Network Narration in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* Trilogy

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Abstract

Wesley Beal examines John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36) to read its complex form — what the author once referred to as a "four-way conveyor system" — as an intricate networking scheme, and considers it as an archive of early network thinking. Contrary to traditional readings of *U.S.A.* that discuss its formal properties in terms of dispersal and the supposedly ruinous disconnections of modern life, the paper argues that the interplay of these formal fragments results in a semiotic web that drives Dos Passos's narrative strategy toward a totalizing vision of the nation and, indeed, history. Beal's paper deals with the progressive widening of network figuration in American modernism to think the very politics of national space, and in focusing on the machinic dynamics of Dos Passos's form, the article establishes network discourses as the organizing principle of several pre-digitization modes of production, including Fordism and the modern corporation.

The literary history of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy is in some respects as epic as the work itself. Common, for example, is the position that Michael Denning takes on the trilogy's troubled relationship with critics over the tumultuous period of late modernism: "To put it crudely, his move to the radical right lost him his left-wing admirers, while the undisputed sense that his early works are his finest made him a difficult icon for the right [….] Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not move from a radical political art to an apolitical formalism, and thus never won the allegiance of formalist or aestheticist critics" [Denning 1997, 167]. This trajectory, however, does not fully account for a spike in interest in the author and the trilogy in the early 1980s: a 1980 *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue dedicated to *U.S.A.*, Townsend Ludington's sprawling biography of Dos Passos of the same year, and chapters in several books throughout the decade. Nor does it account for the late 1990s revival in Dos Passos scholarship — perhaps partly fueled by the 1996 publication of a Library of America edition of the *U.S.A.* trilogy — in which Denning himself is a key figure. Yet on the whole these remain as minor peaks of interest, and in American literary scholarship the *U.S.A.* trilogy is not exactly gone, but is close to forgotten. [1]

Whatever restoration the *U.S.A.* trilogy has enjoyed at the turn of the century encourages its own historicization. For these 1980s and 1990s revivals of *U.S.A.* scholarship correspond to the advances in digital technology that have spawned not only the scholarly field of digital media studies, but have also led to the adoption of digital figurations across the humanities — especially in the powerful figure of the network. The network is, after all, the central figure of some of the most prominent works that have defined the theoretical production of the last thirty years or so, and that in various ways respond to technological developments that have forged the Information Age and the economic trends loosely associated under the omnibus term globalization. Of course it would be sloppy to argue for a causal relationship between the humanities' turn toward network theory and the returns to *U.S.A.* But the correspondence between these two developments raises important questions that could illuminate some of the trilogy's formal complexity, as well as deepen our understanding of the relationship between modernism and networked discourses. What might one find if she were to look at the trilogy in terms of the network theory that has accompanied the renewed attention to it? Moreover, to what degree was network theory already present in the intellectual and literary production of Dos Passos's milieu? [2]

This paper takes up these gaps in scholarship on *U.S.A.*'s networked dynamics and, along with the other papers in this [3]

cluster, the importance of networks to American modernism. Dos Passos's trilogy provides an exemplary case study in the moderns' experiments with networks, because it uses network narration in its representation of early twentieth-century American history. Perhaps more than any other modernist work, *U.S.A.* deploys the fundamentally modern trope of the fragment and simultaneously insists on a totalizing vision of its fragments. Accordingly, its form offers a framework that turn-of-the-century readers should recognize, if only implicitly, as a networked construction. For by insisting on the interrelationships of these textual fragments, Dos Passos transforms fragments to nodes on his totalizing network. Dos Passos's conception of networks is the focus of this essay, which will study the trilogy's formalist network logic and its intervention into characterological connectivity that place his conceptualization of the network as an early marker of the intellectual history of network theory — a history that begins well in advance of the digital revolution that has come to displace variants of network thinking that came before it. Dos Passos's intervention into networked discourse, I argue, is that he uses networks to mediate his formal strategy of fragmentation and totalization as a model of historical study.

The thrust of the argument is not only aimed at registering the network dynamics of *U.S.A.*, but also at using the trilogy as a case study in the literary history of what has come to be called the "network narrative" genre. When recently the network narrative has come into play in genre studies, the result has tended to have a limiting effect that, while appropriate in the delimitation of generic boundaries, has too often excluded important modes of network narration — along both formal and historical lines. Film scholar David Bordwell, for example, restricts the network narrative genre to films structured around the six-degrees-of-separation theorem such as Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975) and *Short Cuts* (1993), Michael Haneke's *71 Fragments* (1994), or Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2005). Offering but lip-service to texts like Thornton Wilder's *Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and Vicki Baum's *Shanghai '37* (1939), Bordwell defines the genre as comprised of those narratives in which "there are […] several protagonists, but their projects are largely decoupled from one another, or only contingently linked" [Bordwell 2008, 192]. And David Ciccoricco's much more theoretically rigorous *Reading Network Fiction* (2007) offers an altogether different vantage of the genre, framing it as the product of a digital environment. With studies in texts such as Michael Joyce's *Twilight, A Symphony* (1997), Ciccoricco studies the formal complexities of narrative when it operates in a truly hypertextual state. But both of these definitions of the genre make some crucial omissions that this paper will begin to amend — Bordwell confining the genre to the narrative of the six-degrees theorem, and Ciccoricco restricting it to a hyperlinked environment.

