

# 17. Documentary Modernism: Worldly Sympathies, Ideal Collectivities and Dissenting Individualism

Irina Rasmussen

English, Stockholm University

An important intellectual debate in modernism concerns the uneasy coexistence of cosmopolitan and nationalist orientations toward the world. From the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, attempts to reconcile cosmopolitanism and nationalism, which can be considered as two contending “vehicles of universalism”,<sup>1</sup> pre-conditioned the cultures of modernity to future neuroses, like a primal scene. The resurgence of cosmopolitanism in the early twenty-first century – when the concept is invoked in relation to economic globalisation and in discussions about world literature understood to foster a desire for universal justice – might suggest that cosmopolitanism has always been a reaction against nationalism and a symptom of the nation-state’s weakening. Perhaps surprisingly, historical analysis suggests otherwise: Nationalism is a more recent phenomenon than cosmopolitanism and a relatively late contender in the arena of world politics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pheng Cheah, “Introduction Part II: The Cosmopolitical Today”, in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 22.

---

## How to cite this book chapter:

Rasmussen, Irina. “Documentary Modernism: Worldly Sympathies, Ideal Collectivities and Dissenting Individualism”. In *World Literatures: Exploring the Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Exchange*, edited by Stefan Helgesson, Annika Mörte Alling, Yvonne Lindqvist, and Helena Wulff, 185–198. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bat.q>. License: CC-BY.

Pheng Cheah questions the view that cosmopolitanism emerged as a response to nationalism, arguing that in actuality modern subjects were cosmopolitans before they became nationals. He points out that cosmopolitanism was “a central concept of the eighteenth-century French philosophies”; the term was derived from “the Greek words for ‘world’ and ‘citizen’, by way of the *esprit cosmopolite* of Renaissance humanism”, and it came to designate “an intellectual ethics, a universal humanism that transcends regional particularism”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, before cosmopolitanism reconstituted itself as a challenge to nationalism in the age of nation-states, it was used in opposition to various regionalisms and related identitarian tendencies to categorise peoples “territorially, culturally, linguistically, or even racially”.<sup>3</sup> So, the relationship between cosmopolitanism and its contenders, whether conflicting or complementary, was always significant in terms of its influence on the concurrent mappings of the world dynamics.

The emergence of a fully articulated “doctrine of nationalism”<sup>4</sup> in the age of nation-states transforms cosmopolitanism more specifically into an ideological counterweight to *exclusionary* nationalism and discourses of cultural superiority that promote, overtly or indirectly, colonialism, imperialism and regionalism. To illuminate these two competing ideological conceptions of the world in modernity, I suggest approaching the nexus of cosmopolitanism and nationalism as it is actualised in a range of aesthetic documentary projects from the 1920s and 30s. I argue that these highly designed documentary modernist projects implement cosmopolitan practices of collection, assemblage and reportage in order to remap the world in formations conducive to universal social justice. My intention is, first, to show how the modernist production of cosmopolitan value in aestheticised documentary cultural forms energises the sociopolitical imaginary of the period and, secondly, to suggest how aesthetic modernisms’ response to the cosmopolitics of the interwar period anticipates contemporary

---

<sup>2</sup> Cheah, “Introduction”, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Cheah, “Introduction”, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Cheah, “Introduction”, 22.

debates in the early twenty-first century about globalisation and world literature.

### **Cosmopolitan practices**

Competing national and global outlooks distinguish the decidedly collaborative modernist projects of the 1920s and '30s I am bringing together under the rubric of *documentary modernism* in order to foreground the complementary aesthetic and political qualities of imaginative, creative documentarian works. Focusing on three kinds of projects – an anthology, a photographic reportage, and a scrapbook historiography – helps to clarify how documentary modernism negotiates between the rock of nationalism and the whirlpool of cosmopolitanism. By attending to how each project transcends generic and political borders, we can better understand documentary modernism in terms of its cosmopolitan value and its methods of collaborating and curating vernacular expressions as practised globalism.

