A New Look at Robert J. Flaherty's Documentary Art

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Abstract: In his paper, "A New Look at Robert J. Flaherty's Documentary Art," Gerhard Lampe challenges the general view of documentary film director Robert J. Flaherty's work. In film studies, it is generally assumed that Flaherty ignored cinematographic developments and kept repeating himself by telling his stories of mythical battles of the individual against the powers of nature in always the same old-fashioned way. He is said to have improved his "photographic eye" with the help of improved lenses and more detailed shots; nevertheless, he did not show any interest in editing problems and sound recording. By comparing Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1923-25), and *Man of Aran* (1934), Lampe shows that the continuity-editing-system and 180° system which emerged in Hollywood at the time of the transition from silent to sound production was also adopted by Flaherty in his films. Lampe argues that Flaherty in fact modernised his cinematographic style after shooting the semi-documentary "Paramount"-film *Taboo* (1929-30) with Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.

Gerhard LAMPE

A New Look at Robert J. Flaherty's Documentary Art

Translated from the German by Conny Roche

In film studies, it is generally assumed that Robert J. Flaherty ignored cinematographic developments and kept repeating himself by telling his stories of mythical battles of man against the powers of nature in always the same old-fashioned way. At best, he is credited to have had "photographic seeing." Based on his own remark: "First I was an explorer; then I was an artist" (qtd. in Barsam 5), film critics have tended to perceive him as an explorer rather than an artist. One example for this one-dimensional view on Flaherty is Richard Barsam's *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*, where Barsam writes: "Flaherty's career was paradoxical in many ways. During his lifetime, the style of the American motion picture evolved constantly, yet the distinguishing characteristics of Flaherty's work remained virtually unchanged from *Nanook of the North* in 1922 to *Louisiana Story* in 1948. Flaherty began his career when filmmakers were self-taught, and he remained true throughout that career to the simple practices that he had painstakingly learned through the failures and successes of personal experience. Those techniques that worked for him successfully in making *Nanook* would, he seems to have assumed, continue to serve him well throughout his career. Thus, while his career bridged the transition from silent to sound production, and while he was actively interested in technological improvements made to cameras, lenses, and film stocks, Flaherty was only peripherally interested in the developments in sound recording and editing" (4). This is Barsam's most important claim which he emphasizes in the summary of the book again. It seems to me that the following quotation represents the main message of the book: "Until the last decade of his career, the primary obstacles to Flaherty's pursuit of cinematic realism were his disregard of editing and sound ... Flaherty had little interest in either the theory or practice of editing until editor Helen Van Dongen joined him on *The Land* in 1940 for the first of their two collaborations" (117). Not only did Barsam argue on the grounds of his claim in the introduction and summary of his book, he also portrayed Flaherty as being rigid and of inflexible attitude, especially in the chapters about *Man of Aran*: "The poetic realism of *Man of Aran* has a power and validity that help to overcome the film's shortcomings in narrative, soundtrack, and music. We can criticize Flaherty's reluctance to develop the grammar of his cinematography and rhythm of his editing, his inflexible attitudes toward camera angles and positioning, and his reliance on build-up and suspense for overall narrative effect. It makes little difference, though, to analyze his films in this way, for Flaherty seems to have been fully aware of what he was doing. He trusted his own eye and technique, developing a style relatively free of influences from Griffith, Murnau, Eisenstein, Vertov, and others who had already extended the variety and expressiveness of the language of cinema" (65-66). At the very least, Barsam had to admit that Flaherty used the method of parallel editing as an additional feature, but he did not look at this contradiction any closer. Instead, he tried to explain it away with the fact that Flaherty had collaborated with an experienced editor, that is, John Goldman. Thus, to a certain extent, Flaherty's artistic achievement in this film is denied by Barsam. Despite the above mentioned, I argue that the material was not put together when the cutting was done only; the camera was already doing the conceptual editing. At best, in Barsam's view, Flaherty is credited for his poetic realism (whatever that means); his "photographic seeing;" and his innovative use of long focus lenses and depth-of-field cinematography (67). In my view, Flaherty was indeed familiar with the cinematographic language of his time and was well aware of the possibilities and adopting the ways of the great filmmakers of his time in order to extend his genre. By comparing and contrasting Flaherty's films and by working out the differences between them, I show how Flaherty's technique evolved throughout time.