To define a genre is a terribly messy business that almost always entails amendment and revision, so I certainly empathize with Bordwell and Ciccoricco when I advance my formulation of the network narrative: simply that it mediates the dialectic of totalization and fragmentation with linking mechanisms that draw atomized nodal formations into a constellar system. This dialectical tension is especially significant in the case of Dos Passos and his contemporaries, as it may well constitute the cultural logic of modernism, given the technological, demographic, and ideational upheaval outlined in the introduction to this cluster of essays. Precisely what kind of network such a narrative might use as a narrational model is variable — networks of people, material or technological networks, and perhaps most relevant to Dos Passos's modern milieu, networks of form itself, to name but a few possibilities. Of course this flexibility is at once the strength and the weakness of such a loose definition, and for my purposes it allows us to read the networked dynamics of modern texts that predate the dawn of hypertextual narratives that are but one set of the genre. This flexibility grants us a position to see that the network narrative is a twentieth-century phenomenon, but not an exclusively late twentieth-century phenomenon, as this study of *U.S.A.* attempts to demonstrate. Through a reading of *U.S.A.*, I contend that we can locate some crucial modes of network thinking in the aesthetics of modern narrative, and that these early forms of the network narrative can illuminate an overlooked period in the development of network theory.

A "Four-Way Conveyor System"

That the fragment is a standard trope deployed by the moderns is a truism among scholars of modernisms. Likewise, the moderns' investment in totalization has been established as an equally central element in modernist literature. These competing impulses — to represent a society breaking into pieces under the pressures of rapid social changes, and simultaneously to find a semblance of unity to guard against outright societal entropy — coincide in the form, as well as the content, of major works of high modernism. The fragment is not necessarily an indicator of a networked body, but very often networked figuration mediates the tension of these competing impulses as an important mechanism

to bridge the gap between dispersal and unity that typifies the modernist aesthetic experiments in form. The *U.S.A.* trilogy's intervention into modernist fragmentation is especially noteworthy in its intensification of the formal experiments already seen in short story cycles like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) or in Jean Toomer's collage of poetry, prose, and drama in *Cane* (1923), to name just two of the most canonical examples. The architecture of Dos Passos's narrative evokes the figure of the network as it circumscribes American history from 1900 up to the late 1920s. Thomas Ludington, the authoritative biographer of Dos Passos, explains that Dos Passos conceived of the trilogy as a "series of reportages of the time" in which he was " trying to get something a little more accurate than fiction " [Ludington 1980, 256].

The distinction of *U.S.A.*'s fragmentation lies in its experimental technique of employing four discrete modes for this historical narrative. As Denning notes, Dos Passos referred to the trilogy's structure as a "four-way conveyor system" comprised of some sixty-eight Newsreels, fifty-one Camera Eyes, twenty-seven biographical sketches, and fictional narratives centered on twelve anchoring character-threads [Denning 1997, 170]. Denning argues convincingly that Dos Passos's architectural narration was designed as "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.* " [Denning 1997, 169]. And indeed, each component of this architecture seems to perform a specialized task in the service of that narration, a design that Denning argues reflects an "aesthetic Taylorism" [Denning 1997, 170]. The Newsreels offer newspaper copy, advertisements, and popular song lyrics to narrate the history and zeitgeist of the period. The Camera Eye, which scholars often recognize as a stream-of-consciousness rendering of Dos Passos's own life, narrates the lived experience of the period — if a lived experience constrained to the author's biography. The biographical sketches outline a punctuated history via great-man-of-history portraits of Woodrow Wilson, Eugene Debs, Andrew Carnegie, Thorstein Veblen, and the Wright Brothers, to name but a few of the figures whom Dos Passos explores alongside their interventions. The fictional component narrates the developments of the period through a matrix of characters experiencing different segments of the historical spectrum. [7]

It bears noting that this "four-way conveyor system" was quite controversial among early reviews of the trilogy's volumes. Even to his contemporary readers, already accustomed to the moderns' revolt against verisimilitude, Dos Passos's four-way conveyor presented a challenge. Upton Sinclair's review of *The 42nd Parallel* for the *New Masses*, though perhaps not quite representative given his commitment to social realism, lashed out at Dos Passos's three non-fictional modes. Sinclair called the Newsreels "vaudeville material"; he said that the insofar as the biographical sketches were relatively short "we don't mind them especially"; and he lamented that the Camera Eye passages bear no strong relation to the character-threads [Sinclair 1930, 88]. Espousing a common ambivalence toward the "four-way conveyor system," Matthew Josephson's *Saturday Review* piece on *1919* treated the non-fictional modes as white noise, characterizing them as "a sort of vivid backdrop against which the characters pass in procession" [Josephson 1932, 107]. And it is telling that the British publisher of *The 42nd Parallel* wanted to eliminate altogether the Newsreels and Camera Eyes from their edition [Ludington 1980, 287]. [8]