Documentary modernist projects often emerged from the artistic networks established around little magazines and small presses. Writers, editors, translators, activists and public intellectuals in the interwar period turned to a novel kind of collaborative network practice. They made a concerted effort to collect artefactual materials that recorded local realities and contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the diverse process of modernisation. These efforts resulted in diverse works of documentary modernism – generic forms that included literary and ethnographic anthologies, photographic and cinematic reportages and other forms of social and historiographic undertakings – all of which experimented with assemblage and developed aesthetic practices of recording life and social history. Importantly, these collaborative acts of critical making constituted themselves as a creative, intellectual and socially conscious genre. The participants' disciplinary backgrounds varied significantly, as did their agendas and the media they worked in to achieve their aims. These projects, however different in subject, form and impact, nevertheless, developed a distinct approach to documenting world events: they strategically reappraised geopolitics, remapped the centre-and-periphery

dynamics and re-interpreted cultural geographies, typically in novel ways. In the process, they forged innovative genealogies of a dynamic world of culture. All of these projects raised questions about how best to strike a balance between global and national citizenship while addressing, fairly and justly, the asymmetrical distribution of material, cultural and political resources within hegemonic socioeconomic formations.

Because documentary modernism encompasses a great diversity of forms and materials, it is impossible to present a comprehensive analysis of this creative genre. Therefore, I will be focusing on three distinct documentary compilations with artistic and historiographic aims. These documentary modernist projects include: an interventionist anthology (Nancy Cunard's *Negro*), a scrapbook project of vernacular historiography (L. S. Gumbly's *Harlem Scrapbooks*) and a narrativised photographic reportage (James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*). A close analysis of each reveals that the task of curating art and social history by assemblage allowed the authors of these projects to move conceptually and imaginatively in multiple directions simultaneously. While they shared interventionist objectives, the unique materials of each project generate specific critical, aesthetic and curating practices and shape particular kinds of global cosmopolitanism.

The notion of national belonging is opened to revision in multiple ways in Nancy Cunard's monumental, 855-page-long anthology of black cultural achievements, *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). *Negro* was compiled internationally, by contributors from multiple geographical locations around the world, whose efforts exemplify a collective modernist effort to forge a world-cultural perspective. One example of *Negro*'s achievement is its multiple entries on world music and dance, written by critics, historians, and musician, that show how careful consideration of black artists and performers' contributions alters the landscapes of existing forms. George Antheil's essay, "The Negro on the Spiritual, or A Method of Negro Music", for instance, charts contemporary musical styles through complex pathways of African diasporas. Antheil argues that black music "survived and built up an incredible machinery" that shaped not only contemporary jazz but also

fire-ritual dances on the islands off the coast of the American South, work-songs, children songs and the spirituals. He notes the influence of black music in the way “The *Rumba* of Cuba and the *Beguine* of Martinique, although Spanish in dress, have Negro hearts and certainly nothing but Negro bodies”.<sup>5</sup> By locating influential sources for syncopation, jazz and dance in multiple locations, Antheil’s genealogy avoids the trap of promoting an expressive logic of cultural analysis. That is, his account discourages efforts to link cultural expressions to a singular place of origins. Instead, Antheil draws attention to the way in which cultural expressions travel and transform, and in doing so, he effectively remaps the geocultural vectors of classical music, jazz and modern dance.

Working with different kinds of records, Alexander Gumby’s *Harlem Scrapbooks*<sup>6</sup> compiles local materials about the impact of the Harlem Renaissance within the neighbourhood of Harlem and the city of New York, while recording the movement’s global imaginary and its national and worldwide influence and appeal. By blending cultural historiography and sentimental history, Gumby’s project develops a crossover form of vernacular historiography that defies generic categorisation, straddling the varied fields of artistic and intellectual production as well as social and personal histories. For instance, Scrapbook 43, “Langston Hughes: Poet, author and play-writer”, the volume in Gumby’s collection that documents Hughes’s literary career, opens with early reviews of his poetry, the 1926 full publication of Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, edited by H. Monroe (vol. XXIX, Nov. 1926, Number 111), and individually published poems from that award-winning collection in *Palm* (October 1926), *The Crisis* (March 1925), *Opportunity* (May 1925 and October 1926) and *The Nation* (February 16, 1927),

---

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Cunard, *Negro: An Anthology*, edited and abridged, with an introduction by Hugh Ford (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1970), 215.

<sup>6</sup> The scrapbooks are archived as: *Alexander Gumby Collection of Negroiana*, [ca. 1800]–1981, in Rare Book & Manuscript Library Collection, at Butler Library, Columbia University.

to mention a few. These are interspersed with pages of newspaper reviews of Hughes' poetry and plays, photos of Hughes's public readings in Harlem, alongside with journal articles and news columns by Hughes. This assembled news flow is interrupted midway through the scrapbook with a personal memento on a verso page, a photograph of the poet with an inscription to Gumby: "Sincerely is so commonplace – Langston".<sup>7</sup> Hughes's ironic coupling of "commonplace" with "sincerely" creates an intimate break, which perhaps amused Gumby in the way Hughes' inscription signalled the poet's veiled recognition of Gumby's own sincerity as a collector of the commonplace. Gumby's blending of vernacular and public forms of expression fits his purpose to create an archive of the *unwritten history*, of black experience mostly in Harlem, New York City. Effectively, the project's scope and the multi-dimensionality of its records transform the scrapbook format, which might appear to be idiosyncratic, into a curatorial project with clear political, conservationist and aesthetic implications that need foregrounding.

