Nicks's of *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* (1982) all trace the correlations between the films' personal stories and larger political and social issues through the various ways in which the directors construct and insert their own presences into the texts. Autobiographical documentary also allows people who are generally marginalized and disempowered to gain a voice by making documentary films about their own lives. Thus, Julia Lesage sees Camille Billops's personal story in *Finding Christa* (1991) rich in implication about both the politics of black family life and the cultural conception of motherhood, and Sheila Petty discusses the personal struggle of gay black filmmaker Marlon Riggs in *Tongues Untied* (1989) to get his story told as resonant of the wider struggle against both a heterosexist white society as well as a frequently homophobic African-American community.

In her analysis of *The Thin Blue Line*, Linda Williams argues that the aim of contemporary documentary filmmakers is to seek the "reverberations and repetitions" that reveal multiple and contingent "truths" rather than a unitary, unproblematic "Truth." Indeed, while each of the essays in this collection is distinctive in its emphasis and approach, ideas do reverberate and repeat throughout the book in provocative ways. This is particularly apposite, given that they all examine documentary, a visual mode that, as Williams suggests, reveals such "reverberations" to be inherent in reality itself. Thus, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis finds a hopeful truth in *Night and Fog* (1955) which, given its subject—World War II German concentration camps and the Holocaust—would seem to suggest a much darker view about the human spirit. Recent documentaries, as several of the essays show, interrogate the more traditional depiction of the truth as stable, objective, and knowable, even suggesting that identity itself is shifting and fragmentary. Caryl Flinn considers how *Paris Is Burning* unfixes traditionally stable notions of gender, and *Daisy*, as Nicks shows, questions the physical authenticity of being when the body can be sculpted by elective surgery.

In the end, it would be impossible in this brief introduction to do justice to such a rich and varied group of essays, much less to the documentaries themselves. Indeed, no single reading, regardless of how persuasive it might be, can ever hope to be definitive. In any event, we leave it to readers to engage in what we see as the pleasurable task of sorting out in more detail the numerous "repetitions and reverberations" contained in this collection. But whatever relations different readers perceive, we hope all will come away from this volume with a profound appreciation of the aesthetic complexity of the documentary form.

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The Filmmaker as Hunter

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*

William Rothman

The field of film study has only recently shown significant interest in documentaries. In part, the scarcity of critical studies of documentary films is indicative of film study's general neglect of criticism, a consequence of the revolution undergone in the past quarter century by a field that accords precedence to what it calls "theory" and (more recently) to what it calls "historiography." There has been a special animus, though, in film study's resistance to devoting attention even to great works within the documentary tradition. It derives from the claim sometimes made on behalf of documentary films—less often by their makers or admirers than by detractors who invoke the claim only to repudiate it—that they are capturing reality directly and thus are inherently more truthful than fiction films. From the standpoint of the field's dominant theoretical frameworks, such a claim seems intolerably naive. By the late 1970s, the prevailing view within the field was that all fiction films are really documentaries, that all documentary films are fictions, hence that they do not fundamentally differ. Documentaries and fiction films are equally liable to be instruments of repressive ideology, hence equally to be resisted.

The publication in the early 1990s of Bill Nichols's *Representing Reality* (1991) and Michael Renov's *Theorizing Documentary* (1993) marked a shift. For both books, the starting point is the recognition that although documentaries are not inherently more truthful than fiction films, there are important differences between them. Reflecting on those differences is a major

concern of the present volume, too. *Nanook of the North* (1922) is an apt starting point for such reflections, because nearly all documentary filmmakers claim its inheritance, and because it marks a moment before the distinction between documentary and fiction was set.

The widely distributed video cassette of *Nanook* prefaces the film with a title stating that it "is generally regarded as the work from which all subsequent efforts to bring real life to the screen have stemmed." The implication is that fiction films are not "efforts to bring real life to the screen"—they are efforts, perhaps, to bring to the screen the imaginary life of fantasy and myth. Yet fiction films do bring real life to the screen; their characters are imaginary, but the camera's subjects are real. And documentaries are steeped in fantasy and myth.

Filmmaker Robert Flaherty actively involved Nanook and his family in the filming, often telling them what to do, directing their performance for the camera. (There are illuminating accounts of the production of *Nanook* in Barsam, Calder-Marshall, and Rotha and Wright. See also Flaherty.) Much of what is on view is typical behavior for Nanook's family (making igloos, lighting campfires). Some is not. Flaherty had his subjects revive a dangerous method of walrus-hunting that Nanook's people had abandoned when they became able to trade pelts for guns.

