

Nanook of the North

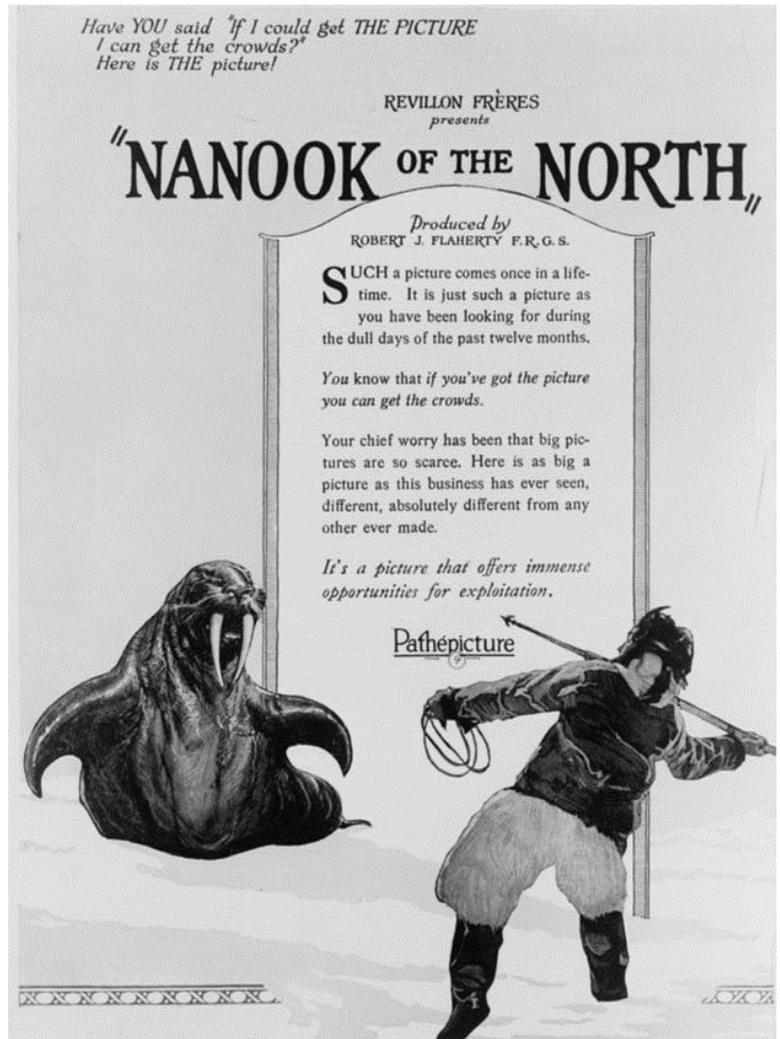
By Patricia R. Zimmermann and Sean Zimmermann Auyash

Robert Flaherty's "Nanook of the North" (1922) represents one of the most significant American documentaries: it operates as a Rosetta stone for debates about documentary ethics, representation, ethnography, orientalism. Documenting the Inuit of Ungava Peninsula in Eastern Canada, the film follows Nanook (Allakariallak) and his family over ice flows, tundra, and bays as they hunt for food, navigate kayaks, and push their dogsled over ice and snow. British producer John Grierson disparaged Flaherty's structure of man against nature as excessively Romantic.

Robert Flaherty is considered one of the first American independent filmmakers. Anti-Hollywood in its rejection of narrative causality and artifice, "Nanook" evokes many documentary styles: reenactment, staging, observational mode, ethnography, exploration, poetic experimental film, participatory mode, fiction, portrait, travelogue, landscape, adventure film, nature film, hybrid forms combining fiction and documentary. A 79-minute silent film, "Nanook" constitutes one of the first feature-length documentaries. Flaherty wrote the intertitles, merging poetic language and description: "the rasp and hiss of driving snow," "the melancholy spirit of the north."

Robert Flaherty (1884-1951) was first and foremost an explorer. Son of an engineer, he grew up in mining camps in northern Michigan and Canada, "learning the arts of frontier survival." Hired by Canadian railroad builder William Mackenzie in 1910 to prospect the Hudson Bay area, Flaherty undertook four expeditions to map this unknown country to locate gypsum and lignite. Between 1914 and 1915, he shot film and photographs on two expeditions. In 1916, while editing, his cigarette fell onto the outtakes. 30,000 feet of nitrate film exploded. In 1920, after raising money from Revillon Freres, a French fur company, to produce a second film, he returned to Hudson Bay.