While Cunard's and Gumby's undertakings can be seen as actualising modernism's global reach and outlook, James Agee and Walker Evans's coverage of the Depression-era American South in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1936; 1941) exemplifies the global imaginary of a localist modernism.<sup>8</sup> Composed as a crossover, creative, non-fictional and photographic reportage of Depression-era America, this collaboration between Agee, a writer known for his literary work, journalism and film criticism, and Evans, a photographer known for developing an influential modernist style of documentary photography, experiments with a new kind of social writing by combining elegiac narrative with vernacular photography. Set in Alabama, the reporting follows

---

<sup>7</sup> *Alexander Gumby Collection of Negroina*, [ca. 1800]–1981. MS #0527. CMI Box 71. "Scrapbook 43: Langston Hughes: Poet, author and playwright (1 volume)". Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>8</sup> See Eric White's discussion of localist modernism as guided by the slogan that "The Locality Is the Only Universal", in his *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), 9–14.

families of tenant cotton-farmers and traces their symbolic attachments to and dependence on the land and cotton-picking. It highlights the social plight and abject poverty of the cotton-farmers by broadening the perspective to rural living around the globe. By presenting rural existence agonistically as a world of both beauty and suffering, the reportage approximates in language and image the capacity the tenants' existence has for asserting and obviating the beauty of the world simultaneously. Rather than treating farming in the Heideggerian terms of "turn[ing] the earth into the world",<sup>9</sup> Agee and Evans's reporting elicits the logic the Kantian amphiboly.<sup>10</sup> It reveals the grandeur and the "grand deception of phenomena", capturing the attraction of things while illuminating "an obstruction to the apprehension of things in themselves".<sup>11</sup> In short, finding beauty within a harsh world the reporters struggle to apprehend, these modernist documentarians continuously attune themselves and their method to the material conditions of terrible rural poverty. Agee and Evans' medium of modernist reporting exemplifies the world-making potential of modernist form to redress local injustices in global terms.

## Documentary modernism and world literature

Aesthetically, critics have described the crossovers between literary modernisms and the 1930s' documentary forms as conveying

---

<sup>9</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 19.

<sup>10</sup> While semantically the word "amphiboly", which means encompassing two opposite meanings at once, is close to "equivocation" and "ambiguity", etymologically, originating in Greek, the word's association with "something about language's very essence" in Aristotle's writings has evolved into "a theory of equivocal symptoms in language" (Apter 25). Another "troubling aspect of amphiboly" is that it produces the "effect of intelligibility within nonsense" and "makes an error of meaning acceptable even as it arouses conscious suspicion of something off-kilter or terribly wrong in language" (Apter 26).

<sup>11</sup> Apter 26. Apter refers to Kant's discussion of the constraints of language and its instability on our immediate experience of the sensible, that is, "our ignorance of the conditions proper to the sensible" in his *The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection* (Apter 26).

an aesthetics of interruption in their sharp redrawing of boundaries between literary and propagandistic forms. While Jeff Allred's *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (2009), a study of the Depression-era documentary photo-texts, represents the consolidation of the modernist documentary as a response to the Great Depression, Allred concludes that, in institutional terms, collecting and assemblage as aesthetic practices led to the institutionalisation of modernism and neutralisation of its interventionist aims.<sup>12</sup> Even Jeremy Braddock's *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, a study of the complex intersection between aesthetic and collecting practices such as "archiving, ethnography, museum display, [and] anthologization",<sup>13</sup> concludes that modernist collection acted towards the end of the period only "as a provisional institution".<sup>14</sup> Emphasising how "canon-defining anthologies"<sup>15</sup> and "the increased authority of the Museum of Modern Art (est. 1929)" emerged as the sanctifying mode of collection, Braddock contrasts that mode with socially interventionist modes of collecting, arguing that the latter "could no longer serve as the basis for the institutionalisation of modernism (provisional or otherwise)".<sup>16</sup>

In response to such studies, the question I want to pose is: What if we extend our critical outlook beyond the frameworks of institutionalisation? Doing so, I argue, enables us to better appreciate the impressive scope and scale of documentary modernism. This socially conscious genre reaches out to the future, aesthetically, by melding social and aesthetic aims, and does so conceptually, by initiating debates that continue today in world-literature studies about literary cosmopolitics and also in the new modernist studies about the institutionalised narrative of modernism. What links documentary modernism to these contemporary discourses are:

---

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Braddock 27.