Although *Nanook* accurately illustrates aspects of its protagonist's way of life, its primary goal is not to contribute to a body of scientific knowledge of human cultures; it is far from an ethnographic film in the current sense. For its own purposes, the film underplays the complexity of the social structures, different from ours, specific to Nanook's culture (he seems to have more than one wife, but no title acknowledges that Nyla is not the only woman sharing his bed). It also underplays the encroachments of the modern world, which gives Nanook's family no choice but to be part of it. Flaherty portrays Nanook's way of life as timeless, unchanging, when the way of life the film portrays was already succumbing to a mortal threat (more accurately, that way of life never existed, for no way of life is timeless, unchanging). And nature itself, the environment on display in *Nanook,* was—is—mortally threatened. (On *Nanook*'s relationship to ethnographic film, see, for example, Winston, who wonders how different—and how much better, in Winston's judgment—the history of documentary film would have been if an anthropologist like Franz Boas, not a self-styled artist-explorer in a colonialist mold like Flaherty, had created the paradigm.)

Flaherty had a vested interest in portraying his subjects' way of life as timeless and unchanging. If Western civilization is destroying Nanook's culture, the filmmaker's own project is implicated. The video version contains a title noting that "the film was made possible by the French fur company Revillon Frères," but Flaherty's titles credit only the "kindliness, faithfulness and patience of Nanook and his family." Paired with his failure to note that his

film was sponsored by a fur company, Flaherty's acknowledgment of his subjects' participation may seem disingenuous. Yet there is no reason to doubt his sincerity when he expresses appreciation for his subjects' human qualities, or declares that he could not have made *Nanook* without their active participation. That Flaherty appreciates his subjects does not mean that his relationship to them is an innocent one. But who are we to judge Robert Flaherty?

In part, Flaherty distorts the real way of life of Nanook's family in order to tell a story about a man's heroic efforts to keep his family alive in a harsh natural environment, not about his conflict with villains or his quest for romantic fulfillment (or, for that matter, the destruction of his world by forces he does not perceive as threats). The story Flaherty tells is quite different from those his contemporary D. W. Griffith was telling. But Flaherty's story, like Griffith's, did not really happen; it is literally a fiction. And insofar as Nanook is the protagonist of such a story, he is as fictional as any Griffith character.

Nanook claims that its protagonist is a real person, not a fictional character. However, real people, too, are characters within fictions (we are creatures of our own imaginations and the imaginations of others). And real people are also actors (we play the characters we, and others, imagine us to be, the characters we are capable of becoming). As opposed to playing a character, *Nanook*'s star appears as himself, or, as it might be more apt to say, plays himself (as opposed to playing a character other than himself). Yet the "self" this man plays and the "self" who plays him do not simply coincide.

Within the film, this man is called "Nanook," although in reality he bears the marquee-busting name "Allakariallak." Flaherty's titles characterize Nanook in mythical, fantastic (and contradictory) terms; Nanook thus emerges as a character created by and for the film in which he appears. But in the face of the camera, Nanook is not a mere "persona"; he is a human being of flesh and blood. The "real" Nanook—the man Flaherty films—is himself a character, a creature of myth and fantasy in the sense that all human beings are, but he is not a textual construct that serves a narrative and holds no further claims upon author or audience.

Insofar as he participated in the making of *Nanook,* the "real" Nanook has a relationship to the camera that is part of his reality, part of the camera's reality, part of the reality being filmed, part of the reality on film, part of the reality of the film. *Nanook* is an expression of real relationships between camera and human subjects, relationships that in turn are expressions of, hence capable of revealing, both the camera and its subjects. Yet Nanook also emerges as a fictional character with no reality apart from the film that creates him. Being filmed has no more reality to Nanook-in-his-fictional-aspect than to a character in a fiction film. But this means that the fictional Nanook has no reality to the camera. (Between a fictional character and a real camera, what real relationship—what relationship capable of expressing, hence revealing, the subject's nature, or the camera's—is possible?)

In a fiction film, the camera's revelations about characters are also revelations about the real people who incarnate them, revelations that express and thus reveal the real relationships between camera and human subjects. The prevailing fiction is that the character, not the actor, is real. What is fictional about a fiction film resides in its fiction that it is only fiction. What is fictional about *Nanook* resides in its fiction that it is not fiction at all. Both exemplify Stanley Cavell's maxim that the only thing that matters in film is that the subject be allowed to reveal itself (Cavell 127). This essay will reflect on three passages—the introductions of Nanook and Nyla; the scene in which the trader, "in deference to the great hunter," explains to Nanook "how the white man cans his voice"; and the thrilling passage in which Nanook, in the act of devouring the walrus he has killed, pauses to confront the camera's gaze—that achieve this revelation and thereby anticipate such issues, which have been central to the documentary tradition.

