

# Roswitha Skare

The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø

## ***The Many Nanooks of the North***

There is no such thing as the one original *Nanook of the North*. There are at least four different versions of *Nanook* with different prefaces and different film music from the English-speaking world alone. In addition to these differences within the film or on the borderline between internal and external, we also have to consider the changes in the film's exhibition during its transition from silent to sound and back to silent film again. Not only could the film be screened as a part of a larger program featuring both live and recorded items, as a part of a double feature, and as a single film, it could also be shown at different exhibition venues: theatres in different locations and of different sizes, schools and libraries after the Second World War, and at home on video or DVD after the film's restoration.

In addition to these differences, the materials surrounding the 1922 and the 1947 edition of the film have changed, too. If shown the different versions of the film, there is no doubt that the same audience would have different experiences. Even the relatively small changes between the restored editions with different forewords and scores would probably result in different readings of important scenes like the gramophone scene, the igloo-building scene or the scene entitled "Winter".

Even today, the audience can choose to watch the restored film on different platforms: on television, online, and of course on DVD and Blu-ray. Depending on what platform we choose, not only will we watch the film on screens of different sizes and with varying sound quality; we may also experience different versions of the film with different musical scores and prefaces. In addition to this, the choices between watching the whole film, only chapters, with or without extra material and so on will have an influence on an audience. For persons with a special interest

in *Nanook*, it is also possible to get a research screening in New York at MoMA's movie theatre or at the British Film Institute (BFI) in London, sitting in a small booth in the basement of the building, watching the film on a rather small screen, with the possibility of stopping the film whenever needed. Both options are without sound, and so those viewings highlight how unusual it is for us today to view images without sound.

Finally, an audience could attend a film festival like the Tromsø Silent Film Festival in Northern Norway, for instance, and experience the film with live music. Film festivals sometimes even present the same film in several screenings with different live accompaniments. While in a way this is much more of a one-time performance as it used to be during the silent film era, at the same time it is also more in line with the more modern invention of original music scores for film. During the silent era only a few films like David Wark Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) had original scores, while compiled music was the usual way to score films, as we saw in the examples suggested by Ernst Luz and James C. Bradford for *Nanook*.

While the main focus of this study has been on the English-speaking world, we can assume that there have also been differences in how the film was screened in different countries. We can assume not only that the subject of the film was more exotic in some countries than others, but also that there were different rules in different countries for what could be shown to an audience and what not. We know for instance that parts of the seal-hunt scene were cut due to censorship in Sweden<sup>1</sup>.

When *Nanook* premiered in 1922, the promotion focused on the film's uniqueness, presenting pictures of real Eskimos for the first time; pictures that were not staged, but lived. However, from the very beginning the film was not only acclaimed, but also criticised for its staging and for presenting a fictitious story (Stefansson, 1928). The 'truth' about Flaherty's relationship to the Inuit, about the real names of the persons involved in the film and so on has been discussed widely. In the summer of 1922, the film's claimed success was first and foremost a clever way to promote the film. Flaherty, and after his death his wife Frances, did all they could to keep the film alive and screened. Not only was the acquisition of the film by MoMA in 1938 important; so was the sound version of the film made after the Second World War. A new wave of interest in the film can be observed in connection with the film's restoration and subsequent availability for the home video market.

Today, *Nanook* is present not only in academic writings about film history, documentary film, or anthropological film, as well as at film festivals, but also in projects by other filmmakers and artists. These projects vary greatly, including the screening of *Nanook* as part of an exhibition about the Arctic, for instance at the

<sup>1</sup> On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1922, the film was given screening permission in Sweden, including screenings for children. Before cutting, the film was 1601 metres, after cutting it measured 1586 metres. The censorship card from Statens Biografbyrå from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1922 only mentions that parts of the seal-hunt scene are cut, but does not specify what parts.

Louisiana Art Museum in Denmark in 2013/14<sup>2</sup>, and the reuse of footage from the film in different projects. In the context of this study, I will briefly mention only two of these projects: Amber Cortes' video and sound installation *Retold Journeys* as part of an exhibition entitled *An African in Greenland* in NYC in the autumn of 2009<sup>3</sup>, and Simon Tarr's *Tia Mak* (2007), a "live VJ performance that remixes the classic documentary NANOOK OF THE NORTH into an avant-garde, pre-apocalyptic rock and roll show" (Tarr, 2007).

Other examples are not as much artistic, as anthropological projects, such as the abovementioned *Nanook Revisited* (1988) by French filmmakers Claude Masot and Sebastian Regnier. They follow in Flaherty's footsteps by taking his film back to the area where *Nanook* was filmed and to the Belcher Islands. Scenes from *Nanook* become part of their own new film about the descendants of Nanook and their reactions to the film. The two filmmakers are present as voiceovers in the film, talking about their project and also repeating many of the stories about the making of *Nanook* by quoting from Flaherty's diary. They both mention the status of the film and of Flaherty as the father of documentary, but also talk about the staging and re-enactments in the film. While watching *Nanook* together with the locals, the filmmakers record their reactions, also interviewing people who have a certain relationship to Nanook afterwards. The film presents a picture of modern life full of supermarkets, guns and snowmobiles, as well as garbage and dead animals, hinting at environmental problems in the area. At the same time, we see pictures cross-cut with pictures from *Nanook*, like the eating of raw seal right after the hunt, that indicate the relationship between past and present.