<sup>15</sup> Braddock 2.

<sup>16</sup> Braddock 212.



(1) a shared cosmopolitan drive to establish a world-historical, global perspective; and (2) an effort to develop alternative kinds of institutionalising practices that combine cosmopolitics with emancipatory critical practices. The projects' interventionist aim of remedying the asymmetric relations among cultures motivates their crossing of real, medial and symbolic divides. In contrast with institutionalised accounts of modernism in terms of a relatively definitive canon and narratives suggesting that aesthetic modernism is disconnected from social concerns (which became dominant in the 1950s and required excision and homogenisation), this study argues that documentary modernism combines aesthetic and social concerns to produce a socially engaged aesthetics that imagines art as a form of social agency in the wider world.

The critical script of institutionalised modernism also risks obscuring how these modernist works travel geographically and culturally, how they reach broader audiences and how they attempt to create a new cultural platform in opposition to the hierarchical division of the world into spheres of influence. In the 1930s, proponents of realism and defenders of artistic modernism debated about the merits of Expressionism. One of the key issues concerned how far artistic and cultural artefacts could circulate within social groups given the constraints imposed by their tone and content. In Georg Lukács's response to Ernst Bloch, who defended Expressionism's practice of drawing on folk art and ordinary people's experiences, Lukács countered that artistic strength could only be measured by the benchmarks of cultural heritage:

[T]he cultural heritage has a living relationship to the real life of the people ... it is characterised by a dynamic, progressive movement in which the active forces of popular tradition ... are buoyed up, preserved, transcended and further developed. For a writer to possess a living relationship to the cultural heritage means being a son of the people.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance", in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 54.

For Lukács, the true folk component in art was found in its alignment with and continuation of national art, which was irreconcilable with lower-order sensibilities such as drawing on the doodles “of children and prisoners, on the disturbing works of the mentally sick, and on primitive art”:<sup>18</sup>

Popular art does not imply an ideologically indiscriminate, “arty” appreciation of “primitive” products of connoisseurs. Truly popular art has nothing in common with any of that. For if it did, any swank who collects stained glass or negro sculpture, any snob who celebrates insanity as the emancipation of mankind from the fetters of the mechanistic mind, could claim to be a champion of popular art.<sup>19</sup>

He concludes that the efforts to “collect old folk products indiscriminately” ultimately appeal to what he calls “[r]etrograde traditionalism, such as regional art” and thus fall short of the real aim he posits for modern art, namely, the intertwined political and aesthetic project of creating works that “grow out of the life and history of their people ... [as] an organic product of the development of their nation”.<sup>20</sup>

Opposing national consciousness that unifies the imaginary to regionalism that fragments the totality, Lukács dismisses modernism’s assembling practices as attempts to heap “lifeless objects in which one can rummage around at will, picking out whatever one happens to need at the moment”,<sup>21</sup> a practice, in his view, completely detrimental to the development of a properly historical consciousness. Lukács’s model of historical understanding differs significantly from Walter Benjamin’s valorisation of assemblage as the kind of historiography that opens the opportunity to counteract triumphalist narratives of modernity, progress and civilisation.<sup>22</sup> Benjamin conceives of individual, found objects as

---

<sup>18</sup> Lukács 54.

<sup>19</sup> Lukács 53.

<sup>20</sup> Lukács 53–54.

<sup>21</sup> Lukács 54.

<sup>22</sup> Quoting Hegel’s redefinition of historical analysis as, “Seek for food and clothing first; then shall the Kingdom of God be granted to you”, Benjamin envisions a historical materialist analysis as focused on “the

arbitrators between the past and the future because to a historiographer of the vernacular they exist simultaneously within multiple temporalities.

