Nanook of the North: one hundred years on. Film Review

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Nanook of the North: A story of life and love in the Actual Arctic (1922*), Directed by Robert J Flaherty [online] USA:* Pathé Exchange

Abstract

The film 'Nanook of the North' was ground-breaking in its combination of documentary and docudrama techniques and provides atmospheric glimpses of the Arctic landscape of the 1920s. Although it expresses admiration for the skills and perseverance of the indigenous people of the Canadian Arctic in managing to survive in such a challenging environment, it also conveys a colonial attitude to them which has played into the popular perception of them as 'primitive' ever since. The film is therefore a complex geographical tool in that rather than simply showing us a range of realistic images of the Arctic 100 years ago, it also plays a part in producing Western understandings of the Arctic as a place.

1. Introduction

Nanook of the North is a silent film about an Arctic hunter, which is part documentary and part docudrama. It was released in 1922 to great acclaim and played an important role in shaping how the Western world visualises the Inuit in particular and the Arctic in general. In June 2022, the film will be 100 years old but, far from being an outdated relic, it continues to resonate for geographers today. This film review will describe the film itself then analyse the ways in which it highlights various aspects of the capitalism and colonialism of the early 20th century, the extent to which it expresses the Inuits' own culture and creativity, and its value as a geographical artefact.

2. The film

Nanook of the North tells the fictional tale of an Inuk hunter and his family living in Inukjuak, Ungava, Canada, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Map showing Inukjuak, where 'Nanook of the North' was filmed. (https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/canada/quebec)

It is a silent film, and is accompanied by lively music which was composed by Timothy Brock and played by the Olympia Chamber Orchestra. The original film is 79 minutes long, and the images are interspersed with intertitles which explain the next sequence of footage and help move the story along.

It was re-released in 1947 in a 50-minute sound version, produced by Herbert Edwards, with narration written by Ralph Schoolman and spoken by Berry Kröger, and music by Rudolph Schramm.

The film is structured to follow the rhythm of the seasons, from summer to winter, featuring discrete episodes rather than an over-arching storyline. It contains four hunting scenes (fishing, and hunting walrus, fox, and seal.). Figures 2 and 3 below show these fox and seal hunts. It also shows the family waterproofing their boats with seal hides, travelling in kayaks and laboriously pulling dogsleds over snowy peaks, building snowhouses, and selling animal furs to a white trader. The key themes of the film can be described as involving family, food, shelter, and survival.

Figure 2. Showing the successes of a fox hunt.
(Nanook of the North (1922) –
IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0013427/mediaviewer/rm1081904897?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_22)
(Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, 1922)

Figure 3: Showing the successes of a seal hunt.
(Nanook of the North (1922) –
IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0013427/mediaviewer/rm1652330241?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_25)
(Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, 1922)

The Inuit who played the family members were not related, but were chosen from those who were willing to participate in the making of the film. The man who played Nanook was a hunter from the Itivimuit tribe called Allakariallak.

In 1989, Nanook of the North was one of the first batch of 25 films that were chosen by the Library of Congress for preservation in the United States National Film Registry for being 'culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant'.

3. What is the relevance of the film for modern geographers?

3.1. Colonialism and capitalism

At COP 26, Addy Ahmasuk, one of the Alaska Youth Delegates from the Inuit Circumpolar Council, explained that the key problems that require examination in the context of the devastating effects of climate change in the Arctic are not erosion, tundra collapse or the melting of ice flows, but the

capitalism and colonialism that caused climate change in the first place and continue to endanger the culture and livelihoods of the indigenous peoples of the Artic region today. Nayak and Jeffrey (2011: 7) define colonialism as 'the physical settlement of territory for the material or military advantage of a colonial sovereign power'. They remind us that 'we cannot divorce the exercise of colonial or imperial power from the expansion of the capitalist system and the emergence of a global division of labour'. There are various aspects of colonialism running through the film which I will now explore.

