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January 30 – March 1, 2015

The Lost Worlds of Robert Flaherty

“First I was an explorer, then I was an artist.” - *Robert Flaherty*

His own story draped in myths and mists, pioneering filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty (1884 – 1951) gained his mammoth status in film history from assiduously carving poetry and legends out of real lives. As adventurous, determined and self-reliant as any character in his films, Flaherty trekked to dramatic, remote regions to experience, record and if necessary, recreate the remaining vestiges of the “primitive” lives he deeply revered. Even when working with subject matter closer to home, Flaherty seemed to actively collaborate with “reality” to make the translation to film as awe-inspiring and deeply felt as the wonders of life and ideas were to him. Part poet, part explorer, he never strictly conformed to the ideal of objective documentation or authenticity—a continual source of academic and ethical contention—instead, he exploited the veracity of film and its persuasive powers in order to restore humanity to a more natural state, living in harmony with one another.

As a restless, intelligent boy in Michigan, Flaherty spent little time in school and more time living a nomadic, frontier life with his father, a mining engineer. Prospecting for gold and iron ore from camp to camp in Canada, the young Flaherty learned how to survive in the wilderness from the miners and the local Inuit. In the midst of this exploration, he discovered his future wife and lifelong collaborator Frances J. Hubbard during a brief sojourn at the Michigan College of Mines. Finally after a second treacherous expedition to the Hudson Bay area he bought a Bell and Howell 16mm camera and took a three-week course in photography from the Eastman Company in order to simply make a visual record of the fascinating lives and customs he witnessed in the frozen, desolate Canadian North.

Focused on correcting the troubling gaps he recognized in his initial efforts to record Inuit life, Flaherty stumbled into the depths of a new obsession. As would be the protocol for *Moana* and *Man of Aran*, he set to work building an ad-hoc film processing lab in the challenging Arctic conditions and trained his Inuit friends to be his technicians. Immersed in the culture for over two years, Flaherty embraced the new artform as a transformative vehicle to show modern audiences that without all the complications and trappings of modern civilization, lives could be happily lived—even under nature’s harshest conditions.

Working to present a form of life untainted by Western civilization, of course, Flaherty tainted it himself by rearranging it to serve his own romantic ideal which the cultures in question often could not even maintain. “Sometimes you have to lie,” Flaherty explained. “One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit.” Shortly after *Nanook of the North* took the world by storm and later *Man of Aran*, questions of authenticity arose, but not of sincerity.

As if convinced of the essential goodness in all, Flaherty’s endlessly inquisitive camera eye pursued creatures expressing themselves purely, instinctively through their direct interactions with each other and their environment. Observing patiently and intently through long-focus, detailed tableaux and an intuitive,

innovative use of the gyro tripod to follow movement, he embedded scenes with a naturalistic suspense and drama. Known for an extravagant shooting ratio, he conferred an almost mystical power to the very process of filmmaking, asking the film to show *him* the story. This was not straightforward education or entertainment; it was art. Flaherty preferred shots and stories that did not reveal everything, leaving an audience confronted with his passionate, sublime visions “wanting to know more.”

His adventures on location directly reflected in the drama onscreen, Flaherty overcame enormous physical and technical challenges filming in remote, rugged locations, only to confront more insurmountable ones within the precarious wilds of commercial film distribution and studio production. Flaherty was an esteemed figure in his time, yet continually frustrated by the creative binds of the box office and those who could not comprehend his unusual methods. A colorful, tumultuous career riddled with forsaken films and unrealized projects, Flaherty's trailblazing path echoed that of another passionate, independent spirit, Orson Welles—to whom Flaherty sold a story for Welles' own unfinished film *It's All True*.

Over the years, Flaherty's films have benefitted from preservation, restoration and most recently, dramatic rediscovery. His daughter Monica Flaherty took the restoration of *Moana* one step further by meticulously recreating a naturalistic soundtrack for her father's formerly silent work, and was able to finally complete the extended process on DCP last year. In 2012, curators at Harvard's Houghton Library found a long lost nitrate print of Flaherty's short film *Oidhche Sheanchais (A Night of Storytelling)*. Aside from being a precious missing piece of Flaherty's spare output, it is the first sound film in the Gaelic language, and it features the cast of *Man of Aran*. This momentous find was restored to 35mm and premiered at *Il Cinema Ritrovato* in Bologna last year.

