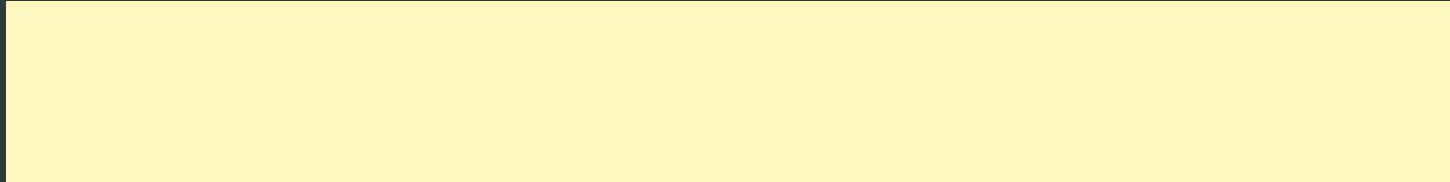


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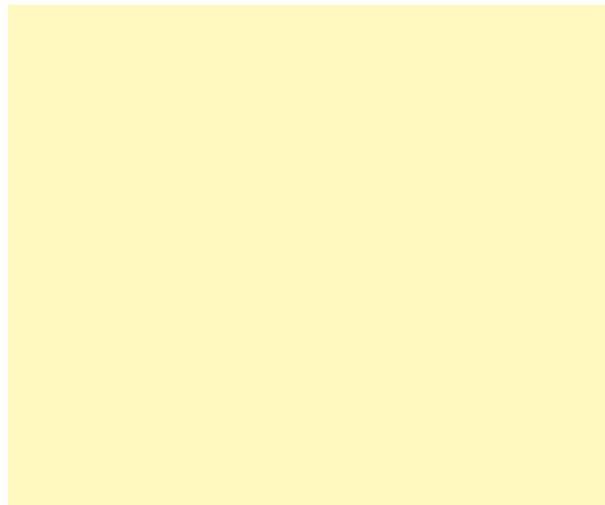
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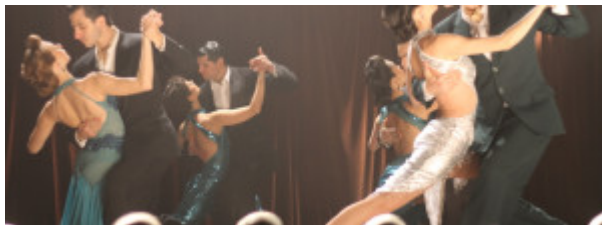
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# Robert Flaherty, The Spirit of Craftsmanship

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 nanook\_igloo

By Greg de Cuir Jr.

*The following essay is reprinted on Nonfics by permission of its author and the International Documentary Film Festival Belgrade (BELDOCS). It originally appeared in the festival's 2016 catalog tied to this year's Robert Flaherty retrospective.*

Few names tower over the history of international cinema like that of **Robert Flaherty**. He has been called the father of the documentary — and that just on the strength of his game-changing debut feature, *Nanook of the North*. He has also been called one of cinema's great fallible romantics and neocolonialists. Indeed, one can make the argument that contemporary considerations more often excoriate Flaherty for profaning the very rules of nonfiction cinema that he created, which of course means that critics still have no idea what documentary is or what it should be. That speaks to how far ahead of his time Flaherty really was. He broke the mold before it even had a chance to set, before anyone even knew what it represented. Alfred Hitchcock once said that the critic who speaks to him about the logic of his cinema is an incredibly boring man. Adhering to the credulous had no primacy in the master of suspense's oeuvre. I would make a similar proposition for Flaherty regarding slippery and presumptuous concepts like “reality” or “truth — and I would go so far as to say the same for documentary in general. It seems perverse to speak of such concepts in unproblematic terms in cinematic art of the 21st century. Let us then bring Flaherty into the present and concern ourselves with the contours of his art rather than testing his ideological constructs, which is a battle of diminishing returns long ago fought and won by his detractors. We are searching for Flaherty's spirit in this retrospective, as the spirit can always be reclaimed even if the body cannot.

A few lines earlier I evoked the notion of art, but I would really like to speak about Flaherty and his cinema in terms of craft. Usually an artist and a craftsman are positioned in opposition to each other, with the former celebrated as a mythological ideal and the latter a lesser point on the continuum. However, I believe in the inherent virtue and modesty of the craftsman. The effort to attain form and the practical application of that formal construct into society are laudable and selfless ambitions. For example, critics are quick to jab Flaherty with charges of Orientalism and fabrication in relation to his film *Nanook of the North*. Those same critics stop short of discussing Flaherty setting up an ad hoc film laboratory in the North and making collaborators of his subjects, teaching them the craft of cinematography (though granted, in the service of his vision). Here we have Flaherty the pedagogue, and we might also speak of Flaherty the collectivist. Indeed we need to speak of a lot of Flahertys, as should be the case with any human being, flaws and all.

