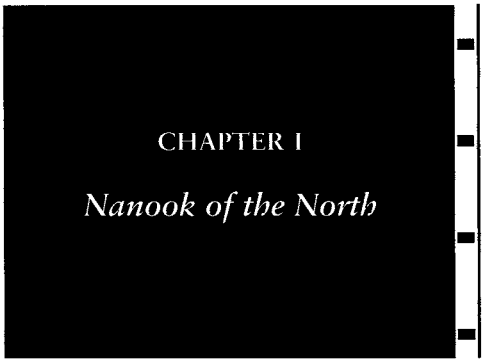


The widely distributed video cassette of *Nanook of the North* prefaces the film with a title that states, accurately enough, that the film "is generally regarded as the work from which all subsequent efforts to bring real life to the screen have stemmed." The implied contrast is with ordinary movies, of course – so-called fiction films with scripted stories, actors, and directors. Presumably these are something other than "efforts to bring real life to the screen" – efforts, perhaps, to bring to the screen the life of the imagination, the imaginary life of fantasy and myth.

Yet ordinary movies, too, may be said to bring "real life" to the screen. For example, in Griffith's *True Heart Susie*, a film contemporaneous with *Nanook of the North*, the character Susie and the world she inhabits may be imaginary, but it is the real-life Lillian Gish who is the subject of the camera. And so-called "documentaries," too, may be said to bring the life of the imagination to the screen, as we shall be reminded throughout this book.

Such facts have led some theorists to deny that in the medium of film there is a meaningful distinction between what we call "fiction films" and "documentaries." Without denying the truth in this suggestion, it is also important not to deny that there are, in fact, significant differences between them. And *Nanook of the North* is an appropriate place to begin reflecting on those differences. First, because virtually all documentary filmmakers have claimed its inheritance. Second, because Flaherty's pioneering work marks a moment before the distinction between fiction and documentary was set, before the term "documentary film" was coined.

As has often been remarked, Flaherty did not, in the manner of a cinéma-vérité filmmaker, simply film Nanook and his family going about their lives. Many actions on view in the film were performed for the camera and not simply "documented" by it. The filmmaker actively involved his subjects in the filming, telling them what he wanted them to do, responding to their suggestions, and directing their performance for the camera. As Gilberto Perez puts it, "The Eskimos in *Nanook of the North* were knowing actors in the movie and active collaborators in its making."[3]

Much of what is on view is typical behavior for Nanook and his family (lighting campfires, paddling kayaks, trapping foxes, making igloos). Some is not. For example, for the sake of his film Flaherty called upon Nanook

and some other men to revive a traditional – and dangerous – method of hunting walrus with harpoons, a tradition Nanook's people abandoned as soon as they became able to trade pelts for guns and ammunition.

Although the film faithfully illustrates certain aspects of the way people like Nanook actually live, it consistently underplays both the complexity of the social structures, different from ours, specific to Nanook's cultural traditions (Nanook appears to have more than one wife, for example, but no title acknowledges that Nyla is not the only woman who shares his bed). And the film equally consistently underplays the extent to which Western civilization has encroached upon those traditions, the extent to which modern society gives Nanook and his family no choice but to accommodate themselves to it, to become part of the modern world, not a self-contained universe separate from it.

Flaherty tends to portray Nanook's way of life as natural – unchanging, timeless, unthreatened – when, in reality, the way of life portrayed in the film was not only threatened but was already succumbing to that threat (or, more accurately, that way of life never really existed, for no real way of life is unchanging, timeless, unthreatened). And, in reality, nature itself, the natural environment on breathtaking display in *Nanook of the North*, was – is – facing a mortal threat.

To be sure, Flaherty may be said to have a vested interest in portraying his subjects' way of life as unchanging and timeless. For if the fabric of Nanook's way of life is being destroyed by the social and economic structures of Western civilization, the filmmaker's project is implicated in that destruction. The video version of *Nanook of the North* contains a title noting that "the film was made possible by the French fur company Revillon Frères," but Flaherty's own titles credit the making of the film only to the "kindliness, faithfulness and patience of Nanook and his family," omitting all reference to his corporate sponsor. Paired with his failure to acknowledge that his film was sponsored by a fur company, the filmmaker's acknowledgment of his subjects' participation in the making of *Nanook of the North* may strike us an act of bad faith, as a guilty denial that his own relationship with Nanook, his family, and his people was a fatally compromised one. On the other hand, there is no reason to doubt Flaherty's sincerity when he expresses appreciation of his subjects' admirable human qualities or when he declares that he could not have made *Nanook of the North* without their active participation. In any case, who are we to pass judgment on Robert Flaherty?

