

Article

Anustup Roy

Robert Flaherty: An Ethnographic Filmmaker?



Flaherty while shooting; (L-R) Frances Flaherty, Richard Leacock and Robert Flaherty

Introduction

The word 'ethnography' is derived from the Greek word ἔθνος (*ethnos*), which means "a company, later a people, nation" and graphy means "writing". Ethnography focuses on large cultural groups of people who interact over time. Ethnography is a

set of qualitative methods that are used in social sciences that focus on the inspection of social practices and interactions of people having common genealogy or ancestry or on similarities such as common language or dialect, history, society, culture or nation.

An ethnographic work must contain the following elements:-

(1) The major focus of an ethnographic work must be a description of a whole culture or some definable unit of culture; (2) an ethnographic work must be informed by an implicit or explicit theory of culture which causes the statements within the ethnography to be ordered in a particular way; (3) an ethnographic work must contain statements which reveal the methodology of the author; and (4) an ethnographic work must employ a distinctive lexicon-an anthropological argot. Each element will now be discussed and elaborated upon.^[1]

We can define Ethnographic film as: a practice of documentary films and of visual anthropology informed by the theories, methods, and vocabulary of the discipline of anthropology, involving use of the film camera as a research tool in documenting whole, or definable parts of, cultures with methodological awareness and precision.^[2] Ethnographic film is a part of intensive study through audio visual documentation about some ethnic groups and to develop knowledge about those groups. It also develops and documents general ideas about ethnicity, especially about their cultural heritage.

Robert J Flaherty:

Flaherty was one of seven children born to Robert Henry Flaherty and Susan Klockner. Due to exposure from his father's work as an iron ore explorer, he developed a natural curiosity for people of other cultures. Flaherty was an acclaimed still photographer. In 1910 Sir William Mackenzie hired Robert Flaherty to prospect

the vast area east of the Hudson Bay for its railway and mineral potential. A self-proclaimed explorer, Flaherty was inducted into the Royal Geographic Society of England for his (re)discovery of the main island of the Belcher group in Hudson Bay in 1914. Over the course of several years and through four lengthy expeditions Flaherty had frequent contact with the region's Inuit (Eskimo) people. He was taken by their traditional survival skills, and found an unexpected spirituality in this northern extreme—a profound cultural grace and dignity in a wickedly unforgiving environment. He also knew that he was witness to and a harbinger of its obliteration. What could be done? On one of his expeditions, Flaherty brought along a motion picture camera. Then it became a milestone in the history of documentary films.

Flaherty's Early Films:-

Nanook of the North (also known as *Nanook of the North: a Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic*) is a 1922 film by Robert Flaherty portraying life of Nanook and his family. This comprises of his wife, Nyala, their children and the dog, Comock. Audience observes Nanook, with his family, hunting a walrus, building an igloo, travelling, searching for food, and trading in Canadian Arctic. The walrus and seal hunting sequences explore the struggle of the communities to eke out an existence. In the "Trade Post of the White Man" scene, Nanook and his family arrive in a kayak at the trading post and one family member after another emerge from a small kayak. Going to trade his hunt from the year, including the skins of foxes, seals, and polar bears, Nanook comes in contact with the white man and there is a

interaction as the two cultures meet. The trader plays music on a gramophone and tries to explain how a man 'cans' his voice. Bending forward and staring at the machine, Nanook puts his ear closer as the trader cranks the mechanism once more. He even bites the gramophone record to feel it.

Man of Aran is a 1934 film directed by Robert Flaherty about life of people on Aran Islands in the western coast of Ireland. It portrays characters living in pre modern conditions, documenting their daily routines such as fishing off high cliffs, farming potatoes where there is little soil, and hunting for huge basking sharks to get liver oil for lamps. Some situations are fabricated, such as one scene in which the shark fishermen are almost lost at sea in a sudden gale. Additionally, the family members shown are not actually related, having been chosen from among the islanders for their photogenic qualities. The film ends with another storm sequence where the distressed family on shore watch the prolonged struggle of the boat to land safely against the elements.