Fully immersing himself in their lives and involving the subjects in the filmmaking process, Flaherty created a unique documentary form which seen from today's vantage—as the concept of “documentary” is continually widened and challenged—approaches a more experimental and innovative hybrid shape. Flaherty's fearless ventures into the unknown were exhilarating turning points which ultimately opened the door to endless possibilities in the worlds of both fictional and ethnographic filmmaking. — *Brittany Gravely*

The Harvard Film Archive is thrilled to present a retrospective of Flaherty's work including *Moana with Sound*, the 2014 2K digital picture and sound restoration of Monica Flaherty's 1980 16mm sound version of the 1926 35mm silent film by Robert Flaherty and Frances Hubbard Flaherty. The film will be presented by Sami van Ingen, visual artist and great-grandson of Robert and Frances Flaherty, who produced the restoration with film curator and historian Bruce Posner.

We are also presenting the local premiere of *Oidhche Sheanchais* which will be accompanied by a symposium focused on the film's significance and history Thursday, February 19 from 2pm – 4pm at the Harvard Film Archive, followed by a reception at Houghton Library. The afternoon will include presentations by Catherine McKenna and Natasha Sumner of Harvard's Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures, among others.

Special thanks: Anita Reher, Sarie Horowitz—the Flaherty; Fleur Buckley—British Film Institute; Steven Hill, Todd Wiener—UCLA Film and Television Archive.

Film descriptions by Brittany Gravely, Carson Lund and David Pendleton.

Live Musical Accompaniment by Jeff Rapsis
Friday January 30 at 7pm

Nanook of the North

Directed by Robert Flaherty. With Nanook, Nyla, Alee



US 1922, 35mm, b/w, silent, 79 min

Remarkably matter-of-fact in its blow-by-blow depiction of the everyday struggle to stay alive in the Arctic hinterlands of Canada's Hudson Bay, *Nanook of the North* expresses Flaherty's reverence for his Inuit subjects in every carefully framed shot. The film, which emerged from a return trip up North after celluloid from a preceding adventure went up in flames, unfolds as a series of long takes interspersed by annotative, occasionally poetic intertitles, all of which serve to highlight seemingly mundane tasks required for survival in the frigid terrain. Beyond its educational function, though, Flaherty's profoundly empathetic intimacy with his subjects—the resilient, prodigious seal-and-walrus-hunter Nanook and his weathered clan—heightens what seems on the surface to be merely a dry informational pamphlet. While many of his subsequent projects felt the pressures of a variety of forces (Hollywood studios, production houses, commissioning industries), *Nanook* shows the effects of complete artistic freedom, its constraint-free conditions yielding an unmatched sensitivity to climate, labor and the simultaneous bond and vulnerability of humans to both.



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Sunday February 8 at 5pm

Louisiana Story

Directed by Robert Flaherty. With Joseph Boudreaux, Lionel LeBlanc, Frank Hardy

US 1948, 35mm, b/w, 77 min

Remarkably laissez-faire with its funding, Standard Oil Company commissioned Flaherty to positively portray oil exploration in the Louisiana bayou. With echoes of *Elephant Boy*, Flaherty places an adventurous, superstitious Cajun youth named Alexander Napoleon Ulysses Latour at the fulcrum of two equally powerful forces: nature and industry. The towering derricks and their dangerous, noisy inner workings have invaded the young explorer's idyllic, animal-populated world, and Flaherty accords both realms thoughtful consideration. Alexander's rural family and the oil workers—who good-naturedly attempt to understand one another—are unpolished non-actors mostly playing themselves. They enter into that peculiar dimension of heartfelt reenactment that feels as innocent and honest as the antics of young Alexander and his pet raccoon. *35mm restored print courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive; preservation funded by The Film Foundation, AFI Challenge Grant for Film Preservation, American Movie Classics, and the Academy Foundation.*