We do not have to search far for Flaherty's emphasis on and celebration of craftsmanship. It is there already in *Nanook of the North* in the brilliant scenes that depict the Inuit family building an igloo. The way the snow and ice blocks are measured and cut to perfection, the deliberate manner in which the igloo frame is raised before the camera eye. There is something constructivist about Flaherty's cinema, and indeed Sergei Eisenstein admitted that Flaherty was a major influence on him and his colleagues in forging a new Soviet film art. The dynamic igloo construction also includes a meta-component as a facsimile that could be used for shooting interiors, shaved in half to allow a maximum of light to enter the space and functioning as a mini-studio. The ice blocks carefully assembled here represent the building blocks of a modern cinema beginning to take shape.

In another example of the exaltation of craft, Flaherty's second production, the short film *The Pottery Maker* (commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City), is all about the process, the method. A little girl watches the craftsman at work while inter-titles explain the

particulars of pottery-making. What quickly becomes apparent in this beautiful short is how the various mechanical wheels that structure the craftsman's apparatus and rotate the clay to be formed mimic the look and effect of film reels turning on a projector or a flatbed, or even a camera. Pottery-making, like glass blowing, is a craft of sculpting in time. Indeed, in the short film *Industrial Britain*, the narrator remarks that speed (or movement in time) is the determining factor in the practice of glass blowing. Cinema can also be considered sculpting in time, whether fast or slow, so *The Pottery Maker* is another condensed meta-reflection on film art, perhaps also something of a hidden key to Flaherty's oeuvre.

Already in 1934, we see Flaherty reach the peak of his craft in *Man of Aran*. The sketching of harsh life on the Aran Islands in Ireland has an impressionistic quality, and one can feel a confident Flaherty working on pure instinct. The *mise-en-scène* in *Man of Aran* is grounded in a discourse of sobriety, but the freeform editing is characterized by modernist fragmentation. This film is exemplary of the concept of kinesthesia, theorized by Slavko Vorkapic as an ideal state of cinematic language and visual expression. Multiple shots collide with each other to reproduce the unforgiving environment of the Aran Islands. In fact, the entire film can be read as one long montage sequence concerned with rhythm, tension, experimentation. Flaherty was not only a proficient stylist but also a good ethnographer. The various crafts of the residents of Aran are on full display, from hunting to farming to refining shark oil for lamp fuel. Method and process are distilled to a sparse extreme here, to the point where they become indistinguishable from the specific operations of cinema. One can observe this in the sequence of the farmer breaking huge rocks with a mallet and the multiple shots that also break down and segment his actions, almost lending him extra energy through the collisions that are compounded. Also, the coiled ropes that the fishermen use to haul in sharks are animated by the powerful rhythm of the editing, rapidly cut together in successive images that imbue them with an elemental charge. Flaherty seems to be trying to unlock or translate the potential of one tool with another — the ropes with the camera, or better yet the chain of images and celluloid assembled in the editing process. *Man of Aran* is a veritable treatise on the nature of cinema, and to watch it is to participate in the attempt to crack open the form and expose the genetic code that lies within.

These basic building blocks of cinema are given corollaries in both *Nanook of the North* and *Man of Aran*. The blocks of stone that are broken down and reassembled to construct fields for growing potatoes are like the blocks of ice that are cut out from their natural state and repurposed to build a home. Here we have a perfect symbolization of Flaherty's method, indeed the documentary method in general in its aim to capture and restructure reality. Those building blocks are mass-produced in *Industrial Britain*, ultimately raising modern cities in *The Twenty-Four Dollar Island*. Material links of this sort abound in Flaherty's cinema as symbols, motifs, actions. Maybe this tells us something about the larger Flaherty project. His trans-filmic comparative analyses are meant to equalize, to show that all men are the same everywhere — if you examine their elemental building blocks. Flaherty's project is also about celebrating the renewing power of collective work. We can see that clearly in most of his films. The spirit of craftsmanship is a team spirit. Even though Flaherty did not seem to be a good collaborator, feuding with the many strong creative people he worked with like John Grierson and F.W. Murnau, eventually excusing himself from their joint projects, the ultimate message of his cinema is that community matters. This is an important and telling message for someone considered to be an archetypal independent

filmmaker. We can locate Flaherty's romanticism most readily in this spirit of extended family, of community, of teamwork, rather than in a quasi-conservative effort to turn back the clock to an idealized past that may or may not conform to stereotypes or actuality.