The Introduction of Nanook and Nyla

Nanook opens with a title: "The mysterious Barren Lands—desolate, boulder-strewn, wind-swept—illimitable spaces which top the world—." This title is followed by two views, evidently taken from a boat, of the sublime, melancholy northern landscape that, on film, is an enduring wonder of *Nanook.* These views testify to the reality of the windswept lands Flaherty's words invoke. They also testify to the title's claim that these lands are "illimitable," "mysterious"—they are as fantastic, mythical, as any our imagination can conjure. The following title asserts that the humans at the center of *Nanook* are as real and fantastic as the lands they inhabit: "The sterility of the soil and the rigor of the climate no other race could survive; yet here, utterly dependent upon animal life, which is their sole source of food, live the most cheerful people in all the world—the fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo." Eskimos, as this title characterizes them, survive by subsisting on animals they kill. They are also fearless heroes who stoically endure rigors "no other race" could survive. Part savage, part hero, they are at once "lower" and "higher" than we. Eskimos are like children, too, the title patronizingly suggests ("lovable," "happy-go-lucky," "the most cheerful people in all the world"). That they also possess the qualities of civilized adults is asserted by the next title: "This picture concerns the life of one Nanook (The Bear), his family and little band of followers, 'Itivimuits' of Hopewell Sound, Northern Ungava, through whose kindliness, faithfulness and patience this film was made."

This title, the first to refer to the film's *dramatis personae,* characterizes the figures to whom it refers, much as a Griffith title might. But Flaherty's title not only posits attributes that define Nanook and his family as characters, it also asserts their existence. To be sure, the opening titles of Griffith's *True Heart Susie* likewise assert the existence of the characters central to the story. But in introducing Susie, the film's protagonist, Griffith's title also names the star who plays her (Lillian Gish), at once positing their identity (as a subject of the camera, Susie is Lillian Gish) and acknowledging their separateness (Susie has no existence apart from *True Heart Susie,* but Gish exists apart from her incarnation in this film, and is capable of being incarnated as any number of characters). Flaherty's title posits character and star as one, like a Rin Tin Tin or Lassie. Nanook exists, it declares; his relationship to the camera is a condition of the film's existence.

By acknowledging that the film was made through the "kindliness, faithfulness and patience" of Nanook and his family, this title's author is also declaring the reality of his acts of filming them, the reality of his own existence and that of his camera in the world of the film. The title says, in effect, "Nanook and his family exist, and thanks to their kindliness, faithfulness and patience I was able to film them." (If Nanook were really the mythical figure of Flaherty's titles—part primitive savage, part hero, part innocent child, part sage—who would the filmmaker be, mythically, to film him?)

It may be taken to be a definitive feature of documentaries that they make truth-claims about the world, claims subject to being tested not only against the testimony of the camera, as is the case with all films, but also against reality as we may know it independently of that testimony. For example, if "The hunting ground of Nanook and his followers is a little kingdom in size—nearly as large as England, yet occupied by less than three hundred souls" were a title in a conventional documentary, we would take it to be making a factual claim about the real world. (We would also take it to be implying that the other Eskimo men who are sometimes on view but never identified by name are in reality what could be called "followers" of Nanook. Throughout the film, the titles have a tendency to inflate Nanook's importance—he is the "chief," the greatest hunter in all Ungava; others are merely his followers—as if such credentials validate the camera's attention to him.) If it were a title in a fiction film, we would take it to posit a fictional premise, one we are called upon to accept for the sake of the narrative, but whose truth or falsity outside of the narrative does not matter to the film.

By this criterion, *Nanook* seems poised between documentary and fiction. When Flaherty presents this title immediately preceding his introduction of Nanook, we take it that it makes a factual claim. But we are also called upon to accept it as a premise of the film's story; whether in fact it is true or false is inconsequential. In *Nanook,* as we have suggested, the only "fact" of consequence is that Nanook and his family really participated in making the film. This fact is acknowledged by the way Flaherty effects Nanook's introduction. He follows his next title (the charmingly Griffith-like "Chief of the 'Itivimuits' and as a great hunter famous through all Ungava—Nanook, The Bear") with our first view of its star/protagonist, a medium close-up sustained

for ten seconds. Within this frame, Nanook looks down, then up, without meeting the camera's gaze.

Having characterized his protagonist as a "great hunter," Flaherty might be expected to show Nanook for the first time performing some hunting-related act. Rather, when we first view Nanook he is doing nothing—nothing, that is, apart from being viewed, allowing himself to be viewed, by the camera. He does not seem to be presenting himself theatrically to the camera, but neither does he seem unaware of its presence. The frontality of the framing as well as the camera's close proximity, combined with the fact that he is engaged in no activity other than being viewed, reinforce our impression that it takes an effort for him not to look at the camera; for whatever reasons, he is avoiding the camera's gaze. And they also reinforce our impression that we do not know his reasons, that they remain private. (For all we know, Nanook avoids the camera because Flaherty, for his own private reasons, directed him to do so. But then Nanook also has private reasons for accepting Flaherty's direction.)

In his initial encounter with the camera, Nanook does not flash the "cheerful" smile we might expect of an exemplar of a "happy-go-lucky" race, but neither does he confront the camera with the threatening gaze we might expect of a "great hunter." Seeming reserved, guarded, he does not express his feelings about, or to, the camera whose scrutiny he endures. Or perhaps his evident reserve is Nanook's expression of how he feels, at this moment, about being filmed.