If Flaherty paints a distorted picture of the real way of life of Nanook and his family, in part he does so deliberately in the interest of telling the particular story he wishes to tell. The story *Nanook of the North* tells is one about its protagonist's struggle for survival against the elemental forces of nature, his everyday efforts to keep his family alive in a harsh natural environment, not his conflict with villainous human forces or his quest for romantic fulfillment (or, for that matter, the destruction of his world by

forces he does not perceive as a threat). It is thus quite different from the stories Flaherty's contemporary Griffith was telling in his films. But the story of *Nanook of the North*, no less than that of *True Heart Susie*, did not, perhaps could not, really happen – it is literally a *fiction*. And insofar as Flaherty's Nanook is the protagonist of such a story, he is no less a fictional character, no less a creature of the imagination, than Griffith's Susie.

It is a distinguishing feature of Flaherty's work, one that separates *Nanook of the North* from Griffith's films, that it claims that its protagonist is a "real person," not a fictional character. As opposed to playing a character, as Lillian Gish does when she plays Susie in *True Heart Susie*, Nanook appears as himself in *Nanook of the North*. However, as film theorists (and films) never tire of reminding us, 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). Thus perhaps it is more apt to say not that Nanook appears as himself but that he plays himself (as opposed to playing a character other than himself). Yet the "self" Nanook plays and the "self" who plays him do not simply coincide, any more than Lillian Gish and Susie simply coincide.

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, the way Susie does. In the face of the camera, Nanook, like Lillian Gish, is a human being of flesh and blood, however. The "real" Nanook – the subject Flaherty films with his camera – is a character, too, a creature of myth and fantasy, as Lillian Gish is, as all human beings are. But the "real" Nanook is not a character created by or for the film, not a fictional character who serves the purposes of a narrative and holds no further claims upon the author or the audience. The "real" Nanook is separate from Robert Flaherty, who films him, and separate from us – he is a human being who calls for acknowledgment.

Insofar as he is a real human being who participated in the making of *Nanook of the North*, the way Lillian Gish participated in the making of *True Heart Susie*, Nanook's relationship to the camera, the camera's relationship to him, 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. In reality, *Nanook of the North* is an expression of the real relationships between the camera and its human subjects, relationships that in turn are expressions of, hence are capable of revealing, both the camera and its subjects.

And yet Nanook also emerges in *Nanook of the North* as a fictional character, a figure who has no reality apart from the film that creates him. The fact of being filmed has no more reality to this fictional character, to Nanook in his fictional aspect, than it has to the fictional Susie. But this also means that the fictional Nanook, Nanook in his fictional aspect, has no reality in the face of the camera. (Between a fictional character and a real camera,

what real relationship is possible – what relationship capable of expressing, hence capable of revealing, the subject's nature, or the camera's?)

Griffith's camera is capable of making no revelations about the fictional Susie that are not also revelations about the real woman who incarnates her, revelations that emerge through, that express and thus reveal, the relationship between the camera and Lillian Gish. *True Heart Susie*'s prevailing fiction is that it is Susie, not Lillian Gish, who is real. Or we might say that its fiction is that Lillian Gish is only acting, rather than revealing herself, when she incarnates Susie in the face of the camera, that the character Susie is only a mask she can put on or take off at will or upon direction.

What is fictional about *True Heart Susie*, in other words, resides in its fiction that it is only fiction. What is fictional about *Nanook of the North*, by contrast, resides in its fiction that it is not fiction at all. Strip away what is fictional about the two films, therefore, and there is no real difference between them. Both equally exemplify Stanley Cavell's maxim that in the medium of film the only thing that really matters is that the subject be allowed to reveal itself.

This chapter will reflect primarily on three passages in *Nanook of the North* that achieve such revelations: The film's opening, in which Nanook and Nyla are introduced; the disquieting scene in which the trader – "in deference to the great hunter," as a title patronizingly puts it – 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.

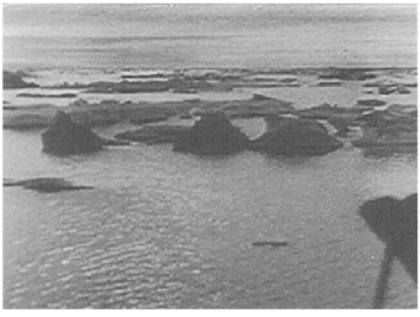
The Introductions of Nanook and Nyla

Nanook of the North opens with a title that – in its use of capitalization and dashes and its straining for poetic effect – is (like so much else in the film) strikingly reminiscent of Griffith: "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 Arctic landscape that, on film, is one of the enduring wonders of *Nanook of the North*.

