

***Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922)**

Nanook of the North: A Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic was the first film of American documentary pioneer Robert Flaherty (1884-1951). Coming as it did less than a decade after the overtly racist silent film milestone *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915), Flaherty's film, funded by the French fur company Revillon Frères and distributed by Pathé, presented a stark contrast: a humanistic, poignant, dramatic, starkly beautiful, and sympathetic look at an Inuit hunter's struggle to survive in an inhospitable environment. Described by film historian David A. Cook as "the first sustained encounter between the civilized world and the Eskimo, outside of professional ethnographic circles" (*A History of Narrative Film*, 4th Edition, 191), *Nanook* was made for \$50,000 and was a box-office success.

Flaherty knew a great deal about his subject from long service in the far north as a businessman and engineer, but *Nanook*, like many of the great documentaries, was anything but an exact record. *Nanook's* family in the film, for example, is a fictional construct. The dramatic capture of a seal, killed by *Nanook* through a breathing hole in the ice, was, in fact, staged for the camera. The suspenseful ending, in which *Nanook* struggles to find life-saving shelter, was completely staged. (In reality, *Nanook* would indeed die of starvation two years after the film's completion.) A natural storyteller but a not so authentic anthropologist, Flaherty was determined to craft his tale of a noble savage even if he had to lie to tell the truth as he perceived it.

Nanook nevertheless captures, with admiration and without condescension, a multitude of valid and engaging ethnographic moments in the lives of his subjects: *Nanook's* "son," suffering from a stomach-ache, actually enjoying the taste of castor oil; *Nanook's* rapid construction of an igloo, complete with an ice window, before our very eyes (though one wall of the bigger-than-life-sized enclosure was left unfinished to allow for proper lighting and camera access); the collective vanquishing of a two-ton walrus; the "family" settling down for a night's sleep, naked, wrapped in furs. Silent film, theorist Béla Balázs argued in his *Theory of Film*, specialized in the art of "physiognomy": the ability to simultaneously reveal the wonder of the face and the inner workings of the soul. *Nanook* is full of faces: the rich countenance of *Nanook* himself, the extraordinary muzzles of his team of huskies, the face of nature itself.

The Library of Congress has designated *Nanook* a "culturally significant" work worthy of preservation in The National Film Registry.

Further Reading

Barsam, Richard Meran. *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1988.

Flaherty, Robert J. "How I Filmed *Nanook of the North*: Adventures with the Eskimos to Get Pictures of Their Home Life and Their Battles with Nature to Get Food. The Walrus Fight." http://www.cinemaweb.com/silentfilm/bookshelf/23_rf1_2.htm