Contrast our first view of Nyla. The Griffith-like title "Nyla—The Smiling One" is followed by a shot of Nanook's young wife, smiling radiantly as she talks to someone offscreen. Engaged in a conversation that absorbs her, she seems not at all self-conscious in the presence of Flaherty's camera (as we have seen, Nanook is absorbed in no such activity when we first view him). The camera frames Nanook head-on, forcing him to choose between looking at it or making an effort not to. Framing Nyla obliquely, the camera assumes a less provocative position. Unthreatened by a camera from which she withholds no intimacies, Nyla appears open, warm, accepting of the condition of being filmed, in contrast to the guarded Nanook, whose relationship to the camera, when he is introduced to us, appears much more tense.

Our initial views of Nanook and Nyla make no assertions about them, do not attribute characteristics to them the way the titles that precede them do. These views simply say, in effect, "This is Nanook as the camera views him" and "This is Nyla as the camera views her." If Nanook and Nyla are nonetheless characterized by these views, as indeed they are, it is only through what these views reveal about these subjects, through what is revealed by their being placed on view, by their placing themselves on view, within these frames.

Having declared them to be real people, not fictional characters, and having acknowledged the reality of the camera in their world, Flaherty authorizes us to take these initial views of Nanook and Nyla (and by extension all our subsequent views of them) as "documenting" their encounters with a camera that was really in their presence. (This is not to deny that Flaherty may have told Nanook and Nyla how to relate to the camera, that he staged these encounters, in effect. The crucial claim is that these encounters are real, not that they are spontaneous.) By contrast, when Griffith presents us with our first view of a character, we are not authorized to take it as "documenting" a real encounter between camera and subject. As we have said, in a fiction film the prevailing fiction is that the character, not the actress, is real, hence that there is no real encounter between camera and subject, for the camera that films the actress has no reality within the character's world.

To act as if she is the character she is playing, an actress must act as if no camera is in her presence. But how is it possible for the actress to have a real relationship with the camera, a relationship through which a character is capable of being revealed? For the character to act as if no camera is present, there is no reality that must be denied. But for the actress to act as if no camera is present, she must deny the reality of the camera in her presence. To deny this camera's reality, she must acknowledge its presence in a particular way. And if the camera is to sustain the fiction that the character is real, it must relate to the actress in a particular way, must acknowledge her presence and deny her reality.

A camera is a physical object; a dog can acknowledge its presence by licking it. But when a camera is filming, it is no ordinary object. Through its presence, viewers who are "really" absent are also magically present; in the presence of a camera, what is absent is also present, what is present is also absent. What makes it possible for a maker of fiction films to use the camera in a way that acknowledges an actress's presence even as it denies her reality is the fact of human life that real people are also characters, imaginary creatures of fantasy and myth, even as they are actors capable of becoming who they are imagined to be. What makes it possible, in a fiction film, for an actress to acknowledge the presence of the camera even as she denies its reality is the equally fundamental condition of the medium of film that the reality of the camera's presence is also the reality of its absence, the absence of its reality.

Nanook's and Nyla's ways of relating to Flaherty's camera, their ways of acknowledging the reality of its presence, are also ways of acknowledging the absence that presence is capable of projecting. They, too, recognize what the camera is, in other words; their recognition is revealed to, and by, the camera. By acknowledging that his film could not have been made without their active participation, the filmmaker credits the camera's subjects with this recognition, acknowledges their acknowledgment of his acts of filming.

This is Flaherty at his most progressive. Far more disquieting is the

passage that chronicles Nanook's visit to the "trade post of the white man," a passage that seems to be designed to deny that Nanook and his family are capable of participating as equals in the making of *Nanook*.

The Visit to the "Trade Post of the White Man"

After effecting the introductions of Nanook and Nyla, Flaherty establishes the narrative present by the title "Nanook comes to prepare for the summer journey down river to the trade post of the white man and to the salmon and walrus fishing grounds at sea," followed by a shot of Nanook paddling a kayak.

Now located spatially and temporally within the narrative world, Nanook is reintroduced by a title ("Nanook . . ."). Then we see Nanook pulling one family member after another out of the kayak, which seems so impossibly small to contain so many people that the effect is comic. Each emerging family member is named by a title—the child "Allee"; "Nyla," who has already been introduced to us; the baby "Cunayou"; and finally, "Comock," the puppy. (This joking association between baby and puppy first sounds what will become a major theme in the film, which repeatedly associates Eskimos with animals.)

The following passage presents the family's preparations for the "long trek" to the "trade post of the white man" and then the journey itself. Consisting of such titles as "This is the way Nanook uses moss for fuel" and "The kyak's [*sic*] fragile frame must be covered with sealskins before the journey begins" paired with shots that serve as illustrations of the practices to which they refer, this is one of the film's most documentary-like passages. It is also one of the most impersonal. We view Nanook "using moss for fuel," for example, but it could be any Eskimo.