These views testify to the reality of the wind-swept lands invoked by Flaherty's words. They also offer testimony, in effect, to the title's claim that these lands are "illimitable," "mysterious" – we see with our own eyes that they are as fantastic, as mythical, as any our imagination is capable of conjuring.

And the following title asserts that the human figures around which

Nanook of the North revolves, too, are at once as real and as fantastic, as mythical, 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 entirely on the flesh of the animals they kill. They are also fearless heroes who stoically endure rigors "no other race" could survive. Part primitive savage, part hero, they are at once "lower" and "higher" than we are. Eskimos are also like innocent children, the title patronizingly asserts ("lovable," "happy-go-lucky," "the most cheerful people in all the world"). That they are possessed as well of the noble qualities of the most civilized adults is asserted by the following title, which is anything but patronizing:

> 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 that refers to the film's specific *dramatis personae*, also characterizes the human figures to whom it refers, much as a Griffith title might. But there would seem to be a crucial difference: Flaherty's title not only characterizes Nanook and his family, posits attributes that define them as characters, it also asserts their real existence.

To be sure, the opening titles of *True Heart Susie* likewise assert, at least rhetorically, the reality of the characters around whom Griffith's story revolves. 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 (in the face of the camera, Susie simply is Lillian Gish; Lillian Gish is Susie incarnate) and acknowledging their separateness (Susie has no existence apart from *True Heart Susie*, but Lillian Gish exists apart from her incarnation in this or any film, and, as a movie star, is capable of being incarnated as any number of different characters). Flaherty's title, by contrast, posits character and star simply as one, like a Rin Tin Tin or a Lassie. Nanook really exists, the title declares, and it is he who stars in this film, he whose appearance before the camera is a necessary condition of the film's existence.

Beyond this, by acknowledging that the film was made through the "kindliness, faithfulness and patience" of Nanook and his family, the author of this title is declaring the reality of his act of filming them, the reality of his own existence and that of his camera within the world of the film. Flaherty's title says, in effect, "Nanook and his family actually exist, and

thanks to their kindliness, faithfulness and patience I was able to film them." (If Nanook were really the mythical figure Flaherty's titles claim him to be – part primitive savage, part hero, part innocent child, part sage adult – who would the filmmaker have to be, mythically, to film him?)

Susie is – cannot but be – the character she is in *True Heart Susie*. However, this does not mean that we must accept all the claims the film's titles make about her. Griffith's titles literally bear his signature; he claims their words, their voice, as his own. But too often they manifest the obtuseness that is the other face of Griffith's insightfulness, his unwillingness or inability to acknowledge the silent mysteries his camera is singularly capable of revealing. The assertions Griffith's titles make about his characters are subject to being overruled, as it were, by the camera's revelations. And this is true as well of the claims about Nanook and his family that Flaherty asserts in his titles.

It may be taken to be a definitive feature of documentary films that they are to be viewed as making truth claims about the world, claims that are subject to being tested not only against the testimony of the camera, as is the case with all films, but also against reality as it may be known independently of the camera's 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, about the size of Nanook's "hunting ground" in particular. (We would also take it to be claiming, implicitly, 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, it might be noted, 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 it were necessary for Nanook to possess such credentials to validate the camera's attention to him, as if only special people, not ordinary ones, were worthy of that attention.) If it were a title in a fiction film, we would take it to be positing a fictional premise, one we are called upon to accept for the sake of the story, but whose real truth or falsity is of no consequence to the film.

By this criterion, *Nanook of the North* seems poised between documentary and fiction. (This is part of what we meant by saying that it marks a moment before the distinction between fiction and documentary is set.) For when Flaherty presents this title immediately preceding his introduction of Nanook, we take it that it does make a factual claim. But we are also being called upon to accept it as a premise of the film's story; whether in fact it is true or false is of no consequence to the film. In *Nanook of the North*, as we have suggested, the only "fact" that is of consequence is that Nanook and his family really participated in the making of the film.

This fact is acknowledged by the singular way Flaherty effects Nanook's introduction, I take it. 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 the film's first view of its star and protagonist, a medium close-up sustained for a very long ten seconds – in this shot, Nanook is a dead ringer for John Wayne, by the way – framed almost frontally against the white sky. Within this frame, Nanook looks down, looks up, his eyes wide, but without ever quite addressing the camera with his gaze.

Having just characterized his protagonist as a "great hunter," Flaherty might be expected to show Nanook for the first time performing some act related to hunting. 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.

