

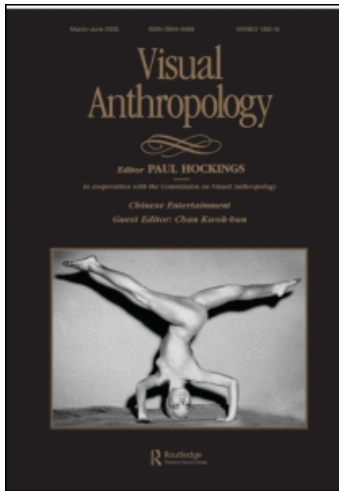
This article was downloaded by: [University of Aberdeen]

On: 16 April 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 773500141]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Visual Anthropology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713654067>

### *Nanook of the North as Primal Drama*

Alan Marcus <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Drama, University of Manchester, England

To cite this Article Marcus, Alan(2006) 'Nanook of the North as Primal Drama', Visual Anthropology, 19: 3, 201 – 222

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/08949460600656543

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08949460600656543>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## *Nanook of the North* as Primal Drama

Alan Marcus

The approach Robert Flaherty took to devise and shape his classic film, *Nanook of the North* [1922], served to codify the emergence of a new film genre, which I have defined in this article as *primal drama*. The film's popular reception and iconic status are assessed in terms of its precursors and the way it engages with themes associated with evolutionary theory, the role of space and place, and the historical context in which it was made. In analysing the film, I seek to interrelate film studies texts and archival research with literature on behavioral psychology, genetics, and cultural geography.

### IN SEARCH OF A GENRE

Robert Flaherty's (1884–1951) reputation is founded on the impact of a handful of films. The first and most renowned of these, *Nanook of the North* [1922], was filmed in an Inuit community in the Canadian Arctic, and has recently been re-released on DVD (Criterion Collection). Flaherty's film provided an entirely new prototype of methodological practice and narrative structure. To this day, few mainstream filmmakers have braved Flaherty's approach, though many have been influenced by his style, as I explore in a forthcoming study, *The Documentary Image: Representations of Realism*. In this article I wish to reconsider the nature of his filmic methodology, and the role of *Nanook of the North* as an important and early example of a new film genre which I refer to here as *primal drama*. This article will reflect on the practices and themes which feature in this film and define its structure as a primal drama. My assessment of the making of the film draws in part on fieldwork I conducted in the Inuit community, Inukjuak, in Arctic Quebec, where the film was shot, and earlier published studies which have arisen from this work [Marcus 1992, 1995].

In the process of analyzing the film's appeal of "looking for the Other" [Kaplan 1997], I am responding to Browne's [1998] request in *Refiguring American Film Genres* that we reconsider the perimeters which have come to define traditional genres. Braudy [1998: 278] has loosely referred to "the genre of nature" as films which define "the primitive essence of what it means to be human." There is now a wide body of literature which examines issues of Otherness and the representation of ethnicity encased in literary and filmic forms [such as Mason 1990;

---

ALAN MARCUS is Director of the Centre for Screen Studies in the Department of Drama at the University of Manchester in England. His publications include *Out in the Cold* [1992] and *Relocating Eden: the Image and Politics of Inuit Exile in the Canadian Arctic* [1995]. E-mail: alan.marcus@man.ac.uk

Friedman 1991; Toplin 1993; Shohat and Stam 1994; Rony 1996; Kaplan 1997; Bernstein and Studlar 1997; Willis 1997]. While the genre I term “primal drama” often features representations of the Other as its subject, it does so in an attempt to present its core theme—that of man’s relationship with nature and his primal instinct for survival. In turn, the primal drama serves as a model for analysing ways of presenting human behavior as perceived at the time of the film’s conception.

For over three million years our ancestors lived on the East African savannah and evolved in small kin-based groups. Robert Winston has suggested that we still retain a “savannah psychology,” rooted in survival strategies linked to a particular type of place and social setting and ill-adapted to the large, complex society we live in today [Winston 2002: 41]. One of the principal attractions of a primal drama may indeed be that it allows us to re-engage with the natural world and with those real or imagined indigenous peoples inhabiting it, so that we might better understand the dichotomy between an urbanized lifestyle and the primal instincts shaped by our forbearers. Human lives, observes Tuan [1977: 54], are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom. This perception is underscored in the way we watch Nanook construct his home and move back and forth between the comfort of an enclosed space and the adventure and challenges of open spaces. Primal narratives are necessarily reductive to permit the viewer to confront issues of survival, sexuality, self-sufficiency, exotic natural environments, and both the appeal and the threat of the Other. These salient themes comprise the points of enquiry this article will address through the cinematic and social prism of Flaherty’s *Nanook* and its paradigmatic construct as a primal drama.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF NANOOK

To some extent, Flaherty’s film resists classification precisely because the documentary did not yet exist as an identifiable genre in the early 1920s. There was already a practice of making *actualités* and travelogues, and Flaherty had experimented with a travelogue style in an earlier attempt to make a film in the north. Descriptions of his previous efforts suggest a parallel to the Edward Curtis film, *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* [1914], on the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island. This has been referred to by some as the first full-length documentary motion picture of native North Americans [Holm and Quimby 1980], and by others as a crude melodrama [Winston 1995: 9]. In fact, Flaherty met Curtis in 1915 and viewed his film before going north [Danzker 1980: 68].

As Holm and Quimby [1980: 29–30] have noted, there are a number of formulative links between the two filmmakers worth highlighting. Both used photography to document indigenous peoples in the Canadian North before making films about them. Curtis’ work appeared first, though Flaherty’s received a larger audience. Each man quickly followed the release of the films with an illustrated book of their experiences. Curtis published the book version of *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* in 1915, and Flaherty’s writing appeared under the title *My Eskimo*

*Friends: 'Nanook of the North'* in 1924. Curtis is remembered now more for his photographs and Flaherty for his films.