Against these critiques we can contrast Malcolm Cowley's *New Republic* review of *The Big Money*, which addresses the complete trilogy's reliance on "technical devices" to make Dos Passos's architecture of history cohere, and he treats each of the four narrative modes to show their unique contributions to the text [Cowley 1936, 137–39]. Cowley even revisited that review a year later to argue that the Camera Eye segments perform the function of maintaining interiority that prevents *U.S.A.* from being a mere "collective novel" [Cowley, 134]. Cowley's persistent defense of Dos Passos's non-fictional modes should indicate the extent to which the ambivalence of Josephson's white-noise assessment prevailed among reviewers of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, which seems to indicate critics' bafflement at what common purpose these separate "conveyors" share. [9]

What I find distinctive about this formal architecture is that it offers a networked vision of the United States and of narration itself. Dos Passos de-centers the character-threads by introducing that element third, behind the first volleys of Newsreels and the Camera Eye that inaugurate *The 42nd Parallel*. With the plot-driven narration marginalized from its usual position of authority, U.S.A. proceeds to locate its narration in the interstices of the four nodes that compose its vision of the United States. [10]

The "conveyors" indeed cooperate as an assembly line to fill in the gaps left by the other nodes, and that analogy is [11]

perfectly appropriate for two reasons. First, each separate node unfolds in roughly chronological order, in the movement of a conveyor. For example, the Newsreels start with the dawn of the new century, cover the tumult of the war years, and move on to the first Florida land boom and other hallmarks of the Roaring 20s. And the other narrative nodes follow that trajectory, with the character-threads presenting minor exceptions in the movement between one dominant character and another that sometimes requires resetting history to get a character's back-story. Second, the "conveyors" structure replicates Fordism's strategy of subsegmentation. The general wisdom is that Fordism is characterized by linearity and centralized control. The former holds, borne out in the rigid edicts of management that coordinated the production of the entire workplace, but the notion that Fordist production was a strictly linear affair simply does not obtain. The Fordist paradigm operates on the division of labor, where separate tasks are performed by separate workers on separate assembly lines. So a worker on the factory floor would not experience the production model as a linear process that oversees each unit from nascent part to salable whole, but as a network wherein different components were manufactured separately and contemporaneously only to be assembled at the last moment. That paradigm — a division of labor — is precisely the model of Dos Passos's architecture: a division of narrational labor that assigns four modalities of representation to four distinct segments of narrative that move along as autonomous, interdependent conveyor belts. That Fordist interdependence of distinct narrative tasks sets up a constellar mode of production. In other words, the structure of the trilogy is that of a network comprised of four anchoring nodes.

We can see this networked narration on display in a sequence of each of the four modalities in *1919*. The sequence [12] addresses Armistice Day in each mode of narration. Joe Williams, whom we first met as he deserted the merchant marine in Buenos Aires, is in France when the news comes, and he enjoys the exuberant scene — "Everybody was dancing in the kitchen and they poured the cook so many drinks he passed out cold and they all sat there singing and drinking champagne out of tumblers and cheering the allied flags that girls kept carrying through" [Dos Passos 1932, 187] — partly with his trademark womanizing. Newsreel XXIX, which immediately follows the Joe Williams piece, conveys the objective history of the event with headlines reporting the actual signing of the Armistice as well as the riotous celebrations that accompanied it: "The arrival of the news caused the swamping of the city's telephone lines"; "at the Custom House the crowd sang The Star Spangled Banner under the direction of Byron R. Newton the Collector of the Port"; "Oh say can you see by the dawn's early light"; and so on [Dos Passos 1932, 189]. The thirty-sixth Camera Eye relates the experience of the event: "Hay sojer tell me they've signed an armistice tell me the wars over they're takin us home latrine talk the hell you say" [Dos Passos 1932, 191]. The biographical sketch at the end of this sequence is a portrait of Woodrow Wilson, and while the Armistice itself gets only glancing treatment — "Almost too soon the show was over" [Dos Passos 1932, 195] — the sketch neatly situates Wilson in the context of the empire building that followed the end of the war: alongside Clemenceau and Lloyd George, Wilson is one of "three old men shuffling the pack, / dealing out the cards" of imperial mapping [Dos Passos 1932, 197].

Still, the sequence of the Armistice Day accounts is but one of the most literal examples of the networked narration that [13] structures *U.S.A.* The nodal formation of the four anchoring fragments does not always provide a concise examination of one punctual moment with such tight thematic clustering, oftentimes preferring a more diffuse, constellar narration of a wide-ranging development in the United States' first decades of the new century.

One of the more pronounced issues engaged across the breadth of the trilogy is the development of the public relations [14] industry. The impact of public relations is demonstrated in the trajectory of the Newsreels across the trilogy. As Caren Irr shows, the arc of the Newsreels moves from news-related headlines to the "want ads, promotions of dancing lessons, celebrations of new auto parts" and other advertisements that dominate *The Big Money* [Irr 1998, 53]. The Camera Eye follows this pattern, as brand recognition begins to enter the speaker's subjectivity: "walk the streets and walk the streets inquiring of Coca-Cola signs Lucky Strike ads" [Dos Passos 1936, 118]. Curiously, Dos Passos's biographical sketches do not feature a founder of the PR field — someone like Ivy Lee or Edward Bernays would not have been surprising — but some of the later sketches do bear the suggestion of PR's influence. Henry Ford's sketch, for example, opens with the glamorizing account by a "featurewriter" whose profile of the auto magnate is equal parts advertisement for Ford and for one of his automobile prototypes: "The machine certainly went with a dreamlike smoothness. There was none of the bumping common even to a streetcar" [Dos Passos 1936, 38]. Stabilizing those diffuse engagements with public relations in the non-fictional modes is an anchoring thematization of PR across the character-threads. The