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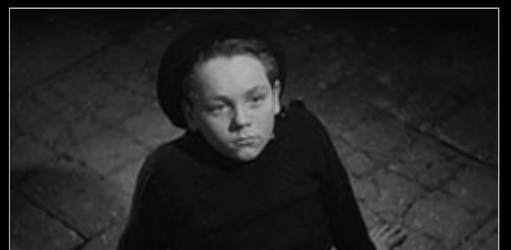
Monday March 9 at 7pm(rescheduled from earlier cancellation due to storm)

A Night of Storytelling (*Oidhche Sheanchais*)

Directed by Robert Flaherty. With Seáinín Tom Ó Dioráin, Maggie Dillane, Michaeleen Dillane

Ireland 1935, 35mm, b/w, 12 min. Gaelic with English subtitles

A lost film until the 2013 discovery of a 35mm nitrate print at Harvard University, Robert Flaherty's 1935 short film *Oidhche*



Sheanchais offers a disarming and fascinating distillation of his ardent belief in cinema as a mythopoeic art and folkloric tradition. To record the soundtrack of *Man of Aran* Flaherty brought the principal members of his cast to London, inviting Colman "Tiger" King, Maggie Durrane, Patch "Red Beard" Ruadh and young Michaeleen to retrospectively add dialogue, in English and in pre-Jean Rouch fashion, to select scenes of the film. During their extended stay in London Flaherty reassembled the nuclear family invented for *Man of Aran* for a second film commissioned by the Department of Education, gathering his four "actors" around a sound studio hearth, together with famed *seanchai* (story-teller) Seáinín Tom Ó Dioráin. In striking contrast to *Man of Aran*, the resultant film, *Oidhche Sheanchais*, was recorded entirely in the dialect of the Aran Islands and is, in fact, considered the first talkie in the Irish language. Speaking and singing in their native tongue, Durrane, Ruadh and especially O'Diorain deliver beautifully animated performances that bring a rare intimacy to *Oidhche Sheanchais*, making clear Flaherty's unique relationship to his actors and giving new human dimension to these now legendary men, woman and child of Aran.



The surging, symphonic poetry of *Man of Aran* is powerfully emblemized in Flaherty's bold imagery of the restless North Atlantic whose unyielding waves and currents unceasingly threaten the fishermen's boats and very lives. All of Flaherty's feature films are anchored in just such a mythologization of Man locked in an eternal struggle with Nature. *Oidhche Sheanchais* stands apart, then, as a purely interior film, set entirely within a sound stage and without any of the lyrical nature imagery so central to Flaherty's visionary cinema. Yet, despite its explicit interiority and literal enclosure within an artificial studio set, *Oidhche Sheanchais* remains, like Flaherty's other films, an adventurous exploration of a vast, uncharted land. For *Oidhche Sheanchais* is, above all, a film about the interior yet fathomless world of the imagination, a limitless realm from which emerges the song and story shared by the fireside group, each a fantasy echo of central themes of *Man of Aran*. In this way Ó Dioráin's fiery telling of a well-known tale of Irish water spirits who tempt yet are ultimately tamed by an Aran fisherman, makes explicit the animistic and deeply Romantic vision of nature animating both Flaherty's cinema and the folkloric world that so inspired him. And Maggie Durrane's moving rendition of the Irish ballad, recalls the longing, melancholy and even dark tragedy which defines lives dependent upon the sea.

As both a figure of a world out of time and a kind of a portal to the imagination, *Oidhche Sheanchais'* minimal set also beautifully recalls the cottage hearth tended by Maggie Durrane in *Man of Aran*; a miniaturized and seemingly self-sustaining world, a domestic island, with chickens and lambs warming themselves alongside the baby's cradle while a kettle heats above the fire. An embodiment of the "infinite immensity" described by Gaston Bachelard, the hearth fire is also where young Michaeleen, in one *Man of Aran's* loveliest moments, drifts to sleep, followed by a montage of images of the restless ocean that seem to spring from the boy's dreams of joining his father's oceanic adventure. As backdrop to O'Diorain's spirited story-telling, the dancing shadow and flame of the hearth fire in *Oidhche Sheanchais* is also, of course, a figure for cinema itself, bringing a meta-cinematic dimension to Flaherty's reanimation of ancient tradition. As Flaherty's first work with direct sound, the film crackles with the miracle of the new technology and its ability to so vividly render the cadence and lilt of the Aran dialect spoken and sung by the actors. And yet the figure of Tiger King, the Man of Aran himself, seems still locked in another realm, standing fixed in a statuesque pose, not speaking a word, a figure then for the lost and receding world of the silent cinema.