Curtis' film was advertised as "a drama of primitive life on the shores of the North Pacific" [Holm and Quimby 1980: 15]. Although it received good reviews, the film soon disappeared from distribution. When Flaherty viewed his own first efforts to make an "ethnographic travelogue" film of the Inuit in 1916, he found fault with its lack of narrative and absence of central characters. "It was boring," he later insisted [Flaherty 1950]. "I had learned to explore," yet, "I had not learned to reveal" [cited in Flaherty 1972: 13]. After he accidentally destroyed the negative, Flaherty set out again to make a film about the indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic, but this time with an essential difference. He was going to ensure that his "drama of primitive life" was sufficiently dramatic, as well as offering memorable scenes of an exotic land and its people.

Flaherty's film is significant for a number of reasons, and chief among these is the methodological practice he pioneered. In order to explore the theme of survival, Flaherty was not content with the praxis of hiring actors and shooting on a set. Rather he took his camera to a distant environment and trained an indigenous cast of non-actors and technicians to assist him in crafting the narrative and devising scenes closely drawn from their personal experiences. The character Nanook supplies a binary role, both as an indigenous person acting out scenes from everyday life, and as proto-male upon whom a Western audience might map their own conceptions about difference and strategies for survival. Torgovnick [1991: 8] in *Gone Primitive* observes, "to study the primitive is thus to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world," reinforcing Malinowski's [1962: 126] view that "the primitive mind" is "the human mind as we find it universally." One of the reasons for the film's robust international reception was not just the novelty of seeing a group of people living in a harsh environment, but also the universality of the film's role as a commentary on human nature. "Our image of the Other," asserts Toren [1991: 277], "is formed over and against our image of self and vice versa." And, as Hiller [1991: 11] explains, "all known human societies seem to formulate ideas of the Other in order to define and legitimate their own social boundaries and individual identities." This appropriation and identification process has particular relevance with regard to *Nanook of the North*, for, according to Fienup-Riordan [1990: xix], "we have modelled our image of Eskimos, perhaps more than that of any other people, on an idealized image of ourselves."

Flaherty decided to focus on an individual family, and while they would be given stage names and direction, they would also play an integral role in the planning and execution of the picture. This venture was to be a legitimate act of collaboration between the filmmaker and his subjects. The film would also have a stronger narrative structure than his 1916 film, involving a series of linked episodes. This new approach aptly concurs with Nichols' [1986: 114] view that the documentary "operates in the crease between life as lived and life as narrativised." Stylistically, *Nanook of the North* might be considered a "docu-drama" or even a neo-realist work. An original advertisement for the film enticingly announces: "a story of life and love in the actual Arctic" [Fig. 1]. Like the Italian neo-realist films to be made in the 1940s, Flaherty used local non-actors and shot

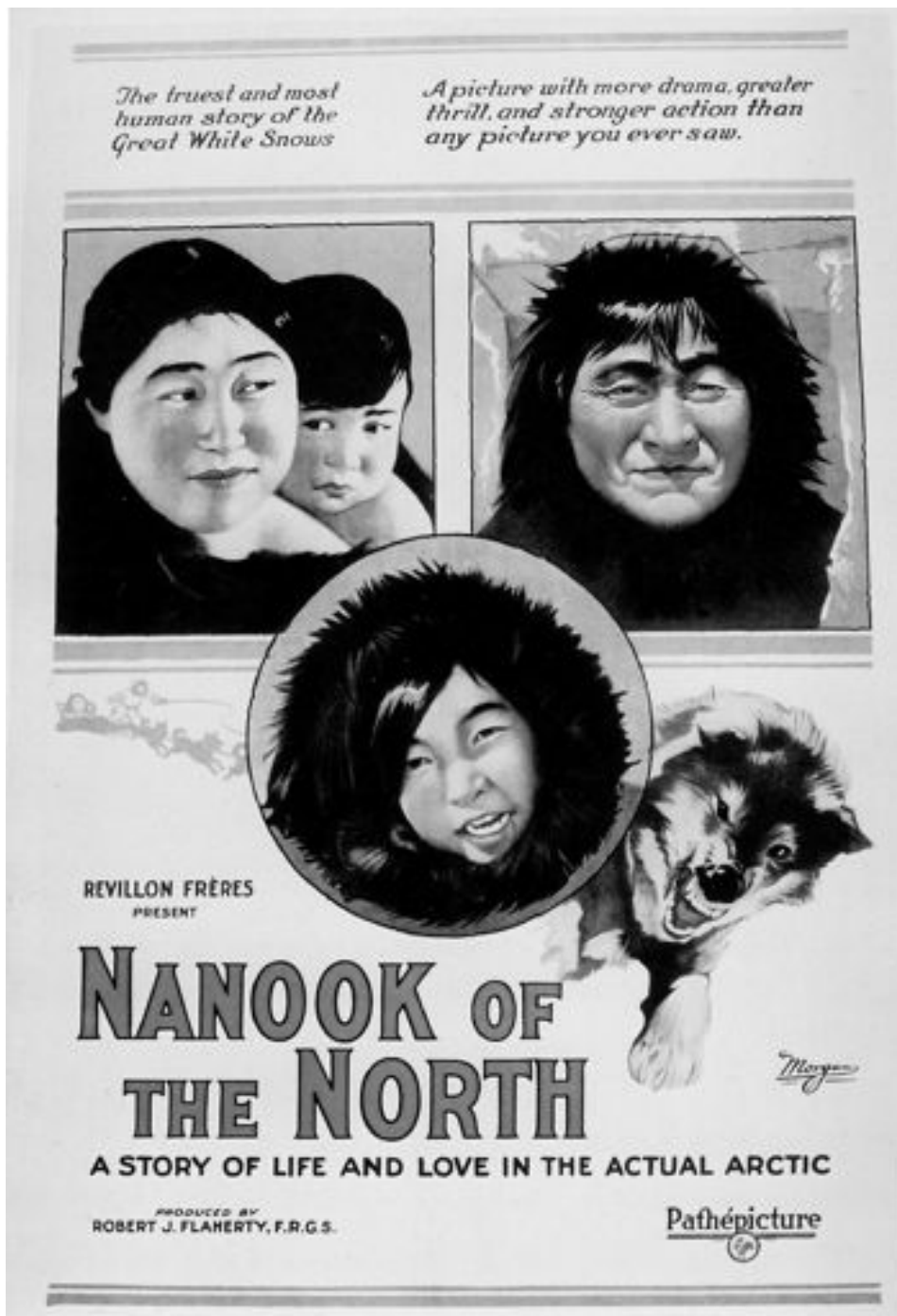


Figure 1 Nanook of the North poster, 1922. (Credit: Pathé Pictures)

on location where the story actually takes place; though one could argue that, unlike Italian neo-realism, there does not appear to be a strongly politicized social subtext to his narrative.