sketches of J. Ward Moorehouse, the father of PR in Dos Passos's fictionalized America and one of many characters working in the field throughout *U.S.A.*, are vital threads that establish the importance of PR in *The 42nd Parallel*. And while his featured profiles expire with the first volume, Moorehouse has cameos in the profiles of Joe Williams and Dick Savage in *1919* and of Charley Anderson and Dick Savage in *The Big Money* — and these are but a few of the many characters who figure prominently in the PR industry.

In both cases, the punctual event of Armistice Day and the development of public relations, Dos Passos's strategy is a formal circumscription. His vision of *U.S.A.* is a composite of these fragmentary perspectives performed by the four narrative modes. But it is the cooperation, not the severance, of those fragments that is telling here. The four modes of narration in *U.S.A.* are not merely perspectivism, as in Wallace Stevens's famous "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," nor are they interchangeable or divisible vantage points from which to view American history. Rather, they cooperate as a network to reflect the very networking of that history. For instead of a diaspora of fragments performing abject disconnection, the structure of *U.S.A.* is a nodal one: one's reading of the Camera Eye in isolation imperils an understanding of Dos Passos's attempt at formal totalization. The formal logic of *U.S.A.* transforms the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation into a constellation of nodes, a network. 15

In a way, *U.S.A.*'s networked form has been obliquely observed in scholarly treatments of its likeness to montage, the buzzword that dominates the bulk of recent scholarship on the trilogy. I do not invoke "network" as a substitution term for "montage" — as if this were some kind of shell game of postmodernist and modernist lexicons; rather, each term illuminates the logic of the other. The montage analogy demonstrates some of the burgeoning recognition of Dos Passos's networked dynamics, and it is no accident that scholars have traditionally recognized Dos Passos's debt to film. As is routinely observed, Dos Passos's Newsreels are reminiscent of the newsreels edited by Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov in the *Kino-Pravda* series (1922-25), and in naming one of his narrative modes The Camera Eye, Dos Passos invokes Vertov's *kino-eye*, an avant-garde philosophy of montage performed in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). David Kadlec observes that by the mid-thirties Dos Passos's debt to Vertov was an open secret and that Vertov was proud to be known for influencing Dos Passos [Kadlec 2004, 307]. Kadlec notes that many critics establish Dos Passos's debt to Vertov in his 1928 tour of Moscow and Leningrad, when he attended some of Vertov's screenings, which he preferred to "the grander, state-backed productions of [Sergei] Eisenstien and Vsevolod Pudovkin" [Kadlec 2004, 307]. 16

Montage remains a mainstay of *U.S.A.* criticism — so much so that many scholars seem to feel compelled to integrate it into their arguments or argue against it when addressing Dos Passos's formal invention. Celia Tichi, for example, grapples with that tradition when arguing for the form's function as a machine: "The filmic montage is a figure that does not go far enough to capture the full sense of Dos Passos's innovation [....] Though Dos Passos identified his fiction with film and cinema and called his own writing an intrinsically satisfying craft, his omniscient fictional form comes from the contemporary model of machine and structural technology" [Tichi 1987, 216]. Irr, writing about the collisions that underlie *U.S.A.*'s performance of social speed, also obliges the issue of montage, observing the many literal collisions in the narrative — of cars, airplanes, and so on — before noting the logic of collision at the formal level: Dos Passos "constructs montages whose organizing principle is the collision between these equally inadequate modes of writing" [Irr 1998, 64]. 17

The aesthetics of montage are a foundational scholarly force to be reckoned with, as Tichi, Irr and a host of other Dos Passos scholars can attest. Framing the trilogy in terms of montage provides a helpful visual analogy for the text and rightly asserts Dos Passos's debt to film, but it does not fully engage the logic of *U.S.A.*'s form. Instead, what many readers understand as *U.S.A.*'s appropriation of montage techniques would be better viewed within the frame of the network. In the montage experiments of modern film and even the photography and advertisements that experimented with the new technology of the half-tone press in the 1880s,[1] old meanings are overturned and new meanings are produced by different techniques — sequential revolutions, overlays, split images, mirrored images, and so on. The productive capacity of montage, according to traditional scholarship on this practice, lies in the collisions it creates, in the violent contrast of juxtaposed images. And this is the force of montage for Irr, who reads the four narrative modes as operating on an organizational principle of collision. 18

A networked reading of montage, however, focuses not on the collisions, but on the collaborative moments the technique facilitates. Such collaboration is, after all, evoked in the Fordist metaphor of the "four-way conveyor system." The four modes of narration are distinct, to be sure, but they produce meaning in their collaborative — not colliding or disjunctural — narration of history, as in the networked narration of Armistice Day and other developments and events that fall under the trilogy's scope. Accordingly, Dos Passos's narrative system performs Fordist subsegmentation, producing meaning not by violent juxtaposition but by the cooperation of separate functions that are simultaneously isolated and integrated, nodal and networked. Denning argues that Dos Passos's "four-way conveyor system" is an "aesthetic Taylorism" that may be as much a symptom as it is a critique of rationalized labor [Denning 1997, 170]. But the analogy of Fordism better illuminates our understanding of the trilogy's formal interplay: if we view this narrative architecture in terms of its emphasis on compartmentalized production instead of its reputation for demanding efficiency, then Fordist subsegmentation comes to the fore and we can understand how the four narrative modes cooperate.