3.1.1. The language and imagery used

These which draw a picture of the Inuits as childlike, happy-go-lucky, simple people. In the opening text, the narrator tells us that when he and a 'half breed' left Belcher Island they 'got out to civilisation' in order to tell the tale of 'Nanook, the kindly, brave, simple Eskimo'. Nanook is described as 'chief' of the Ivimituits, a term redolent of imperialism and meaningless in Inuit culture. The trading post is jokingly referred to as 'the white man's big igloo', as if the Inuit were not capable of distinguishing between different construction methods. In a somewhat uncomfortable scene, Nanook is seen marvelling at the wind-up gramophone operated by the white man, and trying to bite into the record, whereupon the intertitle explains that the trader has tried to explain to Nanook how the white man 'cans' his voice. In reality, Allakariallak was well aware of how a gramophone worked (Rothman, 1997). This echoes the ideas of Homi Bhabha (2004) about the use of colonial stereotypes which form a familiar rendition of words, images and symbols. These repeated patterns have a way of 'fixing' complex social relations in place. He explains that it is the exaggerated quality of these patterns that has the effect of leaking into everyday life.

3.1.2. The role of the white trader

We are told that Nanook barters his fox and bear furs for "knives, beads, and bright-colored candy of the trader's precious store". This suggests that the transaction is flippant, joyful and light-hearted. However, according to Melanie McGrath (2007), the reality of the relationship between the traders and the hunters was that, although when the Southern traders first initiated the whale and fur trades in the 18th century, the Inuit had initially benefitted from trading their furs for food, traps, and tools, they gradually became dependant on the fur trade for their sustenance. At times when the price of furs dropped and they had no credit left at the trading post, they were often left with no alternative source of food or supplies. They had also gradually ceased to be nomadic hunters, and instead become trappers who were tied to locations near to trading posts, which meant that their populations became denser, which had a detrimental effect on the availability of the prey they

were trying to hunt). We are told that the trader "banquets" Nanook's children on sea biscuits and lard. This is presented as a comic moment in the film but McGrath (2007) explains that the police posts in Alaska were instructed to hand out emergency rations of biscuits and lard to the local people at times when falling fur prices meant that they were at serious risk of starvation.

3.1.3. The role of the film maker himself

The Arctic has long attracted heroic white male explorers. According to McGrath (2007), Robert Flaherty fits into this mould. He was the son of an engineer, and grew up in mining camps in Michigan and Canada. His first forays into the Arctic region came when he was hired by the Canadian railroad builder William Mackenzie in 1910 to investigate the area around Hudson Bay in order to locate gypsum and lignite. He returned to the area in 1920, funded by the French fur company Revillion Freres, to shoot the film.

Mr Flaherty presents the characters as typifying the Inuit, but the scenes are scripted, much like reality TV today, and to modern eyes feel somewhat exploitative of their willingness to co-operate for free with his project. Examples of this include the antics with the gramophone, described above, and another example of this comes in the two scenes in which the hunter's young wife's body is seen half naked. This imagery of naked savages again calls to mind the ideas of Bhabha (2004) about the colonial fetishization of indigenous peoples, creating totemic imagery which is both racial and sexual.

Mr Flaherty's connections to the fur trade and to mining businesses echoes the modern-day interest of many powerful nations in winning access to Arctic resources. According to Charlie Duxbury (2020), writing in POLITICO, the melting of the Arctic glaciers is exposing more land for potential exploitation, and the retreat of sea ice is also making it easier to access offshore resources, from natural gas to fish, and get onshore resources to market. For the indigenous people, this continues to raise concerns about whether the exploitation of these resources will bring any benefits to them or whether it will merely speed up the process of industrialising their landscape and excluding them from the land they consider to be their own, as well as escalating climate change.

3.1.4. The romanticisation of the traditional Inuit way of life

Even at the time that the film was made, the Inuits' old ways were already dying out. For example, the hunter who played Nanook usually hunted with a rifle not a harpoon, and often wore western rather than traditional

clothes. Nayak and Jeffrey (2011) describe the 'imaginative geography' of Edward Said's *Orientalism*in which European academics and 'experts' developed a fantasy of the East as a romantic, adventurous, thrilling landscape and its inhabitants as the binary opposite of their Western counterparts. They explain that this sort of self/other racial dualism happens in relation to other parts of the world too, when European nations believe they have little to learn from apparently uncivilised peoples. This film evokes a nostalgia for old ways that were already largely outdated at the time the film was made, but the film's popularity helped shape the Western world's perception of Inuits to this day.