This passage culminates in a spectacular image of men carrying a huge crate across the foreground of a frame dominated by a high wall of hanging pelts, too numerous to count, framed perfectly frontally in the background, blocking out the sky. This is at once a glorious display of nature's bounty and appalling evidence of the slaughter exploited by the "white trader" (that is, the fur trade that sponsors Flaherty's film). By following this image with the title "Nanook's hunt for the year, apart from fox seal and walrus, numbered seven great polar bears, which in hand to hand encounters he killed with nothing more formidable than his harpoon," Flaherty retroactively transforms it from an illustration of the Eskimo way of life—actually, what it illustrates is the modern world's catastrophic intervention in that way of life—into a revelation of Nanook's individual prowess as a "great hunter."

But, again, Flaherty's next title implies that his larger-than-life hero is also an innocent child: "With pelts of the Arctic fox and polar bear Nanook

barters for knives and beads and bright colored candy from the trader's precious store." This is followed by a shot of Nanook showing pelts to the "white trader."

In most of the shots that follow, the trader remains offscreen. Even when visible within the frame, as in this shot, he is filmed differently from Nanook. Indeed, the trader is framed in a way that identifies him less with the camera's subject than with the camera (or the filmmaker behind the camera). According to the title, Nanook is displaying this pelt to the trader, but he is really—at least he is also—displaying it to the camera. This underscores our impression that the filmmaker is employing the trader as a kind of stand-in.

The next title ("Nanook proudly displays his young 'huskies,' the finest dog flesh in all the country round") is followed by a shot of Nanook plopping a playful puppy on the ground, then by a close-up of said puppy. This is followed by the title "Nyla, not to be outdone, displays her young husky, too—one Rainbow, less than four months old," then by a shot of her baby, hugging the puppy from the previous shot.

Whether "Rainbow" is the baby's name or the puppy's is not clear, but it could not be clearer that the film is linking baby and puppy, reasserting the association between Nanook's family and animals (dogs, wolves, walruses). This analogy at once reduces Eskimos to animals and at least ironically elevates animals to the level of humans (dogs, too, are perfectly capable of showing off). In any case, this shot is followed by a longer one in which two puppies are beside the baby in the frame. The baby keeps petting the puppy on the left, but Nyla clearly wants her child to pet the other as well, perhaps to appear not to love one more than the other. In this shot, Nyla's pride in her child is evident, as is her wish to show the baby off to advantage. Obviously, Nyla is exhibiting her baby to the camera, but Flaherty's titles implicitly deny this by asserting that she is showing her baby off to the trader. It is as if Flaherty employs the trader as his own stand-in so as to bracket his original claim that Nanook and Nyla are participants in the act of filming. They are absorbed in an encounter with the trader, the titles imply, *rather than* collaborating with the filmmaker.

This strategy becomes more pointed, and more disquieting, following the condescending title "In deference to Nanook, the great hunter, the trader entertains and attempts to explain the principle of the gramophone—how the white man 'cans' his voice." In the ensuing shots, we see Nanook, bending forward, staring at the phonograph as the trader—again, the framing links him with the filmmaker behind the camera—cranks it up. Nanook half gets up, peers at the machine, and laughs, directing a big, broad grin first to the trader then to the camera. Nanook puts his ear to the phonograph as the trader cranks it again, gives the camera another look, points to the mechanism at the base of the phonograph, then looks at the trader, who has removed the record and now hands it to him. Nanook peers at it and then—puts it in his mouth and

bites it! He looks thoughtfully at the trader, bites the record again, looks up to communicate something to him, takes two bites, then turns to the trader yet again. They are conversing as the image fades out.

Witnessing all this, we have a strong sense that the trader and the filmmaker—two "white men"—have conspired to expose the incredible naivete of this "great hunter" who does not even comprehend "how the white man 'cans' his voice." The clincher is when Nanook bites the record, tastes it, in an effort to determine what it is. The moment has a comical edge to it because in our culture even a man who had never seen a record would not try to figure out what it was by putting it in his mouth and biting it; only a baby would do that—or a dog. But a man in Nanook's culture cannot survive without every day making discriminations that way. Nanook's gesture really reveals a cultural difference, a difference between his culture and that of the "white man," not a difference between having and not having a culture, between being civilized and being a primitive savage bound to a natural order whose only law is "eat or be eaten," as Flaherty's title would have us believe.

If we laugh at Nanook at this moment, as Flaherty's titles invite us to do, if we assume that this gesture reveals Nanook to be more of a child, or more of an animal, than we are, that is a mark of our naivete, not his. Surely, when Nanook bites the record, he is confirming his own provisional hypothesis that this object is not, and does not literally contain, a living thing—the "canned" voice is not "in" the record the way the seal is "in" the as-yet-uncarved ivory, for example, or the way a man's soul is "in" his body (or the way Nanook-on-film is "in" the man Flaherty films). When Nanook first hears the "canned" voice, he breaks into a grin, amused that the "canned" voice is not a profound mystery but only a special effect, as it were. (Nanook has no way of knowing—has Flaherty?—the profound threat the white man's soulless technology poses to his form of life.)

Nanook of the North: In the trading post, Flaherty and the trader conspire to expose the naivete of Nanook.