Most significantly, in contrast to homogenising histories, assemblages function as material manifestations of multiple histories and cultural geographies and can be understood as forms of “dispossessive collectivism”, a term that informs Bruce Robbins’s and Emily Apter’s understanding of world-literary forms.<sup>23</sup> The aesthetic expression informed by dispossessive collectivism stands in contrast to an aesthetic stance that promotes our “self-interest” and sense of cultural ownership.<sup>24</sup> And, significantly for my analysis of the cosmopolitanism-nationalism bind of modernism, the critical project of imagining “a dispossessive ethics of reading”, which sensitises us to the notion that the world is really “an unownable estate”,<sup>25</sup> promotes the sensibility akin to the modernist documentarians who resist the idea that art belongs nationally.

The materiality of assemblages facilitates a closer look, firstly, into what function these artistic practices assign to the arts and, secondly, into what models of history, culture and the world emerge through the curatorial practices of blending art, ethnography, history, journalism and cultural geography. An aesthetic and cultural sensibility they share is the possibility of folding multiple

---

crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist”; his is a historiography that draws not on “a vision of spoils that fall to the victor” but on past existence that resonates with the present “as confidence, courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude”; see Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, trans. E. Jephcott et al., ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 390.

<sup>23</sup> Apter 329. Emily Apter discusses forms of dispossessive collectivism as important for conceptions of *world literature*. She references Bruce Robbins’s coinage, “dispossessive collectivism”, in his essay, “Uses of World Literature”, in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (New York: Routledge, 2012), 391.

<sup>24</sup> Apter 329. Apter refers here to Bruce Robbins’s critique of modernism as not really “encourage[ing] an ethical relation with the entire world” but experimenting primarily with art’s estranging, alienating function.

<sup>25</sup> Apter 329.

temporalities, cultural frames, localities and geographical places. Recent discussions of art's world-making potential<sup>26</sup> advance a similar notion of the world as plastic and malleable, constituted by multiple frames and subtended by shapes it acquires in the works of art, not least. Caroline Levine illuminates this interaction between the world and art in the way artworks connect disparate elements to "give shape to worlds".<sup>27</sup> By flaunting its awareness of being an artifice, an artistic project creates an aesthetic model of the world. The world-making work of such models, as Levine perceptively shows, serves the purpose of making sense of existence. "The work of models", Levine explains, is "to move across scales": to either make a graspable version of a vastly complex reality or to imagine possible complicating consequences and scenarios of a particular event.<sup>28</sup> In either case, "models shift scales", designed to make us see what cannot be grasped and seen for "they sharpen and alter what can be known and imagined".<sup>29</sup>

In documentary modernism, reporting, curating and creating become complimentary world-re-creating practices that inform the projects' utopian politics and aesthetics of interruption. Cunard's interventionist world-oriented anthology, Agee and Evans's reportage on the rural poor towards the backdrop of poverty across America and around the globe, and Gumby's vernacular historiography of black modernity – are all world-oriented forms that escape generic and institutional constraints. What unites these collaborative, multimodal projects is that they reappraise the dynamics between cosmopolitanism and nationalism by configuring a dynamics of interconnectedness between local temporalities and global histories, and by this, they project, I claim, a new cultural dynamics.

---

<sup>26</sup> See for instance, Pheng Cheah's *What Is a World?* (2016) and Mark Seltzer's *The Official World* (2016).

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Levine, "How to Make Worlds", in *Public Books*, January 11 (2016).

<sup>28</sup> Levine, "How to Make Worlds".

<sup>29</sup> Levine, "How to Make Worlds".

If modernism is known for its stylistic and formal inconsistencies, documentary modernist projects display how these inconsistencies open themselves to hybrid forms of artistic and journalistic composition. The resulting multimedial aesthetic forms exemplify the archival impulse to examine a particular context – a figure, an object, a history, or an event – so as to challenge a monolithic view of national culture. What unites them is the shared desire to break the established moulds of historiography and cultural bias. To place this discussion within the emergent discourse of *world literature* is to follow the cues in the works themselves and to account for the broader effects of the new cultural imaginary that shapes this period.

## Bibliography

- Allred, Jeff. *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Benjamin, Walter. “On the Concept of History”. In *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, translated by E. Jephcott et al., edited by H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Braddock, Jeremy. *Collecting as Modernist Practice*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.
- Cheng, Pheng and Bruce Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*. London: Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Cunard, Nancy. *Negro: An Anthology*. Edited and abridged. With an introduction by Hugh Ford. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1970.
- Levine, Caroline. “How to Make Worlds”. *Public Books*, 11 January 2016.
- Lukács, Georg. “Realism in the Balance”. *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso, 2007.

Robbins, Bruce. "Uses of World Literature". In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir. New York: Routledge, 2012.

White, Eric B. *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.