

THE ROAR OF MODERNITY: METROPOLITAN SOUNDSCAPES AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN SUBJECT IN JOHN DOS PASSOS' *MANHATTAN TRANSFER*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the specificities and psychological effects of urban noise in John Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer*. It seeks to elucidate how Manhattan's soundscape is represented on the novel's formal and content level and how it assumes an agency in its own right, when ceaselessly enveloping the novel's characters. The city's specific acoustic regimes, therefore, prove much more instrumental in constituting the characters as modern subjects than other sensorial dimensions. Within a thus enacted metropolitan panacousticon, the urban subject is crucially defined not only as a noise source in itself, but as always already overheard by a supposed other.

KEYWORDS: Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, soundscape, noise, metropolis, subjectivity.

EL RUGIDO DE LA MODERNIDAD: LOS PAISAJES SONOROS DE LA METRÓPOLIS Y LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL SUJETO MODERNO EN *MANHATTAN TRANSFER* DE JOHN DOS PASSOS

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia las particularidades y los efectos psicológicos del ruido urbano en la novela *Manhattan Transfer* de John Dos Passos. Trata de esclarecer cómo el paisaje sonoro de Manhattan se representa en la forma y en el contenido de la novela y cómo asume un rol por derecho propio en la misma, al rodear de forma incesante a los personajes. Los regímenes acústicos específicos de las ciudad resultan por tanto mucho más decisivos en la creación de los personajes como sujetos modernos que otras dimensiones sensoriales. En un panacústico metropolitano así escenificado, el sujeto urbano se define fundamentalmente no solo como una fuente de sonido en sí mismo, sino como alguien a quien ya escucha un supuesto otro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, paisaje sonoro, ruido, metrópolis, subjetividad.

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Why is it that the 1920s are commonly referred to as “roaring” in the American context? What is so special about this decade’s sonic dimension that it has come to define it in public discourse? After all, the 1920s are also identified with other aspects in various Western countries. In Britain and Germany, one generally talks of the *Golden Twenties* or *Die Goldenen Zwanziger*, obviously indicating this decade’s economic upturn and prosperity. In Spain and France, one refers to the mad (*les années folles / los años locos*), the happy (*felices años veinte*) or also to the golden twenties (*veinte dorados*) –equally emphasizing the age’s economic prosperity, but also its political and social turmoil, its metaphoric ‘madness.’

The most popular explanation for the decade’s peculiar name attributes the 1920s’ roar to its exuberant popular culture, its jazz music, extravagant parties, speakeasies, flappers and general hedonism. Yet, one might also argue that the 1920s added a number of roaring technological products to the modern Western urban noise- and soundscape that had been invented earlier, but saw a large-scale commercial introduction and spread during this very decade. This included the automobile and the accompanying significant expansion of motorized traffic, but also that of the phonograph and the radio as media of individualized sound consumption. These significant noise sources joined an already existent metropolitan roar of rail and naval transportation, industrial and construction work as well as an ever-increasing number and density of urban populations living and working in tenements and skyscrapers or roaming crowded urban boulevards.

While the notion of the Roaring Twenties is generally associated with positive connotations, the decade’s characteristic growth and multiplicity of metropolitan noise sources was, indeed, perceived as a threat to health and thus a serious problem to be met by urban government and planning. Following the privately organized Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise, already founded in 1906, the municipality of New York City, for instance, created a Noise Abatement Commission in 1929 as a response to the ever-increasing ‘sonic pollution’ of its urban spaces. In the city’s decade-long ‘war on noise’ measures ranged from traveling noise laboratories, scientific studies and reports on city noise to elaborate signposting, awareness campaigns, extensive legislations and noise abatement weeks (see Thompson 2002, 144-168; Bijsterveld 2008, 93-136 and Rueb 2013).¹

It is not unsurprising that the urban noise, and soundscape –among other aspects of metropolitan life– turned into a preferred subject of the modernist artistic practice during the 1920s: however, among these modernists, writers and filmmakers faced the problem that they were not able to include actual sounds in their works –apart from live musical scoring in the case of silent films. Given this basic lack of a sonic dimension to their creative practice, one might wonder how writers and