In casting the film, Flaherty created a family and gave them nicknames. Nanook was not, in fact, Nanook—his real name was Alakariallak. In his book, *My Eskimo Friends*, Flaherty [Flaherty and Flaherty 1924: 33] first refers to Alakariallak in a passage in which he describes his casting of the film after arriving at the Révillon Frères trading post at Port Harrison (now known by its Inuit name, Inukjuak) on the Ungava Peninsula in Arctic Quebec: “Of the Eskimos who were known to the post, a dozen all told were selected for the film. Of these Nanook, a character famous in the country, I chose as my chief man.” Flaherty gave him the screen name Nanook (a transliteration of *nanaq* in Inuktitut) because it means “bear.” A heroic name together with a planned polar bear hunt would demonstrate an Inuit hunter’s ultimate prowess and serve as the climax of the film [Fig. 2]. For the same reason, Flaherty had Nanook wear polar-bear pants, even though this was not the practice for Inuit from this area. Flaherty’s renaming of Alakariallak was not wholly contrived, as it was common practice for Inuit also to give *qallunaat* (whites) nicknames. Their attempts actually to film a polar bear hunt failed, however, and they had to content themselves with filming a walrus hunt instead [Flaherty 1950: 16].

The artifice continued in the way Flaherty orchestrated, reconstructed, and embellished scenes. The film’s illusion of authenticity masked the fact that



Figure 2 Nanook of the North, 1922. (Credit: Robert Flaherty)



Figure 3 Robert Flaherty and Nyla, c. 1920. (Credit: British Film Institute).

Nanook's on-screen wife, Nyla, was not his wife [Fig. 3]. The role was played by Maggie Nujarluktuk, who was actually Alakariallak's daughter-in-law. As Flaherty famously remarked, "one often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit" [cited in Barsam 1992: 52]. What Flaherty wanted to avoid was a film based strictly on observational techniques which failed to engage the viewer. What he did aim to achieve was a drama featuring conflict and resolution, a drama of survival and of characters who, by endearing themselves to the audience, would be viewed as fun-loving, resourceful, and even exemplary. Flaherty's filmic technique of continually arousing our curiosity and satisfying it, such as when a chiselled block of ice is finally revealed to be a window for Nanook's igloo, is central to the film's appeal [MacDougall 1998: 104]. Time and again the filmmaker acts as conjuror, surprising us while crediting Nanook's ingenuity.

#### FLAHERTY AS SOCIAL ACTIVIST

Flaherty would later be criticized for not adopting a more contemporary socio-political approach to presenting the difficulties his indigenous subjects faced at the hands of the dominant order [Winston 1995; Rothman 1997: 2]. Yet from the outset it was Flaherty's stated intention not to do so: "This film will contain no white man or fur trade subject matter, but will be exclusively to [*sic*] the life of the Eskimos as the primitive inhabitants of the land" [Flaherty 1920]. Given the economic and potentially problematic relationship between the Inuit and the traders, who at that time were the sole providers of Western foodstuffs and hunting equipment, Flaherty could be accused of having glossed over or ignored an essential factor of Inuit life.

Flaherty did not see this issue as an impediment. In fact, in his search for a sponsor he approached Révillon Frères, one of the two leading trading companies operating in the Canadian Arctic at that time. Writing to Capt. Mallet, one of the managers of the French fur company, Flaherty explained: "the film since it would contain no fur trade propaganda, could perfectly well be produced under the name of Révillon Frères, using, for instance, your letterhead which in my opinion would lend the film both dignity and prestige" [*ibid.*]. It was Flaherty's plan not to set his narrative in the present, but to place it in an early-contact period. His approach has been described as that of an "ethnographic taxidermist" [Rony 1996: 102]. There would be no filming of traps or guns for example, which had been used by Inuit men for hunting since the mid-1800s. However, the film's inter-titles make no mention of the era, thereby encouraging the audience to assume that it takes place in the present.

Commenting on filmic representations of the Inuit, the anthropologist Asen Balikci [1989: 7] suggests that the Inuk came to be perceived as a primitive Protestant, embodying Protestant virtues. In his perceptive study, *Transcultural Cinema*, David MacDougall [1998: 105] argues that *Nanook of the North* provided "an early popularization of cultural relativism and an implicit denial of social evolutionary theory." If *Nanook of the North* presents the virtues of the Inuit at a time when native peoples, particularly Native Americans, were often represented in an unfavorable light, Flaherty could then be viewed as a social activist, rather than as a romanticist. He unhesitatingly declared:



I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples, with his rags and his ugly, cheap hats. I am not interested in the decadence of these people under the white man's rule. What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well. They are disappearing. [Flaherty c.1948: 2]

His strongly held views on the risk of the corruptibility of “primitive peoples,” Barnouw [1993: 44] suggests, were formed when as a young man Flaherty witnessed the degrading circumstances of Indians loitering around mining camps under the influence of alcohol. His stated aim for making the film took the form of salvage ethnography. It bore a similarity to Edward Curtis' early articles and lectures which presented the Indians as vanishing cultures [Curtis 1906; Holm and Quimby 1980: 27]. Flaherty's intent differed from his previous statements when filming the Inuit around 1915, announcing at that time that “I planned to depict an ethnological film of life covering the various phases of their hunting, travel, domestic life and religion. . .” [Danzker 1980: 71].