The Fordist element of *U.S.A.*'s formal network schemes bears further consideration, since it aligns the trilogy with an early mode of network theorization. As I argued earlier, Fordism emphasizes centralized management at the same time that its actual production strategy relies on networked simultaneity. So Dos Passos's characterization of *U.S.A.* as a "four-way conveyor system" invokes Fordism's important principle of modern network formulation. And while the networks of Fordism are rigid and hierarchical compared to the truly distributed networks of post-Fordist production strategies and economic systems, it is still important to register how Fordism prefigured a networked model of production in the simultaneity of its subsegmentation. That such a model also drives the formal structure of *U.S.A.* only reinforces that modern context in which the ideological and ideational force of the network was developing — a trend reflected in the Fordist networking of *U.S.A.* itself.

U.S.A.'s narration has the multi-dimensional force of montage, but the logic of its productive capacity is fundamentally different from the theories and practices of montage that rely on collision. Disjunctural montage and networked montage both operate on a constellar model, but networked montage has the separate goal of totalization — a goal that is announced in the very title of Dos Passos's trilogy. And this networked montage may be a uniquely American intervention. Christopher Phillips argues that, in contrast to the European and Russian experiments with montage, by the late 1930s in the United States, "montage was more and more recognized not as a means to evoke the flux and discontinuity of the modern world, but as a way to represent a dominant social theme in late-Depression America: the idea of the 'unity in diversity' of all classes and ethnic groups" [Phillips 1992, 35]. Phillips responds to American trends in the visual arts, but Dos Passos's interventions into montage follow the same path, emphasizing the networked interdependence of the separate narrative modes instead of their dispersal.

Far from some anachronistic misapplication of a contemporary buzzword or catchphrase, a networked reading of *U.S.A.* helpfully demonstrates Dos Passos's formal logic and allows us to recognize the points of connection between the trilogy's four narrative modes. It is no longer sufficient to observe that Dos Passos's representational strategy of the "four-way conveyor system" fits neatly into one of the now-standard narratives for modernism — that the moderns' revolt against verisimilitude was necessitated by rapid social changes that demanded radically new means of representation — or simply that it borrows montage techniques from avant-garde film. Instead, in light of the rise of network theory in the late 1900s, we must begin fitting *U.S.A.* into a narrative for the rise of the network as the dominant figure of a literary history and an intellectual history for the American twentieth century.

U.S.A.: The United Six-Degrees of America

Next to his radical formal innovation with the "four-way conveyor system," the interconnectivity of Dos Passos's content may seem tame. Not only had the characterological, six-degrees-of-separation mode of networking already been explored by others, but Dos Passos himself had experimented with it in *Manhattan Transfer*, his sprawling ode to New York City published in 1925. Ludington reminds us that in many ways, the fictional element of *U.S.A.*'s "reportages of the time" remained at the core of Dos Passos's vision: the trilogy would be "not a novel, but a series covering a lengthy period, 'in which characters appeared and reappeared' " [Ludington 1980, 256]. Indeed, if one node of the narrative structure weighed just a bit more than others for Dos Passos, it would be the character threads: "Despite incorporating nonfiction, his ultimate aim 'was always to produce fiction,' and he thought himself 'sort of on the edge between them,

moving from one field to the other very rapidly.' The series of reportages was to be 'a contemporary commentary on history's changes, always as seen by some individual's ears, felt by some individual's nerves and tissues' " [Ludington 1980, 256].

And so architectural networking of the form is matched in the networking of the fictional content, with individual characters refracting the developments of Dos Passos's "reportages." In this respect, the fictional characters serve as secondary nodes under the primary nodal construction of *U.S.A.*'s form, providing a comfortable fictional body through which the historical and social developments resonate. In *The 42nd Parallel*, J. Ward Moorehouse is the figural manifestation of the developments in public relations, as we saw above, and several others like G.H. Barrow and Dick Savage carry that banner throughout the remainder of the trilogy. Joe Williams figures the tumultuous war years in *1919*, and Ben Compton does the same for labor movements during that period. Charley Anderson and Margo Dowling figure the "roar" of the debt-fueled Roaring Twenties throughout *The Big Money*. And the other key character-threads generally perform the same function, reinforcing the reportages' historical commentary with a handy synechdochal figuration of the major developments in American history. And so the individual characters act as another system of nodes that support the four-way conveyor system's networked narration of American history.