To a point, I agree with Barsam's statement that "All of Flaherty's films are variations on one ideal: happiness exists when man is free and lives simply and harmoniously with nature" (Barsam 7). It is also true that in his films individuals and nature are acting as antagonists: In *Nanook*, it is ice, snow, freezing temperatures, and dangerous wild animals the protagonists have to fight

against; in *Moana* and *Man of Aran* it is humans versus the sea and stormy weather, and so on. The one widely-known criticism of Flaherty since John Grierson goes as follows: Flaherty is said to idolize his protagonists, to bind them into a conservative concept of "family." He is prone to depict an antique, unpolitical world-view (Barsam 7). In 1933, Grierson went as far as to suggest that "A succeeding documentary exponent is in no way obliged to chase off to the ends of the earth in search of old-time simplicity, and the ancient dignities of man against the sky. Indeed, if I may for the moment represent the opposition, I hope the Neo-Rousseauism implicit in Flaherty's work dies with this own exceptional self. Theory of natural apart, it represents an escapism, a wan and distant eye, which tends in lesser hands to sentimentalism ... When Flaherty tells you that it is a devilish noble thing to fight for food in a wilderness, you may, with some justice, observe that you are more concerned with the problem of people fighting for food in the midst of plenty" (148-49). Here, it is not my intention to discuss Flaherty's world-view or to criticize his work in terms of political correctness. My concern is with Flaherty as film maker. Although he was self-taught, similar to many filmmakers in his time, he also went to the movies and had understood clearly and analysed the cinematographic art of his time. Thus, it comes as no surprise that he did not "reinvent the wheel," but, instead, made use of the current customs concerning documentaries when he began to shoot his series of documentaries that helped to evolve the genre. It also secured him a high position in the history of documentary as Kenneth Griffith holds it in the genre of feature films. When Flaherty started, the film industry had already been established for approximately twenty years and it already had its own rules, customs, and conventions. At first, Flaherty worked in the tradition of documentary filmmaking established by its "fathers," Auguste and Louis Lumière. Just like the Lumières in their *L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat* (1895), Flaherty did all the work himself, the camera work, the directing, and the cutting.

For his film *Nanook*, Flaherty spent a few months in the Arctic to record the daily life of the Eskimo (in today's terminology it would be Inuit) Nanook and his family on camera (the hunting, fishing, building of igloos, fur-trading, child care, and the sleigh-dogs). The tough life, the beauty of the polar landscape, and the naive happiness of the people is what the film is about. An additional theme in *Nanook* is the battle of humans against nature, the fight for survival in a hostile environment. Although the film is only showing a few people, it can be seen as an exploration of the world of a different people and their culture. Its dramaturgic and narrative sophistication is "By showing the daily life of Nanook and his family, Flaherty avoids a reserved or distanced position from the protagonists and allows for the audience to identify with them, although they are 'exotic primitives' ... Flaherty's Eskimos are 'acting subject,' no ethnographical objects ... A lot of the action in *Nanook* was initiated by the Eskimos themselves, such as the walrus hunt" (Petermann 30-31). Additionally, Flaherty did not show any signs of the clumsiness of a beginner in his cinematographic abilities. Not only did he know how to take good pictures, he also knew how to tell stories with them. Like the Lumières, he used long takes mainly, which are realised by a motionless position of the camera (with only a few pans) and the action is caught mainly using a medium close-up distance of framing. Like his models, Flaherty used a linear narrative in chronological order, mostly unedited and story-lines are not resolved, again similar to the Lumières. Also, following their fashion, Flaherty used dramatic effects by restricting the view with the camera to create suspense; by letting pictures run through the frame slowly, disclosing their meaning and purpose only gradually. A good example for this is the opening sequence, introducing the *dramatis personae*: Nanook and his family -- Nyla, his wife with the youngest baby on her arms, the children Allee, Cunayou, and Comock, and the husky.

picture 1 *Nanook*: Nanook

picture 2 *Nanook*: With Alea

picture 3 *Nanook*: Nyla with baby

picture 4 *Nanook*: Cunayou

picture 5 *Nanook*: Comock

Flaherty's way of including the audience was new and extraordinary. For example, in *Nanook*, he created a conceptual space between the filmed subject, the filmmaker, and the viewers. This becomes clear during the take in which a fur-trader attempts to entertain Nanook with a gramophone. Nanook plays the "simple-minded wild man" who uses his teeth to check how the "white man" conserves his voice on a record:

picture 6 *Nanook*: Gramophone 1

picture 7 *Nanook*: Gramophone 2

Flaherty also used cinematographic features that filmmakers such as James Williamson and George Albert Smith had helped to develop around the turn of the century, that is, cut ins and cut backs. The first intra-scenic dynamisation processes are featured in Smith's *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900). These possibilities were further developed and experimented successfully by Edwin S. Porter and David W. Griffith, and cut ins were often used by Flaherty. In the following example the camera first focuses on Nyla surrounded by young puppies and a fur-trader (medium close up) and then cuts in on a dog (close up):