Flaherty spent 16 months living with the Inuit. He shot all the sequences—but the Inuit collaborated in determining scenes, repairing the camera (known as the "aggie"), and developing the film. He screened rushes for Inuit. They staged hunting and the igloo



An advertisement featured in the June 17, 1922 edition of Motion Picture News. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

building scenes for him. This collaborative style countered the Hollywood studio system. But his filmmaking also subjected his subjects danger. Flaherty was more interested in cinematography than in editing sequences.

Pathe Frere, the French film distribution, released Nanook in New York City on 11 June 1922. The film was a commercial success in the United States and internationally, earning worldwide gross receipts of \$251,000. The film inspired a Broadway song, "Nanook," whose orientalist lyrics explain: "ever-loving Nanook, though you don't read a book, but oh, how you can love."

"Nanook of the North" adopts a journey structure based on the seasons, from summer to winter. It employs an episodic structure, rather than linear causality. The film features four action scenes demonstrating Nanook's prowess securing food: fishing,

and hunting walrus, fox, and seal. Scenes of the family traveling over ice flows with kayaks and pulling dogsleds over snowy hills mark the difficulties of movement through arctic landscapes. The center of the film focuses on building an igloo out of snow, condensing ideas about family, food, shelter, survival.

Channeling his experience as a photographer and adventurer, "Nanook" employs portrait photography interspersed with landscape tableaux. These two elements combine, indicating Flaherty's technical mastery and complex visual aesthetic. Portrait and action shots comprise the film's visual structure. For example, when Nanook juts his head out from his newly constructed igloo, a door which he has just cut out frames his face as the snow white igloo fills the negative space. This shot contrasts with the opening shot in the film where, in tracking shot, Flaherty reveals the expanse of sea and hills of the sparse Ungava peninsula. Flaherty's juxtaposition of two different visual aesthetics creates a counterpoint of intimate familial or action hunting scenes interspersed with landscape tableaux.

The film also points to Flaherty's knowledge of Inuit artistic practices. He had collected their drawings during his time in Canada. Many scenes emulate drawings and carvings done by Inuit artists. This style consists of small figures in action surrounded by large amounts of white, negative space. Flaherty uses the snowy landscape to create white negative space resonating with Inuit art forms. For example, during their trek to the seal hunting grounds, Nanook's family enters the shot one at a time, walking across a ridge until we see the whole party dwarfed by a white snowy background, evoking Inuit art visual structures. Flaherty's cinematography rejects Western styles of cinematic depth and character centered compositional balance.

Many theoretical debates surround "Nanook of the North." The writings of Jay Ruby and Fatimah Tobing Rony condense arguments swirling around the film. Ruby contextualizes "Nanook of the North" as a collaboration. He argues the film cannot be removed from the "conditions of its production, the culture, ideology and intentions of the producer and the contexts in which it is displayed." Ruby argues against scholars who focus purely on analysis of the film's images.

Ruby contends a more holistic analysis of Flaherty's work requires understanding the social structures enabling the film's creation. Ruby seeks to contextualize rather than aestheticize the film in order to understand interactions between Flaherty and the Inuit. He argues Flaherty worked in conjunction with the Inuit to create an images from their perspective.

In contrast, Tobing Rony positions "Nanook of the North" within racialized, orientalist Western discourses present at the time of its production. Tobing Rony argues that "Nanook of the North" perpetuates the then present-day ideology of the Inuit as a "cuddly primitive" people. For Tobing Rony, "Flaherty did not want to show the Inuit as they were at the time of the film's creation, but as (he thought) they *had been*." She labels "the mode of representation of the 'ethnographic'" which emerged from this impulse *taxidermy*. For her, "taxidermy seeks to make that which is dead look as if it were still living." Within this framework, Tobing Rony focuses on the ways Flaherty rendered the Inuit to appear more primitive and more violent. Tobing Rony argues Flaherty fit the Inuit within preexisting Western European assumptions, rather than structuring "Nanook of the North" to challenge those preconceptions.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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