¹ These phenomena have been the object of Sound Studies in the wake of R. Murray Schafer’s seminal study *The Soundscape* (1993). A collection of typical 1920s New York urban sounds is accessible via historian Emily Ann Thompson’s interactive online project *The Roaring Twenties* (2013, revised 2019).



filmmakers intending to illustrate and document the modern urban roar in their media managed to tackle this striking lack of acoustic ambience. Astonishingly, the 1920s saw the introduction of a peculiar soundless ‘musical’ genre, namely the city symphony, denoting a number of experimental films that documented the life and shapes of one or several cities –comprising such films as *Manhatta* (1921), *Nothing But Time* (1926, about Paris), *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) or *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929, about several Soviet cities), to name but the most prominent ones (Dähne 2013, 164-278, Beddow 2010, 6-9). Without their respective, but never codified musical scoring, however, these films constituted visual rather than sonic or musical symphonies at the time of their release. The city symphonies, however, found their literary counterpart in a range of celebrated 1920s metropolitan novels, most notably James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) and, in the U.S., John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). In each case, the creators of these literary city symphonies did not only intend to relate scenes from the life of one or countless individuals during intervals from one day (*Ulysses*) to a rough thirty years (*Manhattan Transfer*), but they also aimed at capturing the modern metropolitan experience in highly innovative and experimental literary ways. But properly illustrating the modern cityscape also necessarily entailed special attention to its characteristic soundscape, that is, its very specific roar.

Surely, the noise and sounds of metropolitan life had featured as characteristic elements of the modern city already in earlier American novels, such as those by Theodore Dreiser. The American novelist specifically connected the magnetic attraction of the modern metropolis with its sonic aspects in the opening chapter of his urban novel *Sister Carrie* (1900): “A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms” (Dreiser 1998, 4). To the youthful small-town protagonist, Chicago’s metropolitan soundscape is not only new, but also associated with promises of hitherto unknown amusement, freedom and possible emancipation from moral and gender codes.²

In his 1925 experimental city novel John Dos Passos took the literary documentation and exploration of metropolitan soundscapes to another level. With its countless characters and episodic, yet often intertwining plotlines, expressionist city descriptions as well as its collaging of all sorts of secondary material, it has been rightfully argued that the city of New York itself rather than any of the many

² Still bound to Victorian moral standards, Dreiser’s narrator also clothes his warnings of the morally corrupting metropolis in sonic metaphors: “Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognized for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human perceptions” (Dreiser 1998, 4). Quickly enough the once luring urban soundscape may also trigger the opposite feelings of isolation and disillusionment in Carrie: “Amid all the maze, uproar, and novelty she felt cold reality taking her by the hand. No world of light and merriment. No round of amusement” (11).



human characters constitutes the novel's actual protagonist (Gelfant 1954, 11; Brevda 1996, 94; Goodson 2000, 92).³

In his modernist literary portrayal of the metropolis Dos Passos also aimed at capturing its characteristic acoustic dimension. These very acoustics of *Manhattan Transfer* have not remained unnoticed by literary scholarship. Especially in the wake of Philipp Schweighauser's seminal 2006 study *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985. Toward a History of Literary Acoustics*, which also addresses Dos Passos' novel, several scholars of the emergent field of Literary Acoustics or Literary Sound Studies have continuously returned to *Manhattan Transfer* as a particularly 'noisy' text and extended or detailed Schweighauser's analyses of the novel's acoustics. Among these, articles by Beddow (2010) and Eisenberg (2016) as well as a dissertation by Iglesias Quadrado (2018) should be highlighted. While the articles discuss the text's acoustic dimensions in the context of visual art genres and the author's critique of metropolitan life (Beddow 2010) or in comparison to the acoustics of European modernist city novels (Eisenberg 2016), Iglesias Quadrado (2018) follows various strands of acoustic analysis with regard to the novel. His detailed analyses of the articulated forms of urban noise, namely the spoken word and popular music are most innovative and resourceful. In my article, however, I would like to contribute to this existing scholarship on *Manhattan Transfer*'s acoustics by focusing on the text's rendition of unarticulated noisescapes as well as their psychological and subjectivizing effects on the characters in the light of philosophical and sociological concepts provided by Georg Simmel (2010), Jean-Paul Sartre (1992), and Michel Foucault (1979). Particularly, I want to argue that the specific roar of Dos Passos' Manhattan is instrumental in constituting his characters as truly modern subjects within a panacoustic urban regime.