Prior to making *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty had worked for ten years as a mining surveyor and explorer in the eastern Canadian Arctic. During that period he spent long intervals living and travelling with the Inuit, and at times relied on them for his sustenance and survival. His writings reveal a feeling of kinship, as when he remarked that “the urge I had to make *Nanook* came from the way I felt about these people, my admiration for them; I wanted to tell others about them. This was my whole reason for making the film” [Flaherty c.1948: 2]. As a humanist, Flaherty therefore set out to present on film an endangered people, as he saw them, in an effort to publicize their attributes and thereby attempt to save them from assimilation or destruction. With this intent, by his offering a cinematic rendering of an Inuit family, they would no longer be perceived as museum curiosities but identified as a people who were resourceful, inventive and innately likeable. By placing an emphasis on the depiction of family life and the illusion of what Corner [1996: 51] terms “domestic vérité,” Flaherty succeeds in bridging cultural difference [MacDougall 1993: 90]. His altruistic motives may thus serve to ratify his role as an early documentary activist.

#### NANOOK AS PRIMAL MAN

In the persona of Nanook, Flaherty observed that for the public “what they have seen is not a freak, but a real person after all, facing the perils of a desperate life and yet always happy” [Flaherty c.1948: 5]. His choice of words is illuminating, for prior to making *Nanook of the North*, people had grown accustomed to seeing the presentation of the Other showcased as human oddities in “freak shows” [Bogdan 1988]. Inuit were displayed in world fairs and exhibitions. From 1577, when the explorer Martin Frobisher presented Queen Elizabeth I with an Inuit man, woman and child from Canada's Baffinland, to 1901 when Thomas A. Edison shot the earliest cinematic depiction of the Inuit in a film of an “Esquimaux Village” at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, the Inuit were a subject of curiosity. They were considered intriguing—humans who lived by

choice in inhospitably cold environments, ate raw meat and were clad in fur. In Edison's film, the Inuit are depicted as cheerful characters, riding on dog sleds amid what were fake ice floes and *papier-mâché* igloos. In this respect, Flaherty's film also maintained the stereotype of the "happy-go-lucky Eskimo." Of the two indigenous groups of North America, Indians were often represented as hostile while the Inuit were seen as endearing.

With the great success of Flaherty's film, Nanook became an iconographic symbol in popular culture of the friendly and successful primal man. Newspapers recorded the magic and novelty of the film, with the *New York Morning Telegraph* [1922] reporting that "as entertainment the film is an absorbing story of real life." The *New York Times* [1922] announced, "Here is one of the screen's finest achievements." To garner more publicity, Peerless Eskimo Pies were handed out to children under the age of twelve buying a ticket to see the film. Advertisements also displayed an imaginative range of merchandising links with the film's release. Columbia Grafonola phonographs, Baldwin Dry-Air refrigerators, and even cars were associated with the film's star. The Stillwell Auto Livery rental company printed an advert stating: "Poor Nanook—he can't step into an auto and enjoy the wonderful scenery and boulevards of our Southland. But you can!"

There are other elements which form the construction of Nanook's appeal. While Charles Darwin synthesized the theory of natural selection with his publication of *On the Origin of Species* [1859] and his later writings, it was his contemporary, the English social philosopher Herbert Spencer who coined the term "evolution" and the phrase "survival of the fittest." In the figure of Nanook, Flaherty produced an example of such an individual. Early in the film, Nanook arrives in a kayak. After extracting himself, his wife, a stream of children and a dog also appear as if by magic from within the bowels of the slender craft. The metaphors of fertility and barrenness are presented in juxtaposition to one another. Nanook's fecundity stands in clear contrast to the barrenness of the ice floes featured in the previous shot. The fact that he has several children is notable, given the high infant mortality rate at the time, acutely so amongst the Inuit, but also in the south. In this way, "the body's metaphoric standing renders it an exemplary historical map of social relations" [Low 1996: 13]. In Victorian times, roughly one in two infants in Britain had a chance of making it to adulthood [Jones 2000: 116]. Yet, despite the high risk of infant mortality also prevalent in the Canadian north, accentuated by lack of medical care and exposure to extreme environmental conditions and starvation, Nanook and his young wife Nyla managed to produce three healthy children.

Some Social Darwinists have argued that "not all genes are able to compete equally in the face of the fierce and rigorous challenges imposed by the natural environment" [Lerner 1992: 93]. Furthermore, "only the most aggressive genotypes will succeed in this struggle for survival" [*ibid.*]. Essential to this competition of natural selection is the issue of adaptability, and this predilection highlights the asset of inventiveness that Nanook exhibits prodigiously throughout the film. He has transposed a hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the savannah, and adapted it to a demanding life on the icefields of the Arctic. It is precisely the setting's visual barrenness, which we see throughout the film, which emphasizes for us just how precarious such a lifestyle must be. In order to survive, he and his

people have excelled in honing their means of adaptation. The scene in which he constructs a home from snow, even to the point of devising a sun reflector, demonstrates his use of technology to solve problems, and the degree of adaptiveness he has acquired.

While adaptation is a prominent subtext of the film, adaptiveness has also been closely associated elsewhere with aggression [Lorenz 1966; Lerner 1992: 93]. Yet the Inuit society portrayed in *Nanook of the North* becomes symbolic of peaceful coexistence, since low population density limits aggression in the service of territory [Breger 1974: 81]. The ramifications of the use of human aggression foregrounds and cogently informs the appeal and reception of Flaherty's film. Upon its release, the world was still coming to terms with the trauma experienced by the violent aggression of the First World War, which resulted in 10 million deaths and over 37 million casualties. This death toll was followed in 1918–19 by the pandemic "Spanish Flu" influenza, which killed a further 20 million people worldwide, more than in the whole era of the Bubonic Plague. A quarter of the US population was affected.

