assure economic success, at the complete expense of the common-man soldiers: “As he struggled to identify the causes of [the] ‘suicidal madness’ [of the war], Dos Passos persistently blamed the economic competition among wealthy industrialized countries and the nationalist ideologies with which they attempted to cover their mercenary interests” (Moglen 100). Of the many biographies in the novel that depict crucial figures in U.S. railway lore, “Emperor of the Caribbean,” the biography of tycoon Minor Keith, will be useful for scrutinizing industry’s sacrifice of human labor for the sake of business profit:
Limon was one of the worst pestholes on the Caribbean, even the Indians died there of malaria, yellow jack, dysentery.

Keith went back to New Orleans […] to hire workers to build the railroad. He offered a dollar a day and grub and hired seven hundred men. […] Of that bunch about twenty-five came out alive. The rest left their whiskyscalded carcases to rot in the swamps. On another load he shipped down fifteen hundred; they all died to prove that only Jamaica Negroes could live in Limon.

¶ Minor Keith didn’t die. (42P 191)

Keith’s construction of a railway at the expense of human life earns much contempt from Dos Passos. Ultimately, Keith’s serendipitous need to “plant bananas so that the railroad might have something to haul” (42P 191), and the inception of the United Fruit Company thereafter, is what leads him to success. To the media and to capitalist interests, that success and its results—namely, the establishment of “the American empire in the Caribbean, ¶ and the Panama Canal […] and the marines and the battleships and the bayonets” (42P 192)—are what matters, not the loss of life. Yet, the journalistic media through which Dos Passos siphons his biography accidentally includes one incriminating detail: “Why that uneasy look under the eyes, in the picture of Minor C. Keith the pioneer of the fruit trade, the railroad builder, in all the pictures the newspapers carried of him when he died?” (42P 192). The author uses this rhetorical question to imply that Keith, in his death throes, held some remorse for the destruction he caused, a notion that appears to puzzle the media interests enamored of his economic triumphs.

For Dos Passos, the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s, in which both Mac and Ward get embroiled, is in many ways a precedent to World War One, in that it is a malevolent political crisis that American businessmen exploit for profit. While naïvely traveling by train from Ciudad Juarez to Mexico City to get involved with the Zapatista movement, Mac encounters a racist oil prospector who values the land for its potential wealth but not the people who occupy it. He claims the U.S. should “get up an army of a hundred thousand men and clean this place up…It’s a hell of a fine country but there’s not one of these damn greasers worth the powder and shot to
shoot ‘em…smoke ‘em out like vermin, that’s what I say” (42P 240). Even though this oilman’s ideology is genocidal, Dos Passos ironically uses the character to condemn President Woodrow Wilson’s decision to seek involvement in a relatively distant European conflict rather than realize the traumas occurring just beneath the U.S. in Mexico. Apparently, industries consider the potential for profit in Mexico meager compared to that in Europe, hence their neglect towards the former. The oilman continues: “You can’t tell when they’ll cut the railroad and then we won’t be able to get out and President Wilson’ll let us be shot down right here like rats in a trap…If the American public realized conditions down here…My God, we’re the laughing stock of all the other nations” (42P 240). As with his life as a flâneur and as a laborer, Mac will be dependent on the railroad for movement out of Mexico, if the revolution is enough of a threat to him. It is thus difficult for Mac to challenge the parasitic effect that U.S. hegemonic industrial interests aim to have on Mexican territory. Making the moral choice not to join the Zapatistas, Mac remains in Mexico City as a bookseller and has an encounter at a party with Ward, who claims he is in the country “to find out […] just what there was behind Carranza’s stubborn opposition to American investors and that the big businessmen he was in touch with in the States desired only fair play and that he felt that if their point of view could be thoroughly understood through […] the friendly coöperaiton of Mexican newspapermen” (42P 249). At this point, Ward’s preoccupation with superficial images has made him reliant on adopting an image of goodwill that, given the ruthless greed of the businesses he represents, is highly untrustworthy, to President Carranza and to the reader. Overall, it is not surprising that he plans to infuse the Mexican media with capitalistic propaganda in order to achieve economic success. The media, with its commitment to surface detail, has demonstrated itself an optimal promotional instrument for Ward, and he stands to gain much from it, regardless of Mexico’s historical trauma.
These vibes of racism and international exploitation point to an incentive of the railroad that, rather than fitting a narrative paradigm, extends back through its history towards the age of its initial expansion across the American landscape; that incentive is imperialism. Implied in the previous reading of Camera Eye (3), imperialism is what impelled the U.S. to use the railroad in pushing the nation’s boundary westward so as to achieve manifest destiny, and it is what impels Ward and his ilk to expand the railway southward into Mexico so as to make more money:

Insofar as the train has always been a physical extension of an imperialist vision, of the hegemonic expansion of an economic and cultural power, […] its function has been that of coherence, order, and regularity. […] It enforces a kind of readability […] according to the authority of its codes and its master—the white male entrepreneur. The conquest—indeed, creation—of a market is inscribed in the work of circulation and communication that is the economic motive of the railroad, its very raison d’être. (Kirby 27)