Followed by

Man of Aran

Directed by Robert Flaherty. With Colman "Tiger" King, Maggie Durrane, Michaeleen Dillane

UK 1934, 35mm, b/w, 77 min

By his third film, Flaherty's formula was well established: unsparing, process-oriented portraits of resourceful men and their clans eking out a living off the grid. This time the location of choice was the



rocky seashore of Ireland, and funding was sourced from the native country. The result, *Man of Aran*, is a film reverent of its resilient protagonist even as it acknowledges his sure fate to one day “meet his master—the sea.” Befitting this resigned tone, Flaherty alternates furiously between the macro and the micro, intercutting God’s eye perspectives and shots from the level of his vulnerable subjects. Brisk montage editing—notably in a suspenseful sequence dramatizing a two-day attempt to capture a basking shark—is juxtaposed against more contemplative landscape imagery that emphasizes the overwhelming force of the ocean environment, always reducing its inhabitants’ dubbed voices to unintelligible wails of resistance. The gendered titles of Flaherty’s early films often bely the fact that these group portraits are equally about the women in each respective male character’s life, and in this case the protagonist’s tough wife emerges as one of the more memorable faces from Flaherty’s young career.



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Introduction by Sami van Ingen

Friday February 20 at 7pm

Moana with Sound

Directed by Robert Flaherty and Frances Hubbard Flaherty. With Ta’avale Uni, Fa’agase Súa-Filo, Pe’a Taulealea

US 1926/1980, DCP, b/w, 98 min. Samoan with English intertitles

In 1923, a small production office that would later become Paramount Pictures sent Flaherty to the Polynesian islands in hopes of recreating the success of *Nanook of the North*. The resulting film, *Moana*, has been credited by many as cinema’s first docufiction, as Flaherty consciously collaborated with his indigenous Samoan subjects from day one. His idyllic portrait of the tropical community puts considerable emphasis on daily rituals of survival and has no shortage of exotic spectacle: an able-bodied youngster climbing a slanting palm tree hundreds of feet high to hunt down coconuts, a group of fishermen thwarting off incoming waves in a canoe, organic feasts being prepared over hot coals, and a large-scale tribal dance. The film introduces a romanticized Western perspective through Flaherty’s focus on a budding romance between two villagers, as well as his incorporation of a masculine rite of passage that may or may not have been authentic to the community. Ethical questions aside, however, *Moana* compellingly communicates cinema’s potential to construct alternate realities more blissful than our own.



Originally a silent film, the 1926 *Moana* was given a soundtrack in 1980 by Robert and Frances’ daughter Monica Flaherty—who had accompanied them to Samoa when she was three—using field recordings taken from the same locations as well as re-created dialogue, some of which is spoken by original cast members. The resulting 16mm film, *Moana with Sound*, was given a 2K digital picture and sound restoration released last year by Bruce Posner and Sami van Ingen.

Courtesy of Sami van Ingen and Bruce Posner in collaboration with Alpha-Omega Digital, British Film Institute National Archive, Degeto Film, Deluxe Media-Chace Audio, DuArt, Film Preservation Associates, Harbor Picture Company, Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center, Library of Congress National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, Meguru Film Sound, New Zealand Archive of Film, Television and Sound Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua Me Ngā Taonga Kōrero, Park Road Post Production.