It is difficult to find any evidence of the Inuits' interaction with white explorers, traders and policemen from their own perspective. At that time, the Inuit had no written language and instead maintained an oral tradition. In his account of the fur trade in the Western Arctic (as opposed to the Eastern Arctic where Nanook was filmed), Bockstoce (2018: xiv) acknowledges that the literature of the Arctic fur trade is dominated by non-indigenous observers. Nonetheless, he says that the reports he had gathered led him to believe that the Inuit engaged with the fur traders willingly and that "on both sides of the exchanges the trappers and traders usually thought they were receiving a favourable reward." However, it is important to bear in mind that Melanie McGrath (2007) cautions that the Inuit learned to be wary of white people and tended to tell them what they wanted to hear.

3.2. An outlet for Inuit culture and creativity

On a simplistic level, although the film is fictional rather than documentary, it is in part an important historic artefact which illustrates the basic features of traditional life for indigenous people in the Arctic: relying on their knowledge and experience of their environment, and working in tandem with their animals, to survive in an extremely harsh terrain. It contains demonstrations of hunting techniques, methods for constructing snow houses, the traditional way to carry and care for a baby, sewing clothes out of animal hide, managing teams of dogs, constructing boats, and other survival skills passed down between the generations.

Flaherty lived with the Inuit for 16 months, and he later described (Flaherty, 1950) how they not only acted in the film but also collaborated with him in deciding how the scenes would play out, repairing the camera, staging the hunting scenes and building a special 3-sided snow house for him which let in enough light for the camera to function effectively. They also did some of the filming and processed many of the negatives. Their role was therefore not as passive tools of Flaherty's art, but as co-creators. According to Fatimah

Tobing Rony (1996), many of the most striking scenes in the film are the long takes of snowy landscapes, as shown in figure 4.

She hypotheses that 'the filmed landscape against which the figures of the actors appear small and remote takes on the spare, suggestive aesthetic of the Inuit drawings that Flaherty collected' (p. 115). This is perhaps unsurprising, she notes wryly, since several of the Inuit worked as camera operators.

Figure 4. Showing the extreme, snowy landscape surrounding the family. (Nanook of the North (1922) – IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0013427/mediaviewer/rm2306641665?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_9)
(Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, 1922)

4. Nanook of the North as a geographical tool

Films have been acknowledged as geographical tools since the 1950s when Geographical Magazine celebrated those documentary films which represented landscapes and cityscapes as accurately as possible. This was seen to be a useful teaching resource in that it allowed students to imagine actually being in the place in question. Nanook of the North could be seen as successful in this sense, because it provides educational views of landscapes and footage of traditional Inuit lifestyles and culture.

In more recent film studies, Geographers have become more analytical about the relationship between the 'reel' and the 'real'. Two of the areas of film study, as summarised by Aitken and Dixon (2006), that are particularly relevant to Nanook are as follows.

4.1. Film as a product of a capitalist industry

An understanding of the film as a product of the film industry and therefore capitalism means that the film needs to be seen in the context of the various waves of international investment that financed its production, and the exploitation/enrichment of the categories of people involved in its creation. Nanook's relationship to capitalism is referred to in paragraphs 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 above. McGrath (2007) provides evidence of exploitation versus enrichment on a more personal level, in that her book describes the life of the baby son that Flaherty fathered during the filming of Nanook. While Flaherty returned to a successful career in America, his Inuit lover (Nyla in the film) and baby son were left in Inukjuak. They became part of the small group of families forcibly relocated by the Canadian Government to previously uninhabited parts of the polar Arctic where they were left to survive as well as they could in the inhospitable and unfamiliar terrain.

4.2. Film as a product of the processes of creation and consumption

Although a film may depict people and places accurately, it is given meaning through the thoughts and actions of the people who made it and those who watch it. This process is influenced by the underlying power dynamics behind both the creation of the film and the practices of viewing. As an example of how this works, Aitken and Dixon (2006) refer to the 'pervasive characterisation of the desert as a space of and for male heroism' (p. 328) and, as argued, Nanook of the North played a part in the process of creating an understanding of the Arctic in the same light.

5. Conclusion

Nanook of the North is a compelling geographical artefact, combining evidence of the traditional Inuit way of life with some beautiful shots of snow and ice. It portrays a 1920s colonial perspective of indigenous people but the participation of the Inuit actors at every level of creating the film adds complexity and depth to the production. The film also played a part in producing Western understanding of the Arctic as a landscape and the Inuit as a culture.

6. References

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