Nanook's laugh, addressed to the trader and then to the camera, registers his pleasure and at the same time his impulse to share his pleasure with others. However condescending the title may have been that introduced Nanook as lovably "cheerful," through his relationship to the camera he now reveals himself to be a man of good cheer. Nanook's cheerfulness is revealed to be an expression of a winning sense of humor which, in combination with the admirable generosity of spirit that is also revealed at this moment, makes him "lovable" indeed—worthy of Flaherty's love, and ours. What makes Flaherty seem so unlovable in this passage is that his titles seem to be betraying his subjects—and himself—by disavowing precisely what has been revealed to, and by, his own camera.

If Nanook is too naive to comprehend what a phonograph is, as Flaherty's title implies, he must be unable to comprehend what a camera is, what Flaherty is doing when he films him. This implication stands in conflict with the claim, crucial to *Nanook* as a whole, that Nanook and his family are active collaborators in the making of the film. (What gives a filmmaker the right to film the private lives of human subjects? We want to say: What is required is the subject's consent. If a subject does not comprehend what the camera is, how can that subject give consent? How can a subject ever give consent, how can anything a subject says or does count as consent, if it is a condition of the film medium that one cannot know in advance—in advance of viewing the footage that results, that is—what revelations are fated to emerge from a particular encounter with the camera?)

When he suggests that Nanook does not know what the camera is, Flaherty is not innocently revealing his own naivete, I take it. What he is denying is something he knows, not something he simply fails to know, about his subject, about himself. This cannot be doubted, first, because Flaherty processed his footage on location and showed the dailies to Nanook; by the time he had this encounter with the phonograph, Nanook had already become quite familiar with the film image. Second, because Nanook acknowledges this in its introductory titles and also in the passage, late in the film, in which he

carves a window for his new igloo, at the same time revealing himself to Flaherty's waiting camera, waving at it with another warm grin. Self-evidently, the business with the window was set up by Flaherty and Nanook working in tandem. They conspired to play a practical joke on the film's audience (the way, within the narrative, Flaherty and the trader earlier make Nanook the butt of a joke). When he grins at the camera through his new window, we cannot doubt that Nanook understands no less than Flaherty (but also no more than Flaherty) what a camera is. We cannot doubt that Nanook understands that a film—this film—is made to be viewed, that the camera filming him not only stands in for the filmmaker in his presence, but also for viewers who are absent.

In the comic business that follows Nanook's encounter with the phonograph, Flaherty's presentation reveals a painfully evident element of exploitation. The trader "banquets" Nanook's children with sea biscuits and lard, but Allegoo "indulges to excess," and so the trader "sends for—castor oil!" He may be justified in making the boy swallow this unpleasant medicine, but the trader is anything but innocent. He has plied the boy with sea biscuits and lard, after all. More seriously, he is the representative of the fur trade that exploits Nanook's prowess as a hunter, tempts or compels him to kill creatures whose flesh his family does not need to consume in order to survive. Flaherty, too, is anything but innocent. He conspires with the trader. And in his role as filmmaker, he exploits the boy's misfortune, which gives rise to one of the film's most magical, yet most compromised, moments. When the boy takes his medicine, he makes a face at the trader, then addresses to the camera a look so beseechingly woeful we can hardly refrain from laughing.

Almost as if caused by this memorable moment (by the boy's overindulgence of his animal appetite? by the trader's, or the filmmaker's, exploitation of the boy's innocence?), there is a change in the tone of the film, signaled by the title "Wandering ice drifts in from the sea and locks up a hundred miles of coast. Though Nanook's band, already on the thin edge of starvation, is unable to move, Nanook, great hunter that he is. . . ." The boy's overeating is comical, but at another level it is not funny, as this title acknowledges. The boy and his family are "already on the thin edge of starvation," and what is at issue, it is now being made clear, is whether Nanook's prowess as a hunter will enable him to stave off the threat that looms over his family.

The Walrus Hunt

To acknowledge his subjects' humanity, a filmmaker must acknowledge the revelations that emerge through their encounters with the camera. Flaherty at his most progressive proves willing to do so. But *Nanook* also reveals his guilty impulse to deny his human bond with his subjects, to disavow what is

revealed by, and to, his camera. Yet Flaherty's impulse to deny commonality with Nanook and his family itself reveals their commonality. For the filmmaker, no less than his "primitive" subjects, belongs to a natural order whose only law is "eat or be eaten." Flaherty's weapon is a camera, not a harpoon, but he, too, is a "great hunter." Nanook and his family are his prey, vulnerable to being exposed to his camera, exposed by his camera, in all their vulnerability. All filming has a violent aspect. This does not mean that filming is never justified, only that it always needs to be justified, that it is never innocent. Nanook is justified in hunting the walrus; his family needs to eat to survive. Is Flaherty justified in filming the hunt?