Then, of course, there is also comedy or parody like in *Documentary now!*, an American "mockumentary" television series that had its regular television premiere in August 2015. The second episode aired on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2015 under the title "Kunuk Uncovered" (Buono, Thomas, 2015). The film poster presents Kunuk in a hunting pose familiar from the ones seen in *Nanook*. The opening of *Kunuk the Hunter* reminds us of the slide from *Nanook*. The mockumentary tells the story about "a now classic film" called *Kunuk the Hunter* of 1922, "groundbreaking cinema" and "a box office success" that created the genre is now called documentary. New interviews and recently recovered footage reveal the truth about the film, making fun both of *Nanook of the North* and films like *Nanook Revisited*.

Meredith Sebastian, the wife of the director, looking and talking like Frances Flaherty, talks about the Eskimo fever of the 1920s. Letters and photographs from the making of the film document the authenticity and truthfulness of the story told. The gramophone scene is shown and explained by the fact that Pipilok (Kunuk's real name) is not a 'normal guy'; other scenes were also fakes and the film reveals how they were shot.

<sup>2</sup> Arctic. Exhibition at the Louisiana Art Museum in Denmark. [www.louisiana.dk/udstilling/arktis](http://www.louisiana.dk/udstilling/arktis) and <http://arktis.louisiana.dk/> [accessed October 12, 2015].

<sup>3</sup> Project Space. Arctic Book Club: Artists Respond To An African In Greenland. [www.projectspace-fany.org/arctic-book-club-1/](http://www.projectspace-fany.org/arctic-book-club-1/) [accessed October 19, 2015]

Other examples from popular culture referring to Flaherty's *Nanook*, such as Frank Zappa's *Don't Eat the Yellow Snow* (1974) or *Kabloonak*, a 1994 film by Claude Massot about the making of *Nanook*, could be mentioned here, as well as many more that probably were inspired in one way or another by Flaherty's *Nanook*.

These different projects are keeping *Nanook* alive and present in the consciousness of the wider public, probably a public much wider than only those interested in silent films or films about a particular topic and area. Given the fact that *Nanook of the North* has been around for almost a century, as a film, in books, in writings about Flaherty and *Nanook*, and in the projects of other artists and filmmakers, the film really has to be considered a classic. It is still one of the best-known films of the silent era, despite the fact that other films about the same subject and in the same area were made – at the same time or even earlier than *Nanook*. However, films like *The Romance of the Far Fur Country* (1922, Harold M. Wyckoff) had been forgotten for almost a century before being rediscovered, restored and made available on DVD; only time will tell whether *Nanook's* status in film history as the first and most famous documentary about the Arctic will be challenged.

Other questions that remain unanswered concern future presentations of *Nanook*: will new editions of *Nanook* continue to use David Shepard's restoration from the 1970s, and how will they present the film to new audiences? The technological means available today could enable a presentation of *Nanook* that does not pretend to be the original, but instead calls the audience's attention to the existing differences, for instance giving them the choice between different musical scores and of different extra materials.

Even though *Nanook* can be seen as a special case with its sound version and later restoration back to a silent version, and with several editions after its restoration, the existence of both literary texts and films in different versions is more often the rule than the exception. Because of the many persons involved in the production and exhibition of *Nanook*, we will never know what the film would have looked like if only Flaherty's wishes and intentions had been followed. To accept the existence of different versions as historical documents, and telling our readers which version we are actually writing about, would be a good start for increasing our audience's awareness of the existence of different versions.

## Bibliography

Buono A, Thomas R. (2015). Documentary Now! Knuck Uncovered. [www.ifc.com/shows/documentary-now/episodes/season-1/kunuk-uncovered](http://www.ifc.com/shows/documentary-now/episodes/season-1/kunuk-uncovered), [accessed September 22, 2015].

Simon Tarr's TIA MAK. (2007). Live VJ cinema performance. <http://quarknova.com/tiamak/> [accessed November 18, 2015].

Skare R. (2016). «*Nanook of the North*» *From 1922 to Today: The Famous Arctic Documentary and Its Afterlife*, Frankfurt am Main, New York: Peter Lang, pp.133-137.

### **The Many *Nanooks of the North***

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* is one of the best-known documentaries of the silent era and has remained well-known throughout the world ever since its release in 1922. This study focuses on the different versions and editions of the film and the significant ways in which the different elements surrounding the film influence our perception. The article also describes the paratexts connected with *Nanook* and artistic project inspired by Flaherty's film.

This article is an edited version of the chapter from the book *Nanook of the North. From 1922 to Today: The Famous Arctic Documentary and Its Afterlife* by Roswitha Skare. Published by the kind permission of the author and Peter Lang PG.