The principle of social synthesis is explored in depth in ***The Land***, a medium-length work that Flaherty made on commission from the United States Department of Agriculture. Men of all types are presented and equalized in their struggle with the natural environment, from African-American and Chinese-American farmers through Filipino-American and Mexican-American farm workers. This is Flaherty's portraiture of the rich diversity of the United States positioned against the increasing lack of rich diversity in its soil. The dialectical proposition has a scientific component in its focus on and discussion of erosion and the man-made depletion of natural resources. *The Land* is also a cautionary, moral tale. A biblical passage from the Book of Job, Chapter 31, is quoted, opening with the question "If my land cry out against me," evoking furrows wet with saline tears rather than the nutrients of rain, lamenting the broken spirits of its tenants. But the spirit of craftsmanship cannot be broken so easily in Flaherty's oeuvre. The film ends on a positive note about the power of collectivity, with six million farmers beginning to think together and act together, with miraculous machines aiding in the struggle to govern and plan a new world. Indeed, when this film appeared in 1941, the Second World War was emerging just on the horizon, and which would ultimately leave the old world in its ashen wake. This war would do much more than break spirits — it broke bodies, breaking national boundaries, as well. *The Land* evokes this break also with regards to Flaherty's engagement with cinema. He would only complete one other film as a director after this. The new world that he had helped to bring to fruition, ironically enough, was not accommodating to him and the particulars of his craft.

That final Flaherty film would be ***Louisiana Story*** in 1948, which depicts the same rural American populations that suffered from exploitation of the land, that came into conflict with heavy industry and as a result big business. The enterprise in question here is oil. Like in his earlier feature ***Elephant Boy*** (co-directed with Zoltan Korda), here we have a young and innocent boy associated with nature, encountering the crude interests of foreign capital — though in *Louisiana Story* the capital is only foreign to the natural ecosystem, not the boundaries of the nation. *Louisiana Story* moves like a dream or a fable; its protagonist even has a wonderfully literary name: Alexander Napoleon Ulysses Le Tour. Indeed, the young hero is seen constantly traveling by canoe, but mostly his journey is an internal one, measured by an awakening consciousness of the modern world encroaching on him. Flaherty again displays his sensitivity to the natural environment, this time through lush images shot by Richard Leacock, who would win notoriety a few decades later as an initiator of the Direct Cinema documentary style. *Louisiana Story* is full of visual poetry, suffused with images of wildlife, expressionistic in both its detailing of the dense clutter of the bayou and also the intricate web of machinery that comprises the oil well. Flaherty the ethnographer surfaces again in this film, detailing the language, stories, and even songs of the Cajun family at the center of the narrative. In the final act of the film the catastrophes of underwater drilling are enacted, though also averted. Flaherty was working on commission from Standard Oil Company, though one can still feel a subtle critical spirit underlying the project. That critical edge cannot be mistaken at the climactic moment of the film after the oil rig explosion and the well is capped. The young Alexander Napoleon climbs atop the well cap, celebrating a victory and a position above machinery for humanity, for the local culture over the homogenizing force of progress, for the



natural over the artificial. This is also the final victory for Flaherty's cinema.

If one considers the French New Wave and the journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s as something of a climactic point for the ascendancy of international film art, it becomes interesting to note these cineastes' relative lack of interest in Robert Flaherty. He would seem to be a top notch early case study for the *politique des auteurs*. Maybe the young French critics-turned-filmmakers did not celebrate Flaherty because he was independent of and working parallel to the Hollywood system, while they tended to favor those within the system with the potential to either refine or subvert it. Maybe also because Flaherty's brand of nonfiction would not be continued, developed, and recognized until Jean Rouch began making films in the 1950s, and who indeed was an inspirational father figure to the French New Wave. If Flaherty's cinema is thought to be like the inhospitable terrain depicted on the Aran Islands, perhaps because of his bending and fracturing of nascent documentary codes and the ethics of representation, then one must search in the deep cracks of cinematic conformity to find the fertile soil that can be used to nourish. Again, the body may not be salvageable but the spirit of craftsmanship resides in the joints. As the immortal artist Michelangelo stated, and as quoted in a documentary on him that Flaherty produced, "To escape death I attempt to bind my soul to my work." Those binds, those splices, contain the seeds of art that allow it to grow, to live, to thrive, and to touch us all.

*Greg de Cuir Jr. is the artistic director of BELDOCS, which runs May 12-18, 2016.*

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- Jean Rouch
- John Grierson
- Louisiana Story
- Man of Aran
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