Human beings are the only animals who regularly kill each other [Breger 1974: 90], and the First World War served as an indictment of the risk of modern society's misapplication of technology, coupled with aggressive acts designed for territorial gain. The tragedy of these events underscored a lack of moral restraint [Wallace 1995: 80], as forewarned in Malthus' [1798] classic essay on the inevitable consequences of population pressures.

At its core, the film directly comments on the 19th century debate regarding "man's place in nature" [Young 1985]. Agriculture has been practiced for 10,000 years, and with its adoption people became tied to particular pieces of land to farm. Land and possessions became something to be defended and often acquired through acts of aggression. The ethic of sharing, vital to hunter-gatherer groups, lost part of its integrated function within an agrarian society. Breger argues that greed was successfully controlled in early cultures by the systemic practice of sharing. In a society which is dependent on possession of property, "we are still searching for a stable ethic to take its place" [Breger 1974: 84]. In stark contrast to the Hobbesian [1651] view of life as nasty, brutish and short, Breger suggests that modern society has yet fully to develop the customs which would allow us to live as harmoniously in our world as the hunter did in his. In opposition to the First World War's horrifying illustration of this view, *Nanook of the North's* audiences were presented with an amicable alternative society, and it was this feature which reinforced its broad appeal.

In the film, the display of aggressiveness is assigned to the primal sled dogs, who bare their teeth and fight each other for the seal meat thrown to them. Nanook initially exhibits an aggressiveness in his tug-of-war with a seal, but this scene is quickly transformed into a tenacious act and then comedy. At no time during the film is Nanook called on to assert his authority through use of aggression, except for having to separate the fighting dogs with his whip. He is not required to enter into physical combat with other Inuit or outsiders. Seemingly, Flaherty's Inuit society has no need for aggressive acts. In this context, survival is linked to the acquisition of special skills and adaptability to one's environment, rather than to the use of force. This notion is further layered by Nanook's playful nature and



Figure 4 *Nanook (Alakariallak)*, 1922. (Credit: Robert Flaherty)

ready smile [Fig. 4]. Although less technologically advanced than his southern counterparts, he appears to have a sufficient subsistence resource base. Unlike the urbanized man engaged in continuous work for others, Nanook is self-reliant and able to spend more time interacting and socializing with his family, as the scene teaching his young son to use a bow and arrow attests. His is also a life free from disruptive cultural change and requiring less of a need to plan for the future, “as even the simplest agriculturalist must” [Breger 1974: 76]. Nanook expresses a

positive, pioneering attitude, which no doubt found favor with American audiences, who would have admired his ingenuity. Peaceful coexistence and good humor are allied tenets of his survival strategy.

#### A SENSE OF PLACE

Male aggression is often deployed as a means for taking possession of territory, as Freud [1929] elaborated in his writing on the subject. Early film Westerns typified this theme in the way they featured contested wild spaces, such as in D.W. Griffiths' *Fighting Blood* [1911] and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Squaw Man* [1914]. Indeed, Flaherty's film has ingredients of Hollywood's most venerable genre. Yet, for *Nanook* there is no contested space. Flaherty has shown this environment to be composed of endless ice floes and undifferentiated snow-covered landscapes. His primal stage becomes a white tableau in which to act out scenes of everyday life and survival. Simple tasks, such as eating and playing, are magnified against the white backdrop. "Place presents itself to us as a condition of human experience," Entrikin [1991: 1] suggests. There is no hint that Nanook occupies a divided space, or even a shared one, save when other males suddenly appear to help him haul in a seal or hunt for walrus. There is no visible competition for territory. A single white man, in the figure of the trader from the Révillon Frères store at Port Harrison, enters Nanook's world as a bringer of novel southern goods. He exhibits a phonograph for Nanook and provides castor oil for the children. At no time does he represent an oppositional figure who might impose his territorial desires. Nor do we see other agents of the south, missionaries or federal police officers. In what was effectively a colonial setting, we have no sense of intrusion into Nanook's space, not by the province of Quebec nor by the federal authorities. While the Inuit may exist on the periphery of the nation state, since we see no other external representatives, Nanook's world becomes the center, and the periphery ceases to exist. External relations and interactions with the wider society have almost no point of access in the narrative.

The landscapes which feature in the film appear more desolate than wild. This is not wilderness to be tamed, or a fertile region to be coveted. The ambiguity of wilderness, as a place to be feared and revered, and whose "defeat was a marker of human progress" [Short 1991: 10], applies differently in this topographical filmic context. Nanook plays with the landscape, nimbly leaping from one piece of ice to another. During the course of the film, he also reveals the landscape's latent fertility under the ice and in the form of white fox fur pelts, but for Western audiences the cold nakedness of the Arctic landscape does not readily encourage desire. Yet "Geographical space is deeply implicated in social exclusion" [Smith 1990: 9], as many other indigenous peoples of North America experienced when banished to reservations on land that was unwanted by whites. In contrast to Native Americans, who occupied valuable, fertile lands, as characterized in Westerns of the time, these icy landscapes held little appeal. Set in this environment, we can marvel at Nanook's ability to survive, while not having an innate desire to possess his territory.

*Nanook of the North* is a film which features people of a different race, but because it does not provide the foil of outsiders, with the exception of the brief

appearance of the lone, benign trader, the film does not consider issues of racism or racial difference. Importantly, in the way the film seeks a sympathetic representation of the Inuit, it does not place them in the same context as African-Americans or Native Americans, who were still considered at the time the film was released to be “the white man’s burden” [Jordan 1974]. Flaherty’s adroit sequencing of events in the film illuminate Nanook’s resourcefulness and self-reliance and contributes to this affirmative view. The association that audiences are encouraged to make between themselves and Nanook and his family, who display salient survival abilities, strengthens as the narrative progresses.