As the above mentioned scholars have also shown in their work, Dos Passos literally brings the urban cacophony to life in *Manhattan Transfer* by way of including and collaging all kinds of both articulated sounds, such as passing chatter (often in audiographically precise renditions of slangs and dialects), advertisement slogans, popular songs, and also the unarticulated noises of urban traffic, construction work and machines.⁴ These unarticulated noises are rendered palpable via

1. a richly metaphorical language, often culminating in almost synesthetic descriptions of the city that mix images and adjectives of the visual, acoustic and olfactory realm (examples follow below).

³ In this respect, Gelfant (1954) categorizes *Manhattan Transfer* as a synoptic novel that presents "the total city immediately as a personality in itself" (11, also see 133-134).

⁴ It is true that the distinction between articulated and unarticulated sounds is not as clear-cut as one might think. Articulated sounds, such as human speech or singing, might well, especially if coming from many sources simultaneously, when technically distorted or in any other way muffled, be perceived as undifferentiated noise and thus have similar effects on the human mind as purely unarticulated, non-human sounds.

2. a whole range of onomatopoeia that make sounds palpable on a level between articulated and unarticulated language by imitating the sounds of the city verbally. Besides countless standardized onomatopoetic noise nouns and verbs, such as ring, clang, clatter, rattle, bang or boom, one also comes across a number of innovative onomatopoetic creations such as “rattat” (Dos Passos 2000, 50), “rumpetybump” (79) or “brrr” (356).⁵ Such mergers of urban noise and language certainly culminate in the transposition of the novel’s title “Manhattan Transfer” (originally the name of a train station) into the rhythm and sound pattern of train wheels on rails: “The wheels rumbled in her head, saying Man-hattan Tran-sfer, Man-hattan Tran-sfer” (111). If even the novel’s title may be read as a verbalized rendition of an urban sound, does not Dos Passos invite the reader to interpret his entire text as a vast collage of metropolitan noise in and outside the heads of its characters, sometimes symphonic, but all too often dreadfully cacophonous?⁶

And yet, Dos Passos did not only desire to document these urban sounds and noises or include them as formal elements of text composition as part of a “modernist aesthetics of noise,” but also explored their effect on the city’s inhabitants, especially their mental life, which he opened up via the extensive use of interior monologue and the stream of consciousness technique (see Schweighauser 2008, 53).

The effect of the sensory overload on the human mind in modern urban settings was an object of study not only for early twentieth-century artists and writers, but also for early sociologists and psychologists. One of the most prominent among these early studies was German sociologist Georg Simmel’s essay on “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” already published in 1903. While not specifically differentiating between visible, acoustic or olfactory stimulations in his essay, Simmel was convinced that a specific apathetic –or as he calls it: “blasé”– outlook of the urban dweller is

⁵ Even though Eisenberg has rightfully argued that Dos Passos’ text does not reach the level and frequency of onomatopoetic innovation and experiment of Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (2016, 36), there is no denying that it must be considered a particularly noisy text given its constant focus on urban sounds as well as its sheer amount of standardized onomatopoetic verbs, nouns and adjectives. This can be verified by a corpus analysis: sound, sounds: 26 times; ring, rings, ringing, rang, rung: 25; rattle, rattled, rattling: 22; roar, roared, roars, roaring: 21; clatter, clattered, clattering: 18; whistle, whistled, whistling: 16; rumble, rumbled, rumbling: 14; scream, screech: 14; jangle, jangled, jangling: 9; buzz, buzzed, buzzer, buzzing: 8; noise, noisy: 8; boom, boomed, booming: 7; clang, clangs, clanging: 7.