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Saturday February 21 at 7pm

Elephant Boy

Directed by Robert Flaherty and Zoltán Korda. With Sabu, W.E. Holloway, Walter Hudd
UK 1937, 35mm, b/w, 85 min

Even within the docu-fictional Flaherty oeuvre, *Elephant Boy* stands out as an exotic hybrid of studio style attempting to corral Flaherty's open-ended, observational adoration of regional authenticity and naturalism. London's Denham Studios financed Flaherty's journey to India to recreate a story from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* with an all-native cast. His crew soon discovered the charismatic orphan and elephant handler Sabu, who would star in the title role and quickly rise to international fame. Shooting was rife with genuine hazards, cinematic feats and animal wrangling, with a few of the more astounding stunts—including an elephant cautiously stepping over a baby in the road—making it to the screen. Distressed by Flaherty's non-narrative footage, the studio shot some expository scenes in London with professional white actors and quickly assembled an entertaining oddity. Depicting a deceptively harmonious portrait of British rule, the film's central charms derive from the tenderly shot scenes of elephants and their remarkable rapport with Sabu. *Print courtesy of the British Film Institute*



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Friday February 27 at 7pm

Tabu: A Story of the South Seas

Directed by F.W. Murnau. With Matahi, Reri, Hitu
US 1931, 35mm, b/w, 81 min

In late 1927, both Flaherty and acclaimed German filmmaker F.W. Murnau were nearing the end of a contract with Fox Studios. Both men were fed up with the Hollywood studio system, which for its part seemed to have no further use for them. Collaborating on a Romantic tale that combined Flaherty's penchant for protagonists struggling for physical survival with Murnau's fascination with the struggle for *spiritual* survival, the story focuses on a pair of young Tahitian lovers who flee oppressive tribal rule only to find themselves at the mercy of predators both in and out of the water. The scenario was a true collaboration between the two filmmakers, and Murnau relied heavily on Flaherty's experience with shooting in a remote location and working with a non-professional cast. However, as filming advanced, Murnau took over, and by the end of the shoot, Flaherty had more or less abandoned the film. Today, we recognize *Tabu* as Murnau's last masterpiece, but it could not have been made without Flaherty. *Print courtesy of Murnau Stiftung.*



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Sunday March 1 at 5pm

Twenty-Four Dollar Island



Directed by Robert Flaherty
US 1927, 35mm, b/w, 15 min

This stunningly beautiful and vibrant "city symphony" celebrates the Manhattan of 1927 from the machinery of the waterfront to the trees of Central Park. *Print courtesy of Bruce Posner*



Industrial Britain

Directed by Robert Flaherty
UK/US 1933, 35mm, b/w, 22 min

While in Europe attempting to slink into the Soviet Union to make a film, Flaherty was approached by London's Empire Marketing Board Film Unit to document craftsmanship within industrial Britain with his famously observant and respectful eye. EMB's head John Grierson—who actually coined the term "documentary" in his review of *Moana*—was forced to intervene when Flaherty quickly exceeded his government-allotted time and budget, feeling his way into the subject by filming "experiments." Flaherty and Grierson's mutual exasperation aside, the finished film transcends its propagandistic purpose and unveils a reverent ode to the ancient traditions of skilled craft and labor. Graceful, expressive images of workers weaving cloth, harvesting grain and making baskets give way to glass-blowing and pottery-making, then pouring metal, engineering airplane motors and disappearing into dark coal mines. "Behind the smoke, beautiful things are being made," states the narrator as human and machine function together in dignified harmony beneath Flaherty's earnest light. *Print courtesy of BFI*



A Night of Storytelling (*Oidhche Sheanchais*)

Directed by Robert Flaherty. With Seáinín Tom Ó Dioráin, Maggie Derrane, Michaeleen Dillane

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The Land

Directed by Robert Flaherty
US 1942, 16mm, b/w, 45 min

Flaherty was commissioned by the Department of Agriculture to make a film about the importance of farming in modern America. The result combines Flaherty's longstanding passion for tradition and community with his post-Grierson reconciliation with modernity. This wide-ranging film essay is even more episodic than *Industrial Britain*, with each segment resembling—in the words of Siegfried Kracauer—"fragments of a lost epic song that celebrated the immense life of the land; nothing is omitted and each episode is full of significance." *Print courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art*



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