#### THE PRIMAL FATHER

Darwin’s writings had a profound effect on Sigmund Freud and his theories of behavioral development. In his book, *Totem and Taboo* [1919], beguilingly subtitled, *Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics*, Freud relates his theory of psychoanalysis to the time when a *primal horde* was led by a dominant father. Freud’s notion of the “primal father” with sexual rights to all the women is dramatized in the scene in the igloo bedchamber, where we see Nanook with two adult females and their children. Their sexuality is then displayed for our scopophilic pleasure and libidinal desire, as we watch Nanook and the women remove their clothing for the camera and snuggle together under a large single covering. Freud’s perception of the primal father was of one who was destined to suffer [1919: 259]. In place of any adolescents or other males who might challenge Nanook’s position, Flaherty has substituted an overarching struggle with the severe Arctic environment to provide for his dependents.

Flaherty’s cataloging of Nanook’s abilities throughout the film, from building a house to landing a seal, collectively serves as examples of male display. The flamboyant bear-skin trousers which he wears further underscore his prominence as a successful hunter. As Winston [2002: 191] notes, “display itself is proof of a genetic advantage. Those males with the best physical display are likely to be stronger and healthier.” However, Winston is of the view that “the outward signs of strength, of virility and of health” are secondary considerations [*ibid.*: 196]. What women are more impressed by, he asserts, is successful risk-taking, status and wealth. Nanook’s status is assured by his exclusive role in the film as the primal father, and his good relations with the trader. His relative wealth is displayed by the large number of white fox fur pelts delivered to the trading post [as seen in Fig. 4]. When appealing to the opposite sex, “it’s all about consumption, showing off and confidence,” asserts Winston [*ibid.*: 1971]. Little wonder then that shortly after the film was released, Nanook was idealized as a sex symbol in a popular song. Its lyrics [Hagen and Crooker 1922] reflect the star’s risk-taking appeal:

Polar bears are prowling,  
 Wintry winds are howling;  
 Where the snow is falling,  
 There my heart is calling:  
 Na—nook! Na—nook!

Eskimo man, ice-cream snowman—  
 Oh!—I love you so!  
 You are such a cave man,  
 You are such a brave man;  
 In your northern Ice land,  
 It is such a nice land;  
 Soon, —if dreams come true,  
 —I'll be with you.

Nanook illustrates his willingness to take risks by dexterously leaping about the ice floe, and shows prowess as he waits interminably, despite the cold, for the right moment at which to plunge his harpoon through a hole in the ice. It may be that natural selection favors those who take risks, and that risk-taking is an indicator of genetic fitness. Hazardous risk-taking behavior has been demonstrated as an indicator of genetic superiority. Studies with female guppies show that they prefer to mate with risk-taking males [Winston 2002: 200]. Further research confirms that those males that can afford to take physical risks are in the main able to do so because they are healthier, fitter and faster. This behavior thereby ensures that risk-taking displays can be a reliable indicator of a male's desirability as a mate.

#### NANOOK'S SEQUEL

For Nanook and the other Inukjuamiut, Robert Flaherty came and went. They heard nothing of the popular lyrics or of the international success the film achieved. The outer world heard once more about Nanook, when two years after the film was released it was reported that he had died of starvation while hunting caribou in inner Ungava. What went unreported was that he was seen spitting up blood before he died, and that relatives said his death was due to tuberculosis rather than lack of game [Marcus 1995: 226]. Nanook was mourned as far away as China, his heroic death becoming integral to the Nanook myth, ideally adhering to Flaherty's presentation of man's primal struggle for survival.

Years later, Robert Flaherty was in the middle of negotiations with sponsors to make a sequel, entitled *Iviuk, Son of Nanook*, when the filmmaker died on July 23, 1951. It is tempting to imagine what form the picture might have taken, but the reality of what transpired for the group he made famous would have revealed a poignantly contrasting narrative. Robert Flaherty had a son by Nyla, Nanook's on-screen wife, though he never returned to the north and may not have known of his son's birth. Flaherty's wife, Frances, recalled that "Bob was forever always telling me that he wanted to go back to the north. I got to come back, he would say. He wanted to go back to dwell in his mind, to find a refuge. The memory of the north never left him. But Bob never did go back" [cited in Rotha 1983: 50]. His Inuit son was called Joseph, and he adopted his father's surname.

Flaherty's sequel might have reflected the dramatic shift in the way the Inuit came to be perceived by the Canadian government in the immediate post-war period. Thirty years after *Nanook of the North* was filmed, officials viewed the Inuit as becoming too reliant on the white man. They felt "the Eskimo Problem,"

as it became known, was due to an unstable fur-based economy, a high incidence of tuberculosis and infant mortality, periodic incidents of starvation, and a growing dependency on state benefits [Marcus 1995: 25–27]. As Robert Phillips [1959: 20], Chief of the Arctic Division of the Department of Northern Affairs, and later Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, reflected: “Their voices became silent as white men told them what to do, what to trap, what to wear, how to think and how to die. The Eskimos were no longer the proud Inuit who had mastered the toughest climate on earth; they became just ‘the Eskimo Problem.’” The main problem, though, was that the Inuit were not adhering to an inherited timeless image of primal man. And no longer were they being described by officials as resourceful and independent. Even an advertisement sponsored by Union Oil parodied notions of Inuit life transmogrified by welfare [Fig. 5]. The full page ad, which appeared in the 16 February 1953 issue of *Newsweek* magazine, featured an Inuk jumping for joy and stated that the Inuit’s new life under the welfare state was “soft and easy,” because they had complete security. As a result, they had “lost all *vigor* and *ambition*” (italics theirs). Underneath a cartoon of an Inuk smoking, the advertisement offered the moral: “Enslavement by security isn’t something that happens only to Eskimos. In fact, millions of people all over the world see nothing wrong with a welfare society” [Union Oil 1953].

In a short space of time, a change in perception had transformed them from resourceful Arctic dwellers into feckless layabouts. Thus Canadian government planners put into practice that which Flaherty had tried to recreate in his classic film. Officials would also attempt to turn back the clock. An experimental plan was conceived by them which would relocate groups of Inuit further north, where utopian-like colonies could be established for them in the Queen Elizabeth Islands in the High Arctic—an archipelago so far north that it possessed no indigenous population. The year the Union Oil advertisement appeared saw the first of the relocations. The primary community selected for “voluntary resettlement” was the same group of Inuit in Arctic Quebec who had been the subject of Flaherty’s film. Among the Inuit chosen by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for the second wave of the operation in 1955 was one Joseph Flaherty.