It is not that Nanook is 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, that he is, for whatever reasons, avoiding meeting the camera's gaze. And they reinforce our impression as well that we do not know Nanook's reasons, that they remain private. (For all we know, a reason for Nanook's avoidance of the camera may be that Flaherty, for his own private reasons, directed him not to meet its gaze. But then Nanook also has his private reasons, unknown to us, 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 singularly "happy-go-lucky" race, but neither does he confront the camera with the threatening gaze we might expect of a "great hunter." Nanook does what perhaps can best be described as enduring the camera's scrutiny – otherwise we would not have this view, of course. He seems reserved, inscrutable, guarded, not expressing his feelings about, or to, the camera. 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 equally Griffith-like title "Nyla – The Smiling One" is followed by a shot of Nanook's beautiful young wife, smiling radiantly as she talks animatedly to someone offscreen.

Un-self-consciously engaged in a conversation that absorbs her, she seems completely at ease 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 do so. Framing Nyla obliquely, the camera assmumes 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, as he is introduced to us, appears much tenser.

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. They 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, through what is revealed simply by their being placed on view, by their placing themselves on view, within these frames.

Having already declared them to be real people, not fictional characters, and having acknowledged the reality of the camera in their world, the reality of his own acts of filming them, 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 the possibility that Flaherty told Nanook and Nyla how he wanted them to relate to the camera, that he staged these encounters, in effect. The crucial claim is not that these encounters with the camera were spontaneous, only that they were real.)

By contrast, when Griffith presents us with our first view of Susie in *True Heart Susie* – it is also our first view of Lillian Gish, of course – we are not authorized to take it as "documenting" a real encounter between camera and subject. As we have said, the film's prevailing fiction is that it is Susie, not Lillian Gish, who is real, hence that there was no real encounter between camera and subject, for the camera that filmed Lillian Gish has no reality within Susie's world.

To act as if she were Susie, Lillian Gish must act as if no camera were really in her presence. But how is it possible for Lillian Gish to have a real relationship with Griffith's camera, a relationship through which Susie is capable of being revealed, if in the face of the camera she must act as if no real camera were present?

For Susie to act as if no real camera were present, there is no reality she must deny. For Lillian Gish to act as if no real camera were present, on the other hand, she must deny the reality of the camera that is in her presence, the camera that is really filming her. To deny the reality of this camera's presence, Lillian Gish must relate to it, acknowledge its presence, in a particular way. And if the camera is to sustain the fiction that it is Susie who is real, it must relate to Lillian Gish in a particular way, too; it must be used in a way that at once acknowledges her presence and denies her reality.

A camera is a physical object made of metal, glass, and (these days) plas-

tic; a dog can acknowledge the reality of its presence by licking it. But when the camera is doing its singular work, when it is filming Nanook, for example, it is no mere object. Through its presence, viewers who are "really" absent are also magically present, as it were. In the presence of a camera, what is absent is also present, what is present is also absent. Not recognizing this, a dog does not recognize what is present – what is also absent – when a camera is present.

What makes it possible for Griffith to use the camera in a way that acknowledges Lillian Gish's presence even as it denies her reality is the fundamental condition of human existence that real human beings are also characters, imaginary creatures of fantasy and myth, and are also actors capable of becoming who they are imagined to be. What makes it possible, in turn, for Lillian Gish 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 represents. 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. At his most regressive, as in the disquieting passage in which Nanook's family visits the "trade post of the white man," Flaherty attempts to deny that Nanook and his family are capable of participating as equals in the making of *Nanook of the North*, attempts to disavow rather than acknowledge what is revealed to, and by, his own camera.

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"; 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 the animal kingdom.)

In narrative terms, 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 as it does of titles like "This is the way Nanook uses moss for fuel" and "The kyak's 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 most documentary-like passages in the film. It is also one of the most impersonal. It is Nanook whom we view "using moss for fuel," for example, but it might just as well be any other Eskimo; revealing Nanook's character through the way he relates to the camera is hardly a purpose of this shot.

This passage culminates in a spectacular image: Men carry a huge crate, evidently containing furs, 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 an awesome display of the glorious bounty of nature and an appalling testimonial to the magnitude of the slaughter sanctioned and exploited by the "white trader" (that is, by the fur trade that also sponsors Flaherty's film).

By following this haunting 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 impersonal "illustration" of the Eskimo way of life – actually, what it "illustrates" is the modern world's catastrophic intervention in that way of life – into an astonishing 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 ensuing shots, the trader remains offscreen. Even when he is visible within the frame, as he is in this shot, he is filmed very differently from Nanook. Indeed, the trader is framed in such a way as to identify him less with the camera's subject than with the camera itself: According to the title, Nanook is displaying this pelt to the trader, but he is really – at