⁶ Schweighauser has convincingly argued that apart from the text’s imitation of the urban soundscape by way the creative tools of language, *Manhattan Transfer*’s specific noisiness is rather a product of its “sudden shifts in and multiplication of points of view, his formal ruptures, and disintegrations of linear narrative [which] reject the codes of what we might call instrumental communication,” thereby “mak[ing] noise a principle of literary form [...]” (2008, 51). By fragmenting his narrative into short snapshots and scenes while leaving sometimes years’ long gaps between them or not taking up certain plotlines again, Dos Passos deliberately “impedes processes of communication between texts and readers and thus injects noise into the channels of cultural communication” (51).



at first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts... Just as an immoderately sensuous life makes one blasé because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they finally can no longer produce any reaction at all, so, less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength and, remaining in the same [i.e. urban] milieu, do not have time for new reserves to form. This incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy constitutes in fact that blasé attitude which every child of a large city evinces when compared with the products of the more peaceful and more stable milieu. (2010, 105-106)

According to Simmel, the permanence and contradictoriness of urban noises represent a lasting burden on metropolitan dwellers, exhausting them and molding their minds and characters towards an apathetic state drained of emotional response (see also Beddow 2010, 2-3).

But Dos Passos' text proves that prose fiction might provide both a richer and more detailed exploration of these relentless metropolitan stimulations than any minute sociological analysis might be capable of. In fact, his richly sensuous and metaphoric prose style appears to be specifically apt for capturing not only the city's often-aggressive visual qualities – with a special emphasis on color, often reminiscent of the polychromatic quality of expressionist painting⁷ –but also its olfactory dimensions. Both the visual and the olfactory experience come together in this striking scene towards the end of the novel:

Rosy twilight was gushing out of the brilliant west, glittered in brass and nickel, on buttons, in people's eyes. All the windows on the east side of the avenue were aflame. [...] She bought a bunch [of arbutus] and pressed her nose in it. May woods melted like sugar against her palate. [...] Through the smell of the arbutus she caught for a second the unwashed smell of his body, the smell [...] of crowded tenements. Under all the nickelplated, goldplated streets enameled with May, uneasily she could feel the huddling smell, spreading in dark slow crouching masses like corruption oozing from broken sewers, like a mob. (Dos Passos 2000, 352)

The same is true for the city's acoustic features, which just as easily seem prone to mingle with other sensorial input, such as in the following short passage featuring the view of downtown Manhattan from a skyscraper, wherein the urban noise literally becomes visible: “He stood looking out over the harbor of slate and mica in the uneven roar of traffic, voices, racket of building that soared from the downtown streets bellying and curling like smoke in the stiff wind shoving down the Hudson out of the northwest” (93).

⁷ The painterly qualities of his text betray the often-overlooked fact that John Dos Passos was also a talented painter in the expressionist and cubist tradition (see Pizer [2013] and Pizer, Nanny and Layman [2017] for painting's influence on Dos Passos' literary work).



Despite such frequent instances of an almost synesthetic documentation of the city's sensorial overstimulation, however, I would argue that the metropolitan acoustic dimension plays an even more important role on the content level than the visual, olfactory or tactile dimensions, as urban sounds and noises are instrumental in molding Dos Passos' characters into truly modern subjects and thus also prove fundamental for the writer's critique of life in the modern metropolis.

In fact, it seems as if Dos Passos' Manhattan characters are constantly accompanied, annoyed, exhausted, intimidated or even scared by the urban roar surrounding or rather enveloping them wherever they go. On streets that "throb [...] with loudening pain" (159) they are suddenly overwhelmed by "cars [and] faces flicker[ing] past [them]" and struggle with the "moaning turmoil and the clanging of the fireengines [that] wont seem to fade away inside," keying them up "so that everything is like chalk shrieking on a blackboard" (356). Yet the urban drone follows them even into the alleged privacy of their apartments. Besides blaring buzzers, phonographs or telephones, it is thin partition walls and the sheer number of people boxed next to and above each other in their "squirrelcage[s]" (296) and "shoebox[es]" (346) –to name but two striking metaphors used for describing people's cramped housing conditions– that turn urban buildings themselves into restless acoustic resonance chambers:

Voices came through the thin partition. A young girl was crying through her nose: [...] Susie Thatcher stirred in bed moaning fretfully. Those awful people never give me a moment's peace. From below came the jingle of a pianola playing the Merry Widow Waltz. O Lord! [...] A wagon clattered by down the street. She could hear children's voices screeching. A boy passed yelling an extra. [...] Oh I'll go mad! She tossed about in the bed, her pointed nails digging into the palms of her hands. I'll take another tablet. Maybe I can get some sleep. (31-32)

As this example vividly demonstrates, the urbanites in *Manhattan Transfer* do suffer from noise.⁸ No other character demonstrates that better than Ellen, one of the novel's recurring characters who changes names, jobs and husbands several times during the course of the narration.⁹ Despite her being born and raised in roaring Manhattan, she nevertheless seems to have inherited a specific oversensitivity towards noise from her mother Susie (see quote above). Indeed, Ellen never appears to grow used or rather oblivious to the urban cacophony, but on the contrary remains most sensitive towards it throughout the novel. This leads her to react bodily to or even explicitly complain about it on countless occasions.