Robert Flaherty’s Inuit son was selected for “rehabilitation” [Fig. 6], so that he and the others might be remoulded into a primitive ideal, akin to the independent figure of Nanook popularized by his father. This emphasis on social engineering is illustrated by the remarks made by a senior official involved in the relocation: “The reasons for moving this family are grounded in an attempt to keep the Eskimo in his native state and to preserve that culture as primitive as it is” [Stead 1953: 6]. In turn, Flaherty’s prophetic words were realized. His fear that the white man would intervene in an invasive and potentially destructive way in Inuit society was confirmed. In the white man’s eyes, contact with the Inuit had partially destroyed that which he admired most—their ability to live on the land in a state of self-reliance.

An interlocking primal drama had come full circle. Attitudes and ideals Robert Flaherty presented in his sanitized, romantic version of primitive man were reapplied when the government relocated his Inuit son as part of their “Eskimo Rehabilitation Program” [Fryer 1954]. Through physical isolation, minimal contact with whites, and the removal of government benefits, the experiment



## WHAT PRICE KENAUYAKSAIT?



For hundreds of years the coast of Baffin Island in Northern Canada has been an Eskimo home and hunting ground. The Baffin Island Eskimos were known throughout the North for their skill as seal hunters and fishermen. They lived on raw seal meat and raw fish. Their existence, while primitive, was a happy one.



2. Eight years ago the Canadian government set up a system of family allowance under which the Baffin Island Eskimos received \$5 a month for each child—as did all other Canadians. These allowances, called "kenauyaksait" by the Eskimos, represented more money than most of them had ever seen at one time.

3. To the Eskimos, their new-found wealth meant they didn't have to hunt seals or catch fish any more. Most of them left their hunting and fishing grounds and moved in close to the trading posts where they received their monthly handouts and could buy the niceties of civilization.



4. The Eskimos' new life was soft and easy—for they had complete security. But because they no longer needed to provide for themselves they lost all vigor and ambition. As a result, the government is now trying to get them to move away from the trading posts and start producing or forfeit their allowances. But this is next to impossible to accomplish. For the Eskimos have grown to depend on their security so much that they have no desire to return to their former life of freedom and independence.

5. The important point of the story is this: enslavement by security isn't something that happens only to Eskimos. In fact, millions of people all over the world see nothing wrong with a welfare society. But welfare plans are like dope. The doses are small and pleasant at first, but they eventually enslave us. For that reason, we Americans must maintain our self-reliance, our productivity and our freedom. For these things, after all, are responsible for America's greatness.

### UNION OIL COMPANY OF CALIFORNIA

INCORPORATED IN CALIFORNIA, OCTOBER 22, 1920

This series, sponsored by the people of Union Oil Company, is dedicated to a discussion of how and why American business functions. We hope you'll feel free to send in any suggestions or criticisms you have to offer. Write: The President, Union Oil Company, Union Oil Building, Los Angeles 17, California.

MANUFACTURERS OF ROYAL TRON, THE AMAZING PURPLE MOTOR OIL.

Figure 5 Newsweek magazine, February 16, 1953. (Credit: Union Oil Company advertisement).



Figure 6 Joseph Flaherty and his wife Rynee, and daughters Martha and Mary, Grise Fiord, 1959. (Credit: Jaybeddie Amagoalik).

was designed to reshape the Inuit into a contemporary primal man. The government reformers were drafting a new “map of morality” [Vitebsky 1992: 223], identifying the southern areas as places where Inuit had become dependent on “handouts,” and seeing the High Arctic as a place free of contamination, offering

the prospect of moral redemption. This idealism had much in common with the earlier views of General William Booth and the proponents of a British emigration policy for “shovelling out paupers” during the 19th century. The aim was to encourage emigration to the “Unpopulated and virgin lands” of Canada and Australia, both as a means of socially reforming unwanted indigents and reducing “surplus populations” in Britain [Booth 1970 (1890); Johnston 1972]. However, the ideological rehabilitative component of the relocations camouflaged the latent penitential environment they engendered [Allen 1981: 54].

While thirty-four Inuit from Inukjuak were relocated to Cornwallis Island, Joseph Flaherty, his wife and three children, and nineteen other Inuit, were transported aboard the government supply ship the *C.D. Howe* on a six-week voyage to Ellesmere Island in the High Arctic archipelago and dropped off on a beach. The place, known as Grise Fiord, became the northernmost community in North America, and remains so today. As one RCMP officer assigned to this group later remarked, it “was a one-way ticket” [Pilot 1990]. Another officer referred to it as a “Garden of Eden” [Sargent 1954], but for the Inuit it was a foreign land from which they could not return, and it was there that Joseph Flaherty died.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, Francis  
1981 *The Decline of the Rehabilitative Ideal*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Balikci, Asen  
1989 Anthropology, Film and the Arctic Peoples. *Anthropology Today*, 5(2): 4–10.
- Barnouw, Erik  
1993 *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barsam, Richard  
1992 *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bernstein, Matthew, and Gaylyn Studlar  
1997 *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Bogdan, Robert  
1988 *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Booth, William  
1970 [1890] *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. London: Charles Knight and Company.
- Braudy, Leo  
1998 The Genre of Nature: Ceremonies of Innocence. In *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Nick Browne, ed. Pp. 278–310. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Breger, Louis  
1974 *From Instinct to Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