The passage that most pointedly links filming and killing, the walrus hunt, begins with the title, "For days there is no food. Then one of Nanook's look-outs comes in with news of walrus on a far off island. Excitement reigns, for walrus in their eyes spells fortune." In nine shots, we view Nanook and his "brother fishermen" gathering near a family of walruses bobbing in the sea. "With the discovery of a group asleep on shore," the next title reads, "the suspense begins." The following shots present the group of walruses, including the "sentinel" ("A 'sentinel' is always on watch," a title explains, "for, while walrus are ferocious in water, they are helpless on land"); the hunters, including Nanook; and a shot with walruses in the background and a hunter—Nanook?—creeping toward them in the foreground. Within this last frame, the sentinel suddenly rises and, followed by the other walruses, hurriedly lumbers toward the safety of the water. Nanook runs after them, followed by the other men who enter and rush through the frame. Then shots of the hunters tugging on a rope are alternated with shots of walruses bobbing in the waves, including the harpooned one.

The title "While the angered herd snorts defiance, the mate of the harpooned walrus comes to the rescue—attempts to lock horns and pull the captive free" is followed by a view purporting to show this. This shot is followed by the poignant title "Rolling the dead quarry from the undertow," then a series of shots in which Nanook and a fellow hunter flip the dead walrus over like a side of beef, culminating in a final vision of the walrus, now dead (and *alone* in death), displayed for the camera.

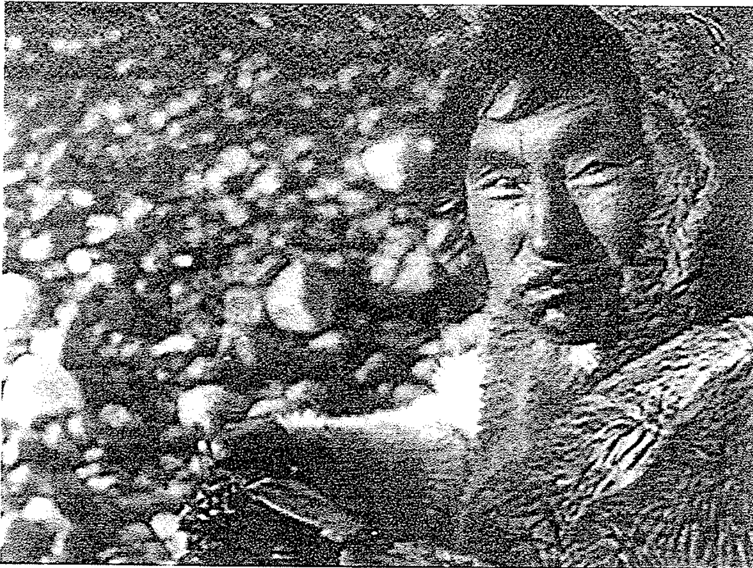
What follows is a frontal medium shot of Nanook sharpening his knife, his attention fixed on what he is doing, until he suddenly looks up with a grin, as if to show off his sharp blade to the camera. Nanook leans into this frame, his face now hidden from view, and places his knife blade against the base of the walrus's neck. He starts slicing the beast's flesh, his body blocking the bloody carcass from view. The title "They do not wait until the kill is transported to camp, for they cannot restrain the pangs of hunger" is followed by a shot of three hunters standing in long shot, each eating still warm flesh. Nanook is in this grouping, his knife in clear view. Then there is a cut to a

medium closeup of Nanook, framed almost in profile, slicing off flesh, tearing meat with his teeth, chewing.

We feel we are glimpsing humanity shorn of its thin veneer of civilization, and are repelled and fascinated by this vision. Like a cat interrupted devouring a bird, Nanook looks up. His gaze locks with the camera's. For the only time in the film, Nanook seems to view the camera as a threatening intruder—a competing hunter or, perhaps, a lowly scavenger. And his gaze, too, is threatening, as if this savage predator, his thirst for blood unsated, might next attack the camera (Flaherty, us).

When he looks up at the camera at this moment, Nanook is not sharing his pleasure, as he elsewhere does when addressing the camera. There is a fierceness to his look, as if this "great hunter" is warning that he will tolerate the camera's presence only if it keeps its distance. He is not denying his relationship to the camera, he is declaring that it has a limit, that this limit must be respected, and that it has now been reached.

And Flaherty acknowledges this limit. When Nanook looks down, takes another bite of walrus flesh, and licks the blood off his knife blade, completely absorbed now in sating his hunger, the camera does not linger on him. Rather—I find this the most thrilling moment in the film—Flaherty cuts to a



Nanook of the North: Nanook's look suggests that the limit of his relationship to the camera has been reached.

view of the sea. We can barely discern the members of the walrus family, heads still bobbing in the surf close to shore, as they wait for the father, himself a "great hunter," who is fated not to return.

Flaherty's gesture of cutting to the walrus family does not feel like a reproach to Nanook, but rather an homage to this "great hunter" and to the "great hunter" he has killed. Nanook is a beast of prey, as Flaherty is; his kinship with the slain animal, and with the filmmaker, has been revealed to, and by, the camera. But the walrus family, too, is revealed to possess the "kindness, faithfulness and patience" Flaherty has recognized as attributes of Nanook's family. If there is an element of reproach in Flaherty's gesture, as surely there is, it is addressed not to Nanook but to himself insofar as he may have failed always to acknowledge his bond with his subjects, always to remember that no life is a jest, that filming is a sacred trust.