Flaherty observing a film roll

Conclusion

Flaherty is considered a pioneer of documentary films. He was one of the first to combine documentary subjects with a fiction-film like narrative. He is often called as father of American documentary films. With, *Nanook of the north*, Flaherty begun a series of films on the same theme; humanity against the elements. This continued in, *Moana: a Romance of the Golden Age* and *Man of Aran*. All these films employ the same rhetorical devices; the dangers of nature and the struggle of the communities to eke out an existence. Even these films reinvented past cultures to construct exotic documents of humanity. Flaherty's early films employed individual protagonists around which he spun a web of episodic accounts of the struggle to survive, often in harsh environments.

In its earliest years (1895–1902) film production was dominated by actualities—moving pictures of real people in real places. Robert Flaherty's great innovation was simply to combine the two forms of actuality, infusing the exotic journey with the details of indigenous work and play and life. To some extent, Flaherty's film resists classification precisely because the documentary did not exist as an identifiable genre in the early 1920s. What existed was a practice of making actuality's 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.^[3]

Though Robert Flaherty being called as a father figure of documentary films (John Grierson coined the term documentary in a review of *Moana*), in reality he diverted from actuality. He had a noble cause of presenting the ethnic groups in their own rights who devoid of any help from modern civilisation. But in doing so he portrayed them so primitive which was not reality. As in ‘man of Aran’ a man is seen levelling the foundation of the garden by throwing a huge boulder, instead of employing a sledge hammer, in numerous instances. He even created new customs (such as shark fishing in “man of Aran”) for his films according to his preconceptions about the ethnic communities he filmed. He even imported Scottish shark fishermen, with a boat used in shark fishing, to instruct the locals.^[4] Flaherty also dramatised sequences as can be seen in a sequence, where a woman is shown carrying seaweed along the Inishmore cliffs during a storm; eventually the accumulated fertiliser is spread on a garden being laid near a cliff edge by the husband of the woman. Actually seaweed is collected only along low-lying shores twice a month at spring tides when the sea is absolutely calm, and this garden is located in an area neither before nor since utilised for farming, but chosen by Flaherty to take advantage of the breathtaking scenery and to exaggerate the hardships of island existence.^[5] Although, *Nanook of the North* (1922) 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.^[6] 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.^[7]

Flaherty’s films are a “great leap forward” in the history of documentary films especially about ethnic groups of interest because of the documentation of their life and culture. But his efforts have some limitations as ethnographic films because: He used enactment which is very vibrant in case of Nanook’s on-screen wife, Nyla, was not his wife. The role was played by Maggie Nujarluktuk, who was actually Alakariallak’s (Nanook’s) daughter-in-law.^[8] For portrayal of ethnicity, he broke reality, which in turn disturbs actuality for his vision of portrayal of ethnic groups in primitive way of life. Moreover he forced the audience to think in way he thought about the life of Inuits or people of Inishmore. Probably Flaherty tried to depict that, without the intrusion of western modernity those ethnic groups were self-sufficient.

Works cited:

- 1) <https://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/ruby/is.html>
- 2) Kuhn, A. & Westwell, "Ethnographic film” In A Dictionary of Film Studies
- 3) Alan Marcus: *Nanook of the North as Primal Drama*, page 202, *Visual Anthropology*
- 4) John C. Messenger, Jr. : *Man of Aran Revisited: An Anthropological Critique*, page 363, *Visual Anthropology*
- 5) John C. Messenger, Jr. : *Man of Aran Revisited: An Anthropological Critique*, page 363, *Visual Anthropology*
- 6) William Rothman: ‘Filmmaker as Hunter’, page 2

7) William Rothman: 'Filmmaker as Hunter', page 2

8) Alan Marcus: Nanook of the North as Primal Drama, page 207, Visual Anthropology

Reference material:-

Flaherty, Robert. "How I Filmed *Nanook of the North*." In *Film Makers on Film Making*, ed. Harry M. Geduld,

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.

Barsam, Richard. *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*.

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Picture Courtesy: International Centre for Photography

Mr. Anustup Roy, a Postgraduate scholar of Film Studies Department, Jadavpur University, made a short experimental film. Based in Kolkata