Indeed, we have by now seen how Dos Passos mimics the railroad’s “readability” through the novel, assembling his narratives into a “work of circulation and communication” that reflects the industry’s domination. Yet, we have also seen Dos Passos turn the train qua optical technology inside out, setting one industrial apparatus—cinema—against another and thereby threatening a vicious cycle that may well end with the destruction of both. The author hints at this on Mac’s train journey to Mexico City: “Occasionally at night bullets came through the windows. Near Caballos a bunch of men on horses rode the whole length of the train waving their big hats and firing as they went. The soldiers in the caboose woke up and returned the fire and the men rode off in a driving dustcloud. The passengers had to duck under the seats […] or lie flat in the aisle” (42P 239). Three critical progressions are completed in this excerpt. Firstly, the guns trained on antelopes in Camera Eye (3) now appear to turn inward against the train itself. Secondly, as in Ward’s heterotopia, the images outside the railroad that at first may seem panoramic and fictive adopt a life of their own by interfering with the scene inside the railcar, only now, the window/screen is shattered beyond restoration, the vacuum of the train opened wide, and the
interference far more serious. Thirdly and most vitally, as the narrative that follows Camera Eye (25), this episode shows Mac withstanding a traumatic experience in which, indeed, one industrial technology—in this case, guns and ammunition—is directed against another. The crucial difference is that while Dos Passos’ turning of his Camera Eye inside out is a constructive act of prompting a critique of industrial capitalism, the bandits’ activities are destructive and nihilistic. Nonetheless, in both instances, the railroad sustains damage, and the bandits appear to take the self-reflexive process begun by the author at Harvard to an extreme logical conclusion.

Camera Eye (20), judiciously placed after the Minor Keith biography, provides a useful example of the railway’s tragedy, in which it becomes powerful insomuch that it destroys even its most ardent supporters. Set during the Lawrence strike, it depicts two roommates who dismiss the strikers as “a lot of wops anyway bohunks hunkies that didn’t wash their necks ate garlic with squalling brats and fat oily wives the damn dagoes they put up a notice for volunteers good clean young ¶ to man the streetcars and show the foreign agitators this was still a white man’s [country]” (42P 192). The attitudes of imperialism emblematized by the train and its filmic paradigms herein continue to be associated with pervasive racism, and all its slurs and stereotypes. “If U.S.A. is an encyclopedia of ideological stock phrases and clichés, the common coin of self-justification and rationalization, none is more insistent than ‘this was still a white man’s country’” (Denning 195). Cinematic and nativist clichés thus become wrapped in an all-encompassing dialogue of distinct American nationalism. The two men of course cross the picket line and volunteer to operate the streetcars, the result of which is tragedy: “his roommate was fiddling with something between the bumpers and this fellow twirled the shiny brass handle and the car started and he ran down his roommate and his head was mashed just like that […] killed him dead […] right there in the carbarn” (42P 193). Treating the car as a surface object with
little more substance than the brass toy cannons of Camera Eye (2), the roommates take for
granted the potential destructiveness that the device holds, and their disregard leads to the train
fatally consuming one of them. Kirby writes of the paradigm of the train crash as an
“‘imagination of disaster,’ which clearly seems rooted in the fantasy of seeing technology go out
of control” (61). While equating collisions of trains with the clash between the train and the film
camera may seem ridiculous, in this novel, they appear to produce similar carnage. These men
believe in the railroad as an essential vehicle for urban society, yet in the end are destroyed by it.

*The 42*\textsuperscript{nd} *Parallel* thus roughly traces a lifespan through filmic paradigms of the railroad
narrative. The development of a child, a child’s initial harrowing exposure to sensory assaults, a
coming-of-age through mobility and experience, a university education, a fleeting romantic
encounter, a seeking of a vocational opportunity, a need to escape from sociopolitical unrest, and
a reckoning with tragic death are all framed within the train as a filmic device, and thus within
clichéd railroad narratives that render such a life flat, unmotivated and wasted. While the young
John Dos Passos is destined to emerge from the railroad’s tunnel vision as a scathing critic of its
constraints and corruptions, his characters are revealed as unable to look beyond the railway’s
prism. As a result, Mac inures to an existence of aimless travel from one place to the next, and
Ward becomes a perpetrator of capitalist dishonesty. One final detail from the novel that
demands attention is the observation that the Camera Eye sections are numbered in parentheses,
which suggests that their divisions are a literary construct, and that the Camera Eye means to act
as a whole—perhaps the whole of Dos Passos’ coming of age. If our lifelong perspectives are
single continuous filmic shots, captured by our eyes and preserved in memory, then we are all
endowed with Camera Eyes. Whether we can use them on our own terms as Dos Passos does, or
whether we give control of them to authority, may influence the trajectory of our history.
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