Flaherty follows the haunting shot of the forlorn walrus survivors with the title "Winter . . . ," then with two memorable views of swirling snow blowing like smoke over the desolate landscape into the unfathomable depths of the frame. These two shots, the film's most sublime visions of the "Barren Lands" in which Nanook and his family struggle against starvation, are in turn followed by a title whose language rises to the poetic level of the camera's revelations: "Long nights—the wail of the wind—short, bitter days—snow smoking fields of sea and plain—the brass ball of the sun a mockery in the sky—the mercury near bottom and staying there days and days and days." This is not the Griffith-like purple prose of so many Flaherty titles, nor the words of an impersonal, godlike authority who claims to stand above or outside the world of the film, but words "spoken," almost confessionally, by a human being who is acknowledging that he has lived through winters like this that feel like dark nights of the soul that will never end.

This passage signals a more somber mood, as winter's arrival intensifies the threat of starvation. It is as if Nanook's killing of the walrus, or Flaherty's filming of the killing, "causes" the onset of winter (the way Lear's rage "causes" the tempest, or the way Allegoo's overeating "causes" the wandering ice to drift in from the sea, occasioning the film's first invocation of the threat of starvation).

The remainder of *Nanook* is not unrelentingly somber, however. There is the aforementioned comic interlude in which Nanook and his family build an igloo. This is followed by the tenderest passage in the film, in which the family awakens the next morning, having spent the night snug and happy under one big sealskin blanket.

But even in this idyllic passage, there are reminders of the looming threat. Nanook has to make a separate igloo for the puppies to keep them "warm all night and safe from the hungry jaws of their big brothers." These puppies, cute and innocent as little Cunayou and Allegoo, have the blood of wolves in their veins; they will grow up to become beasts so savage they will

eat their own kind when the "blood lust" is upon them, as Nanook's boys will grow up to be "great hunters" like their father.

When Nanook hunts " 'Ogjuk'—the big seal," the scent of flesh awakens in his "master dog" the "blood lust of the wolf—his forebear." In another Shakespearean transition, the resulting dogfight causes "a dangerous delay. . . . By the time the team is straightened out, a threatening 'drifter' drives in from the north. . . . Almost perishing from the icy blasts and unable to reach their own snowhouse, the little family is driven to take refuge in a deserted igloo. . . . The shrill piping of the wind, the rasp and hiss of driving snow, the mournful wolf howls of Nanook's master dog typify the melancholy spirit of the North."

Astonishingly, the film ends with a series of views of the dogs outside, hunkered down in the blizzard, alternated with intimate views of the family slipping under the sealskin blanket and drifting off to sleep. A shot of Nanook's solitary "master dog," his "blood lust" long since abated, faithfully and patiently enduring the cold, is followed by a view of the sleeping family, and then a final closeup of Nanook in bed, safe for the duration of *this* night.

In a Griffith film, the machinations of villains—figures of evil incarnate—threaten dire consequences. In *Nanook,* there are no villains: the threat to Nanook's family comes from within nature. What is threatened is not a fate worse than death but is death itself, a part of nature. And what saves the human community from this threat, or grants them a reprieve, is part of nature, too (the ice of the igloo that provides shelter from the storm, the sealskin blanket, the bodily warmth of huddled human animals). The dog, man's best friend, has wolf's blood in his veins; the "blood lust" in his nature is what causes the near-catastrophe. Nanook is not exempt from "blood lust"; neither is Flaherty, and neither are we. But we humans also share the dog's capacity for "kindliness, faithfulness and patience." What is noble and savage, in human nature as everywhere in nature, are aspects of the sublime and beautiful reality that is *Nanook*'s subject. But this reality—nature itself—is facing a mortal threat that cannot be said to come from within nature, although it cannot exist apart from nature. *Nanook* is torn between acknowledging and denying this threat, in which the film itself is implicated.

André Bazin believed it was the wish for the world re-created in its own image that gave rise to the emergence of film, hence that, starting with the Lumière films, a realist strand runs the length of film history (21). In *The World Viewed,* Cavell gave Bazin's idea a crucial twist by observing that it is precisely because film's material basis is the projection of reality that the medium is capable of rendering the fantastic and mythical as readily as the realistic. Reality plays an essential role in all films, but in no film does reality simply play the role of being documented. Reality is transformed or transfigured when the world reveals itself on film. Then, too, reality itself, in human experience, is already stamped by fantasy and myth.

Documentaries are not inherently more truthful than other films. Yet it does not follow that documentaries, to be truthful, must repudiate the aspiration of revealing reality. What particular films reveal (or fail to reveal) about reality, how they achieve (or fail to achieve) those revelations, and what they acknowledge (or fail to acknowledge) about the revelations they do achieve, are questions best addressed by close critical readings which illuminate what separates documentaries from fiction films without denying what they have in common: the medium of film.

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