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It is also notable that within the fictional narrative mode, the individual characters are nodally connected to each other — not just to the broader networking schemes of *U.S.A.*'s formal approach to narration. Dos Passos's goal of a trilogy traversing a wide span of time "in which characters appeared and reappeared" means that *U.S.A.* takes a narrative structure that is increasingly common in contemporary narrative production: the six-degrees theorem. Under the totalizing network of vast schemes of American history performed by the "four-way conveyor system" lies this second network of crisscrossing characters.

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But for many scholars these characters' relationships remain a jumble of disconnection. Michael Denning, for example, writes that the organizing principle of the fictional narration is disaggregation — a critique that was common among the trilogy's contemporary reviewers:

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> Perhaps the most striking thing and unsettling aspect of *U.S.A.* is the lack of any coherent connection between the characters: no family or set of families constitutes the world of the novel; no town, no neighborhood, or city serves as a knowable community; no industry of business, no university or film colony unites public and private lives; and no plot, murder, or inheritance links the separate destinies. [Denning 1997, 182]

And for that reason, Denning concludes that the fundamental social unit of *U.S.A.* is a cocktail party, a function that, he notes, marks the climax of each of the three volumes. The cocktail party, he writes, "stands as a substitute for narratives of home and family, an alternative to the domestic space that usually organizes the novel [….] In *U.S.A.*, the party is not only a social structure and a symbolic space, it is a narrative kernel, one of the basic building blocks of the novel" [Denning 1997, 183].

Denning's attempt to stabilize this disaggregation in the locus of the cocktail party is admirable, given the profile of literal cocktail parties in the culmination of each volume and in the aura of socialite Eveline Hutchins, and given the figurative cocktail party of "ill assorted people" — to use one of Hutchins's phrases — who have but little in common throughout the trilogy [Dos Passos 1936, 444]. And it is a reading to which I am sympathetic, as it serviceably addresses the lack of organic connections throughout the trilogy. But Denning's reading does not go far enough in explaining the logic of the characters' connections. To impose such a "substitute for narratives of home and family" to organize the fictional characters of *U.S.A.* is a false projection of a traditionally ordered narrative. Instead, making sense of that disaggregation on its own terms is precisely the demand placed on readers by this narrative.

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Denning's discomfort with the erosion of traditional mechanisms of social organization — family, community, work, etc. — speaks to the very dispersal that Dos Passos tries to capture, and simultaneously to balance with the formal ligatures of the characters' interconnections. It is, in other words, a marker of one side of the cultural logic of modernism: an intense concern over entropic disaggregation that many moderns feared to be threatening the coherence of nation, community, and culture. To see the networked mediation of these dialectical polarities — fragment and totality, dispersal

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and unity — let us consider the case of one of the trilogy's most colorful characters, Doc Bingham. Never does Bingham enjoy the spotlight of a chapter titled after his name; instead, we only see him through the character-threads "Mac" in *The 42nd Parallel* and "Richard Ellsworth Savage" in *The Big Money*. His appearance alongside Fenian "Mac" McCreary is brief, but memorable. Mac answers a want-ad listed for The Truthseeker Literary Distributing Co., Inc. by Emmanuel R. Bingham, D.D. They travel the countryside, posing as purveyors of moral pamphlets but are quick to advertise other, less pious wares: Bingham stocks such scandalous tracts as *The Queen of the White Slaves* and tells one mark, "We have a number of very interesting books stating the facts of life frankly and freely, describing the deplorable licentiousness of life in the big cities, ranging from a dollar to five dollars. The Complete Sexology of Dr. Burnside, is six fifty" [Dos Passos 1930, 36]. The con is up, however, when Bingham is caught in bed with a patron's wife and abandons Mac to fend for himself. He does not resurface until deep into *The Big Money*, when Dick Savage is assigned to handle a public relations account for Bingham, now going by "E.R. Bingham," whose latest scam involves alternative medication and diets — regimes we might label "new age" today. Again, the appearance is fleeting. Bingham, the advocate of clean living, convinces Savage to escort him around some of the city's seedy sex districts and eventually grants him the account. His only subsequent appearance in the text is indirect, as Savage and the Moorehouse PR firm lobby food legislation on his behalf and arrange favorable publicity on radio and newsreels — though not, I should clarify, the Newsreels of the complementary narrative mode.

In many ways, Bingham's reemergence is completely frivolous — the kind of detail common in six-degrees narratives [29] that, for some, smacks of contrivance. And it is true: Bingham is unnecessary to demonstrate Savage's loyalty to the Moorehouse firm and the degradation to which he falls, which one might assume are Dos Passos's primary goals in dragging Savage through strip clubs and Bingham's incessant claptrap. But if the frequency of such tangential crisscrossing is any indication, the network of relationships — Mac to Bingham to Savage to Moorehouse to Charley Anderson, and so on — is the important discovery that Dos Passos wants to reinforce here. And, as I suggested earlier, that very networking is the basic unit of social organization within the fictional mode of narration, and its replacement of "narratives of home and family" that traditionally organize the novel makes for an important reconception of the nation — one that demonstrates the network's foothold in literary production and intellectual history in the modern period as it mediates the impulses toward outright social disintegration and the traditional ligatures of family, place, and work.