- Browne, Nick  
1998 *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Corner, John  
1996 *The Art of the Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Curtis, Edward S.  
1906 Vanishing Indian Types: The Tribes of the Northwest Plains. *Scribner's Magazine*, 39 (June): 657–71.  
1915 *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. Yonkers-on-Hudson: World Book Company.
- Danzker, Jo-Anne Birnie  
1980 *Robert Flaherty Photographer/Filmmaker: The Inuit 1910–1922*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery.
- Darwin, Charles  
1859 *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Presentation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: John Murray.
- Entrikin, J. Nicholas  
1991 *The Betweenness of Place*. London: Macmillan.
- Fienup-Riordan, A.  
1990 *Eskimo Essays*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Flaherty, Frances Hubbard  
1972 *The Odyssey of a Film-Maker*. New York: Arno Press.
- Flaherty, Robert  
1920 Letter to Mr. Mallet. 16 February, 1920. Silvermine, Norwalk, Connecticut. In Box 21, Butler Library, Rare Books Archives, Columbia University, New York.  
c.1948 [no date] Typed draft for 'Film: language of the eye'. In Box 48, Butler Library, Rare Books Archives, Columbia University, New York.  
1950 Robert Flaherty Talking. In *Cinema 1950*. Roger Manvell, ed. Pp. 10–29. London: Pelican.
- Flaherty, Robert, and Frances Hubbard Flaherty  
1924 *My Eskimo Friends 'Nanook of the North'*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.
- Friedman, Lester  
1991 *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Freud, Sigmund  
1919 [1913] *Totem and Taboo*. London: Routledge.  
1929 *Civilization and its Discontents*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Fryer, A. C.  
1954 Eskimo Rehabilitation Program at Craig Harbour. *RCMP Quarterly*, 20(2): 139–42.
- Hagen, Milt, and Herb Crooker  
1922 *Nanook of the North* (Sheet Music). Music by Victor Nurnberg. New York: Cameo Music Publishing Company.

- Hiller, Susan  
1991 *The Myth of Primitivism*. London: Routledge.
- Hobbes, Thomas  
1996 [1651] *Leviathan*. Richard Tuck, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holm, Bill, and George Irving Quimby  
1980 *Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Johnston, Hugh  
1972 *British Emigration Policy 1815–1830, 'Shovelling out Paupers'*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jones, Steve  
2000 *The Language of Genes*. London: Flamingo.
- Jordan, Winthrop  
1974 *The White Man's Burden*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kaplan, E. Ann  
1997 *Looking for the Other*. New York: Routledge.
- Lerner, Richard  
1992 *Final Solutions: Biology, Prejudice and Genocide*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Lorenz, Konrad  
1966 [1963] *On Aggression*. London: Methuen.
- Low, Gail Ching-Liang  
1996 *White Skins/Black Masks*. London: Routledge.
- MacDougall, David  
1993 Complicities of Style. In *Film as Ethnography*. Peter Crawford and David Turton, eds. Pp. 90–98. Manchester: Manchester University Press.  
1998 *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw  
1962 *Sex, Culture and Myth*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Malthus, Thomas  
1989 [1798] *Essay on the Principle of Population*. P. James, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marcus, Alan  
1992 *Out in the Cold*. Copenhagen: IWGIA.  
1995 *Relocating Eden: The Image and Politics of Inuit Exile in the Canadian Arctic*. Hanover: University Press of New England.  
forthcoming. *The Documentary Image: Representations of Realism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mason, Peter  
1990 *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other*. London: Routledge.
- Morning Telegraph*  
1922 Film Review of 'Nanook of the North.' 12 June.
- New York Times*  
1922 Film review of 'Nanook of the North.' 2 July.

- Nichols, Bill  
1986 Questions of Magnitude. In *Documentary and the Mass Media*. John Corner, ed. London: Edward Arnold.
- Phillips, R. A. J.  
1959 Slum dwellers of the Wide-Open Spaces. *Weekend Magazine*, 9(15): 20.
- Pilot, R.  
1990 (Personal communication with author.)
- Rony, Fatimah Tobing  
1996 *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rotha, Paul  
1983 *Robert J. Flaherty: A Biography*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Rothman, William  
1997 *Documentary Film Classics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sargent, G. K.  
1954 *Eskimo Conditions, Craig Harbour Area*. RCMP Craig Harbour detachment report. 31 December 1954. National Archives of Canada/RG85/1446/1000-133/1.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam  
1994 *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. London: Routledge.
- Short, John Rennie  
1991 *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, David  
1990 The Sharing and Dividing of Geographical Space. In *Shared Space: Divided Space*. Michael Chisholm and David Smith, eds. Pp. 1-21. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Stead, G. W.  
1953 *Report on Tour of the Arctic Islands, September 8-12, 1953*. National Archives of Canada/RG22/176/40-2-20/3.
- Toplin, Robert Brent  
1993 *Hollywood as Mirror: Changing Views of 'Outsiders' and 'Enemies' in American Movies*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Toren, Christina  
1991 Leonardo's Last Supper in Fiji. In *The Myth of Primitivism*. Susan Hiller, ed. Pp. 261-82. London: Routledge.
- Torgovnick, Marianna  
1991 *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu  
1977 *Space and Place*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Union Oil Company of California  
1953 Advertisement in *Newsweek*. February 16.
- Vitebsky, Piers  
1992 Landscape and Self-Determination among the Eveny. In *Bush Base: Forest Farm*. E. Croll and David Parkin, eds. Pp. 223-46. London: Routledge.

Wallace, Jeff

- 1995 Introduction. In *Charles Darwin's the Origin of Species*. David Amigoni and J. Wallace, eds. Pp. 69–94. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Willis, Sharon

- 1997 *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Winston, Brian

- 1995 *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*. London: British Film Institute.

Winston, Robert

- 2002 *Human Instinct*. London: Bantam Press.

Young, R. M.

- 1985 *Darwin's Metaphor. Nature's Place in Victorian Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### FILMOGRAPHY

Curtis, Edward

- 1914 *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. Seattle Film Company. Distributed by World Film Corp.

DeMille, Cecil B.

- 1914 *The Squaw Man*. Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company. Distributed by Famous Players-Lasky.

Flaherty, Robert

- 1922 *Nanook of the North*. Révillon Frères. Distributed by Pathé.

Griffiths, D. W.

- 1911 *Fighting Blood*. Biograph. Distributed by General Film Company.