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 **Documentary/Modernism: Convergence and  
Complementarity in the 1930s**

Tyrus Miller

Modernism/modernity

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 9, Number 2, April 2002

pp. 226-241

10.1353/mod.2002.0032

ARTICLE

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

*Modernism/Modernity* 9.2 (2002) 226-241

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Documentary / Modernism:  
Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s

## 1

As terms that share their provenance in the cultural upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, "modernism" and "documentary" nevertheless appear to belong to distinct art-historical, literary, and aesthetic domains. As we have come to understand them, they seem to indicate opposed sets of beliefs about the nature of artistic communication, to embody different assumptions about the artwork's public role, and in many cases to represent strongly divergent political commitments on the part of their practitioners. Modernist artists and writers, as commonplace has it, attacked the conventions of mimetic visual and literary representation, laying bare the semiotic, social, and psychological conventions that allowed traditional artworks to be seen as verisimilar pictures of reality. Modernists interrogated the ways in which subjective perception and thought mediated any possible apprehension of the world, and they sought to account for the decisive material role that media such as language, paint, and bodily movement played in articulating the artwork's relation to reality. From this basic stance of modernist artists, ultimately, derived many of the defining features of the modernist artwork: its tendency towards difficulty, fragmentation, and abstraction; its self-reflexivity and heightened self-consciousness; its prominent display of artistic technique; its polemical, often mandarin withdrawal from everyday life and culture.

Documentary, in contrast, seemed to draw its energy and inspiration from the antithetical realm of the everyday, the popular world upon which modernist art and writing had demonstratively **[End Page 225]** turned its back. In reportage, reports, photographs, and films, the documentary artist attempted to register the teeming multiplicity of movements of labor, daily routine, and city life. Honesty, accuracy, and openness to the contingent details of the empirical world were premium values in the documentary aesthetic, and objectively existing "reality" its formal touchstone. In pursuing its goal of representing reality truly, documentary took up the aspirations of nineteenth-century artists, both realist and naturalist, to reveal the face of the common life that less rigorous modes of art tended to mask. Documentary, in sum, is frequently thought to represent the furthest development of naturalism in the arts, just as modernism, its aesthetic antipode, is seen as the acme of anti-naturalist impulses.

This story is familiar to the point of near-banalities, and like most folk wisdom, it has the virtue of being plausible if not precisely true. Once it is given closer scrutiny, however, several problems nag this account. First, evidently, the basic terms upon which it rests are unstable and difficult to define with precision: for example, the opposition of modernism's "subjectivity" to documentary's "objectivity," and of "modernism" itself to the "realism" and/or "naturalism" with which documentary is aligned. It is pertinent to recall here Roman Jakobson's terminological scruples concerning the multiple senses of "realism" and easy to concur with him that "those who speak of artistic realism continually sin against it."<sup>1</sup> Yet I want to pursue a somewhat different line of theorectical and historical argument than such terminological skepticism. In the conceptual frameworks taking shape around both modernism and documentary, I wish to suggest, formally innovative experimentalism and naturalistic explorations of everyday life were not so much opposed as instead *complementary* moments of a broader modernist poetics. Only from this perspective, I argue, do the mixtures of radical montage, reportage, state- or commercially-oriented advertising, and surrealist defamiliarization in the documentary works of John Grierson's filmmaking team and the texts of *Mass Observation* reveal their underlying coherence. Similarly, such a perspective, which implies that documentary arose in close relation to the later development of modernism in the late 1920s and 1930s, helps explain the significant presence of modernist writers, visual artists, and musicians in the documentary film movement and the amateur ethnographic organization called *Mass Observation*.<sup>2</sup> These movements involved such modernistically oriented writers as Charles Madge, David Gascoyne, William Empson, Kathleen Raine, Naomi Mitchison, W.H. Auden, and even E.M. Forster; artists, photographers, and



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MODERNISM / *modernity*  
VOLUME NINE, NUMBER  
TWO, PP 225-241.  
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HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

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