A major aspect of that networked conceptualization is the contingency that runs throughout the fictional narrative mode. [30] The appearances and reappearances, the meetings and departures — these nodal connections tend to take place by chance. Besides Dick Savage's connection to Bingham, one might study the contingent crossings of G.H. Barrow with "Mac" McCreary, stenographer Janey Williams, Dick Savage, the wandering Anne Elizabeth "Daughter" Trent, labor advocate Mary French, activist Ben Compton, and aspiring actress Margo Dowling — an improbably wide and inclusive social circle to travel in. Or, to belabor the point with one particularly rich case with a more concrete locus, at the last of Eveline Hutchins's cocktail parties — indeed, the party that concludes *The Big Money* — Mary French briefly glimpses Margo Dowling. French's profile thus far has centered on her social activism through Hull House and her advocacy for Sacco and Vanzetti, and Dowling has been something of a foil character, self-involved and materialistic in her fervent pursuit of stardom. The connection is a fleeting one: "Mary saw a small woman with blue eyelids and features regular as those of a porcelain doll under a mass of paleblond hair turn for a second to smile at somebody before she went out through the sliding doors" [Dos Passos 1936, 442].

The very lack of intimacy in this last connection gets to the heart of what many criticize as disorganization, [31] disaggregation, or atomization in the fictional narrative mode. Mary and Margo are not introduced, they do not speak, and they do not even enjoy mutual recognition since Margo would not identify a lowly activist by sight. In fact, the only thing they have in common is Eveline Hutchins, their mediating link. And this dearth of intimacy gets to the issue of knowability, the lack of which Denning finds so troubling. It is true: whatever connections there are between these characters, there is rarely enough to constitute a knowable community. Even in the case of family, most characters carry a high degree of estrangement: Joe Williams, Dick Savage, "Daughter" Trent, Ben Compton, Charley Anderson, Margo Dowling, Mary French — nearly all of the major characters are deeply alienated from their families in some way or another. And in the absence of any knowable community to assemble these characters, one might not be completely mistaken to conclude that contingency is the organizing principle of the social in the fictional narration.

It is a mistake, however, to read the shortages of intimacy and knowability as constituting a narrative of dispersal. Instead, the fictional mode of *U.S.A.* insists on the interconnectivity of its networked characters, and while those relationships may lack profundity, the abundance of such connective chains demonstrates Dos Passos's totalizing impulse. As with the fragmented narration of *U.S.A.*'s form, the characters in the fictional mode of narration are best viewed not simply as indications of the fragmentation of the social, but in terms of the network that connects such disparate individuals.

This polarity of dispersal and totality might be illuminated by Jean-Paul Sartre's work on seriality and the practico-inert in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* [Sartre 1960]. In an essay from 1947, Sartre hailed Dos Passos as "the greatest writer of our time," but his concern in the *Critique* is not a literary one [Sartre 1947, 96]. Rather, his goal is to understand the development of group formations. Among his three modes of group formation — seriality, fusion, and institution — the series most readily relates to the problems readers might raise in Dos Passos's character-threads. Sartre investigates the series with an anecdote of a queue at a bus stop: the series is "a plurality of isolations" wherein no individual has a relation to the other beyond the common need of transportation, wherein each individual in the series is completely interchangeable with any other [Sartre 1960, 259]. "There are serial behaviour," he continues, "serial feelings, and serial thoughts; in other words, *a series is a mode of being for individuals both in relation to one another and in relation to their common being* and this mode of being transforms all their structures" [Sartre 1960, 266]. Thus, the series certainly expresses the dispersal felt by Dos Passos's characters: they are isolated from each other in almost every meaningful way; as types to represent various developments — labor advocacy during the teens and 20s, the birth of public relations, etc. — they are often interchangeable with each other. And most importantly, they conceive of themselves as a series — as evident in the estrangement of families and the superficiality of relationships between the major titular character-threads like Mary French and Margo Dowling.

The reader, however, does not share that experience of dispersal, and it is from her vantage point that network dynamics become visible. For Sartre, the series can never approach totality precisely because of its atomizing limitations: "The totality of the gathering is only the passive action of a practico-inert object on a dispersal. The limitation of the gathering to these particular individuals is only an accidental negation" [Sartre 1960, 268]. He describes "practico-inert" as matter that is "being-outside-in-the-thing" [Sartre 1960, 228] — which is to say, an exteriorized object or practice that maintains the group from without[2]. In the case of the queue at the bus stop, that exteriorized matter is the bus itself, the transportation system, the city, and so on. There are many forms of the practico-inert in the content of *U.S.A.* — Moorehouse's public relations industry, Charley Anderson's work for the airline industry, and so on. To the extent that the practico-inert content constitutes a material axis of connection, the characters are networked by these material, exteriorized mediations. But these material mediations do nothing to overcome the subjectivity of seriality that determines how the characters conceive of each other in disconnection. The practico-inert that successfully resolves the dispersal and disaggregation of these characters is Dos Passos's totalizing vision. Or, in other words, the practico-inert that networks *U.S.A.*'s characters is form itself.