⁸ By shifting seamlessly from objective third-person narration to the subjective perspective of Susie's interior monologue, Dos Passos highlights how noise sneaks just as unhindered from the urban or architectural space into the human mind (where it may prompt various nervous reactions) as it seems to seep through the permeable walls of the city's public and private spaces.

⁹ Indeed, as Iglesias Quadrado has rightfully argued and demonstrated, Ellen's story, its painful as well as its triumphant moments "throughout *Manhattan Transfer* [...] is told acoustically" (2018, 90).



It is “the roaring and the rattat outside” (50) that frightens her at night as a child.¹⁰ There are “shivering beady tentacles of sound” reaching out from the telephone that just does not stop ringing during her time as a Broadway actress, eventually causing her ears to “ring sickeningly” (235, 236). When she walks the streets, she is “groping continually through a tangle of gritty sawedged brittle noise” (129). It is the “endless chirruping of typewriters, the endlessly repeated phrases, faces, typewritten sheets” that tire her out in her later job as an editor (333). And time and again it is roaring and screeching traffic sounds that turn her nerves into “sharp steel jangled wires” or make her mind “go brrr all the time like a busted mechanical toy” (333, 356). Wherever she goes and whatever she does, Ellen seems to be caught in constant acoustic pain. With her sensorium constantly exhausted by the metropolitan soundscape, Ellen might just be the one character in Dos Passos’ narration that proves to be most exemplary of Simmel’s “blasé outlook” of the urban dweller. Emotionally hardened –she frequently perceives of herself and is perceived by others as ironclad, mechanic or doll-like¹¹– cynical and overly rational in her private life decisions that almost always go hand in hand with career decisions. In fact, it seems that Ellen’s marriages do not so much grow out of love or affection, but rather out of career calculations connected to the professions and standing of her respective husbands. Her first marriage to the much older actor John Oglethorpe opens her the doors to Broadway fame; her second marriage to journalist Jimmy Herf ushers in her second career as a fashion editor and her anticipated third marriage to district attorney and mayor-to-be George Baldwin is about to make her the city’s first lady.¹²

Yet sounds, especially if articulated, may also be productive of more than just nervous pain in *Manhattan Transfer*: Random snippets of conversations, popular songs or advertisement slogans overheard while roaming the streets or riding busses and cabs can turn into trigger moments for new thought processes and action patterns. Several times, Dos Passos demonstrates how such articulated sounds intrude into his characters’ minds and start resonating with or prompting certain memories, fantasies and plans. Picking up the words “But she’s made the

¹⁰ Ellen’s suffering from city noise as a child is echoed later by her baby son’s painful sensorial overstimulation in his crib when “[f]rom outside above the roar of wheels comes a strangling wail clutching his throat” (Dos Passos 2000, 333) –an (over-)sensitivity that little Martin seems to have inherited from both his mother and grandmother (31-32).

¹¹ On various occasions Ellen senses herself to be “a stiff cast iron figure in her metalgreen evening dress” (Dos Passos 2000, 237) or “rigid as a porcelain figure under her clothes, everything about her seemed to be growing hard and enameled” (335), while others perceive of her as “a porcelain figure under a bell glass” (272), a linotype with “a gulping mouth with nicklebright rows of teeth” (296), an “Elliedoll” (273) or even “an Effenbee walking talking doll” (356, see also Brevda [1996, 81-84] on this).