None of this is to resolve these problematics with a critical cliché — form is content! — but recognizing the form's stabilization of these diasporic figures into a network is key to understanding the connective logic that prevails in *U.S.A.* and that is the defining strategy of Dos Passos's magnum opus. To say that these characters do not realize their interconnection is not to say that they are, in fact, disconnected. The impact of seriality on the subjectivity of Dos Passos's characters is undeniable, but it is also clear that Dos Passos strives to show their networked interrelations to the reader. This networked reading not only resolves the misgivings one might have concerning the disaggregation of Dos Passos's character-threads, but it also sets Dos Passos as a pioneer in conceptualizing the network as the twentieth century's defining organization for the social. Above all, a networked reading of *U.S.A.* enables us to perceive the interconnections that do take place in the absence of ligatures such as place or family.

It would be unsound to label these relationships intimate or knowable, but it would be equally unjustified to claim that Dos Passos has nothing but "ill assorted people" populating his fictional scene. Instead, recognizing the networking of these characters enables readers of *U.S.A.* to grasp the social organization theorized by Dos Passos, an organizational scheme that would only become familiar toward the end of the century.

U.S.A. and the Intellectual History of the Network

Perhaps with an explanation of *U.S.A.*'s networked form and its innovations in characterological connectivity in mind we can contextualize some of the puzzlement expressed by Dos Passos's contemporaries in their reviews of the trilogy and its volumes: the formal experimentation of *U.S.A.* anticipates some network dynamics that did not become a commonplace until later in the century. But even in the moment of modernism, the network was becoming a powerful ideational and organizational figure. And one might pause to think about how *U.S.A.* participates in this general shift toward network thinking that took place even in advance of the digital revolution. Randolph Bourne's 1916 essay "Trans-National America," for example, eschewed the melting-pot metaphor in favor of a "clusters" theory of the nation that today we would articulate in the vocabulary of the network. And during the first decades of the century, intensifying through the 1920s, the modern corporation — today a major locus of network ideology and practice — began to make common a practice of diversification that slowly reorganized the corporation as a decentralized, multidivisional, networked body. Moreover, one can read Fordism as an early experiment in networked production schemes, as I argued above.

In short, during the modern period the United States was setting out on a long path that would result in the network's figural ascendancy by the closing decades of the century. And, to belabor the point, this development of network thinking took place independently of the advances in digital technologies that are commonly assumed to have sparked the field of network theory. Alongside formative developments like the establishment of the corporation and the fracturing of the melting pot, Dos Passos's contributions to network thinking may seem rather insignificant. But I want to argue that *U.S.A.* is nonetheless an important marker of the intellectual history of the network's figural grip on the U.S. over the last century. If we read *U.S.A.* — or other modern texts like "Trans-National America," for that matter — as antecedents to contemporary deployments of the network, we can begin to see not only the long lineage of the importance of the network in American intellectual history, but also some alternatives to today's commonly accepted conventions of network theory, and especially the genre of the network narrative.

If we take literary representation as one marker of intellectual history, we can see in the development of the network narrative genre that commitment to network thinking dates back to the moderns. Registering the genre in modernism not only stretches the literary history of that genre, but also expands the conventions generally ascribed to the genre. Where Bordwell limits the genre to films predicated on the six-degrees theorem and Ciccoricco confines it to hyperlinked environments, a reading of *U.S.A.* as a network narrative opens the genre to new — or rather, old — methods of network narration that rely more on formal fragmentation and totalization. A focus on network narratives that operate on the connective ligatures of form itself offers a radical rewriting of scholarship on the genre that could allow us to read networked narration in new media — for example, in the avant-garde experiments in collage and montage techniques that were major interventions in modern arts, and that constructed visual narrative across space according to the logic of cooperative nodal configurations.

Finally, I want to gesture toward a broader hypothesis about intellectual history and the network — one that would require a wider range of works to substantiate, but one that we can see emerging from this case study of *U.S.A.* and perhaps from this collection of essays as a unit. Often it is assumed that the widespread use of the network as a figural dominant across the humanities and even across the business world is somehow a derivative of the digital revolution. The logic here is that the network became a familiar model for these other fields because of its role in information and communications technologies, and that it was extrapolated from its digital context for use as a figural and ideational model in literary representation, in humanities scholarship, or in theoretical formulations. What I want to suggest is a different source of origin in that relationship: it is not so much that the digital revolution provided a new figure that these other fields could appropriate for new scholarly and literary explorations, but that it gave articulation to networked dynamics that had already been present there — indeed, present since the modern period. In other words, networks were constitutive elements of American intellectual production decades before the digital revolution, and while the digital revolution brought helpful articulation to the intellectual use of networked dynamics, it only did so well after it was already an established feature of the American intellectual landscape. Otherwise, we could not look back on *U.S.A.* or other modern texts and see so easily the networked dynamics they use to inform their texts. Reading *U.S.A.* as a network narrative is not the work of anachronistically projecting contemporary digital fixations backwards, then, but of

seeing how a modern text can prefigure the way we talk about networks today.

Notes

[1] See Christopher Phillips's introduction to *Montage and Modern Life, 1919-1942* ([Phillips 1992, 22–28]) for a more detailed account of the lineage and evolution of montage in the visual arts.

[2] Sartre is notoriously hesitant to provide rigid definitions for his neologisms throughout the *Critique*. Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (1971) offers a helpful statement to fill the void: the practico-inert is "matter which has been invested with human energy and which henceforth takes the place of functions like human action" [Jameson 1971, 244].

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