¹² Considering Ellen’s rise to Broadway fame and social ascent through her attachment to various influential men, Brevda has contested that “Ellen Thatcher is the cynical younger sister of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, hardened by her additional years in the modern city” (1996, 85) and one should add in Simmel’s logic: her additional years exposed to the metropolitan cacophony.



biggest hit ever been made on Broadway” from a random conversation while on a bus is enough to trigger a most sensuous and again strikingly synesthetic reverie of stage success and stardom in the ambitious actress’s mind:

Ellen smiled happily. Greatest hit on Broadway. The words were an elevator carrying her up dizzily, up into some stately height where electric light signs crackled scarlet and gold and green, where were bright roofgardens that smelled of orchids, and the slow throb of a tango danced in a goldgreen dress with Stan while handclapping of millions beat in gusts like a hailstorm about them. Greatest hit on Broadway (Dos Passos 2000, 144-145, see also Iglesias Quadrado [2018, 101] on this passage).

But Dos Passos reveals yet another dimension of the urban roar than its mere capacity to, on the one hand, overpower and stupefy the metropolitan subject, or, on the other hand, to infiltrate and thus ultimately interfere with and drive its psychological processes. I would like to argue that the urban noisescape in *Manhattan Transfer* is central in constituting the metropolitan dweller as a truly modern subject in the sense that such philosophers as Jean-Paul Sartre (1992) and Michel Foucault (1979) have theorized the subject as someone who is always already aware of and thus subjected to some sort of scrutiny by an ‘other,’ an internalized experience of constantly being under someone’s eyes –or for that matter: someone’s ears– as its specific mode of being in the world. In his 1943 philosophical opus magnus *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre captured the subject’s constitution by way of another’s presence in the famous words: “If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of his being –then I have an outside, I have an essence” (1992, 321). That very idea has been popularized even more widely in Sartre’s play *No Exit*, first performed a year after *Being and Nothingness*’s initial publication, where he has one of his characters exclaim the even more famous words: “So this is hell. I’d never believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the ‘burning marl.’ Old wives’ tales! There’s no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is –other people!” (1989, 45). Michel Foucault has certainly built on these notions, but crucially extended them by implementing them into his historical-sociological account of power and discipline and their central role in the formation of the modern subject. His analysis of the panoptic prison structure in *Discipline and Punish* ultimately amounts to an account of the subjectivation process such as it becomes automatized in modern disciplinary societies. While the panoptic regime is, just as in Sartre, centered on the visual dimension, it may just as convincingly work as a panacoustic regime. In fact, visible/visibility could easily be exchanged with audible/audibility in the following passage:

The cells of the periphery [...] are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible [...]. Visibility is a trap. [...] Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. [...] He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which



he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Foucault 1979, 198-200)

In *Manhattan Transfer* the individual is not only overwhelmed and subconsciously driven by the urban roar. More importantly, this noise is a perpetual reminder that the individual is never really alone in the city. Never, in a strict sense, does he or she enjoy any privacy—even within his or her private spaces—but is ultimately also and at any time audible and thus potentially always already being overheard by someone. Indeed, *Manhattan Transfer* abounds with instances of characters desperately trying to carve out some acoustic privacy for themselves or reminding each other of their audibility and possible eavesdropping within the giant resonance chamber of the metropolis:

“Keep quiet cant you ... here take yer shoes off ...” (Dos Passos 2000, 60)

“Shush you can hear everything through the partition”. (125)

“The telephone reached out shivering beady tentacles of sound. She slams the window down”. (235)

“Now for chrissake keep still”. (270)

“Jez you make me nervous with your whimperin an cryin... Cant you shut up? [...] I thought I heard somebody movin in the bushes ... This goddam park is full of plainclothes men ... There’s nowhere you can go in the whole crummy city without people watchin [but also: overhearing] you”. (318)

To remain within the Foucauldian terminology, in Dos Passos’ text the modern city appears more like a giant panacousticon than a panopticon. The city also emulates the latter’s ability to constitute the modern subject, yet not so much as someone who is aware of and has internalized that he or she is always already overseen, but rather as someone who is always already overheard. Indeed, it is audibility, the state of overhearing each other on city streets, busses and subways, in packed tenements, shops, bars and offices, that is as much or even more so a trap than visibility in the modern metropolis and its “permeable architectures” (Klimasmith 2005, 5).¹³

The existential forlornness of the acoustically constituted subject, the modern noise-enveloped individual that appears to be private and non-private at the same time, is perhaps best described in this passage:

¹³ Betsy Klimasmith elaborates on the permeability of modern architecture: “In urban boarding houses, apartment buildings, and hotels, [s]ound, heat, and smells traveled between residences. Urban dwellings thus exemplified permeable architecture... In the modern urban landscape, theatricality, voyeurism, and proximity simultaneously fragmented the broad notion of public space into individual stages, performances, and stories, and transformed private spaces into shared spaces” (2005, 5); the same holds true for work spaces: while the use of sound-abating materials helped to turn modern office skyscrapers into “acoustically efficient refuges from the noises of public life,” a thus created silence also transformed them into panacoustic regimes on the inside with an obvious disciplinary effect on the workforce (Thompson 2002, 168).

[Ellen] got into bed. [...] She drew her knees up to her chin and sat thinking. From the street she could hear the occasional rumble of a truck. In the kitchens below her room a sound of clattering had begun. From all around came a growing rumble of traffic beginning. She felt hungry and alone. The bed was a raft on which she was marooned alone, always alone, afloat on a growling ocean. A shudder went down her spine. She drew her knees up closer to her chin. (Dos Passos 2000, 156-157)

In another striking and truly contemporary passage (which also echoes the passage of her noise-tormented mother in bed), Ellen is literally caught in the acoustic grip of the panacoustic cell of her apartment, variously resonating with a constantly ringing telephone, the door buzzer, the chatter of callers and visitors as well as the urban noise carried inside through the window variously opened in an attempt to ease the suffocating acoustic grip inside and closed again in order to shut out the urban roar outside or to prevent eavesdropping from neighboring apartments.

Under the skin of her temples iron clamps tighten till her head will mash like an egg; ... The telephone reached out shivering beady tentacles of sound. She slams the window down. O hell cant they give you any peace? ... She no sooner puts the receiver down than the bell clutches at her again. ... She starts walking up and down the room again. I am borne darkly fearfully afar... The phone rings. ... She throws up the window again She hears the burring boom of a big steamer from the river. ... The telephone is shiveringly beadily ringing, ringing. The buzzer burrs at the same time. ... Ellen's ears ring sickeningly. ... Those women'll drive me mad. Then the tension in her snaps, she feels something draining out of her, like water out of a washbasin. (235-237)

The subjectivizing effect of the metropolitan panacousticon is highlighted via the shift from the resonance chamber of the apartment as part of a larger permeable urban architecture onto Ellen's mind, which turns out to be a resonance chamber in its own right. Her mind reverberates not only from the noises directly thrown at her, but also from those non-diegetic 'silent' sounds, such as her own memories, associations and reasonings¹⁴ that produce –as seen in another passage– their very own “brrr” inside of her (see Dos Passos 2000, 356).

Thus, in *Manhattan Transfer*, an ever-increasing and ever-diversifying metropolitan soundscape becomes not only a major characteristic of, but also an agent within the city, which is ultimately reflected on both the text's content and formal level. Formally, the text collages all sorts of articulated chatter, slogans, songs, but also unarticulated noises via onomatopoeia, metaphors and neologisms into a vast urban cacophony. On the content level, the urban roar takes a toll on the novel's myriad characters, variously tormenting, stupefying, blunting, enticing or inspiring them –thus prompting reactions and processes within their minds that the reader is able to follow via Dos Passos' extensive use of interior monologue and stream of

¹⁴ Here specifically it is P.B. Shelley's *Adonais* elegy, whose stanzas are adapted to Ellen's own situation within her mind.



consciousness. In this sense, one is to witness here the fabrication of the overstimulated modern urbanite into an apathetic –or in Simmel’s words ‘blasé’– product of the urban milieu. Furthermore, *Manhattan Transfer*’s ceaseless urban roar proves to be crucial in constantly reminding the metropolitan dweller of his or her being never alone, of never having any real privacy. A thus enacted metropolitan panacousticon ultimately appears as a powerful agent in constituting the modern subject as someone who is always already overheard, always already under the curious ears of another. Once internalized and adapted to that panacousticon, it does not matter if there really is an eavesdropper –that eavesdropper has already found a place in one’s mind and audibility, just as much as visibility, in the panoptic regime, is a trap.

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