picture 8 *Nanook*: Nyla with child and dogs

picture 9 *Nanook*: Cut in on Picture 8

This specific cut in may well be seen as a forerunner of what Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein defined theoretically as "Montage of Attractions" and of how the Soviet director Lev Kuleshov calculated the maximum effect achieved by the addition of his pictures in his experiments that are named after him. In this way the onlooker's eye is fixed on the merry, peaceful and harmonic elements and their meaning. *Moana* was planned originally as *Nanook of the North*'s companion picture and its original working title was *Moana of the South*. In this context of a series it is no wonder that Flaherty's next (own) film was called *Man of Aran*. A structural identity of theme, a generalising tendency, and in a way a research strategy directed at both, anthropological and ethnological values, is what his films are characteristic of. In *Moana*, Flaherty tried to capture a form of life unbiased and untouched by Western industrialized civilisation. The depiction of the daily life of the Samoans of Savai'i comes across as glorification of a "primitive form of life," still living in unison with nature. And there are more similarities in the two films: Similar to his work in *Nanook*, Flaherty was criticised for showing escapism in *Moana*. Also, Flaherty used the same patterns of cinematography as in *Nanook*, dramaturgically as well as regarding narration. Regarding the work of the camera, it appears he used more pans and cut ins than before. Nevertheless, *Moana* differs from *Nanook* in two major aspects: First, Flaherty -- not as the first person to do so, but as the first person to do so successfully -- filmed on panchromatic material, which is sensitive to all colours and produces more brilliant pictures (unlike the back then widely used orthochromatic film, which is not sensitive to red at all) and second, Flaherty used new lenses with longer focal distance which enabled him to make very detailed shots over long distances. The following pictures demonstrate the effect of this artistic intention. Like in *Nanook*, the narration is told to gradually build up suspense. We see two Samoans putting their boat to sea but do not know yet what comes next. The boat is departing, moving away from us (the audience), becoming smaller and smaller. Suddenly, Flaherty cuts in with a close-up shot and the theme of the sequence becomes apparent: The men are fighting the waves in a dramatic way. In the end, the boat is turned over by the waves.

picture 10 *Moana*: Fighting the waves (extreme
(long shot 1)

picture 11 *Moana*: Fighting the waves
(extreme long shot 2)

picture 12 *Moana*: Fighting the waves
(cut in 1)

picture 13 *Moana*: Fighting the waves
(cut in 2)

In my view, such shots, above, suggest "photographic seeing" by Flaherty while at the same time they show more than that, namely his "cinematographic seeing," his working with cut ins thus having the editing and its effects on the audience in mind. In other words, he used telephoto lenses according to the principles of artistic editing. Thus, it becomes clear that with *Moana* Flaherty was up to the cinematographic state of the art as well as ahead of his time. What he did not adopt before filming *Man of Aran*, however, were the methods of parallel editing, which had already been worked out in Brighton for the dramaturgy of feature films. Edwin S. Porter also adopted these methods for his film *The Life of an American Fireman* (1902) whose existence was obvi-

ously owed to James Williamson's film *Fire* (1901). These trans-scenic editing methods for feature films were apparently not considered yet as being adequate for *Moana* by Flaherty. Porter's *The Life of an American Fireman* remained singular too, maybe because the editing techniques brought certain problems with them and were not as easy to apply to documentaries. These problems are evident in *The Life of an American Fireman*: The intercutting between sequences taken inside and outside the building disturbs the rules of continuity and double the actual periods of time. Those "mistakes" arose owing to the fact that while shooting material for a documentary, the director could hardly ask the protagonists to stop during a sequence and then to start over again. Also, discontinuity was not yet perceived as being a problem at that time. Only in semi-documentary controlled films, for example in P.H. Carver's *The Silent Enemy* (1930) was this method used. In the latter, members of the Ojibway nation play dramatic moments of their lives before the arrival of the white man in the Hudson Bay Area. Thus, as far as I can see, this specific cinematographic form of narration was first introduced in documentaries by Flaherty in his *Man of Aran*.

Before analysing *Man of Aran* and its cinematographic differentiations, the "missing link," namely the revolution in the studios regarding dramaturgy, needs to be discussed. The 180° system and the continuity editing system were not developed only at the time of sound production: These features can already be found in classic silent motion pictures, for instance in John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924), where resolutions of sequences following the pattern of establishing shot and shot-reverse-shot are found already, while over-shoulder and point-of-view positions were established later on. These camera positions were combined early with typical distances of framing, such as the establishing shot and the close-up shot. The coming-to-life of the sound motion picture has speeded up the resolution of sequences into many intrascenic cuts and varying distances of framing because dialogues are easier and depicted more economically using the shot-reverse-shot system. This system defines the radius of action of the camera before the axis of action (a semi-circle) and uses different axes of camera positioning in relation to the axis of action, such as the establishing shot at 90°, the shot-reverse-shot at approx. 45° and the over-shoulder shot at half of that again. The following pictures show the basic patterns of resolution of a sequence taken from Flaherty's *Taboo* (1929-30): Reri is rebelling against her fate of becoming a priest. During the festive ceremony she sets Mahati's heart on fire with her dancing and he is falling in love with her:

picture 14 *Taboo*: Reri, dancing with Mahati
(establishing shot, *plan américain*)

picture 15 *Taboo*: Reri, dancing with Mahati
(shot, medium close-up)

picture 16 *Taboo*: Reri, dancing with Mahati

(reverse shot, medium close-up)

Hitu, the old chief, is watching the forthcoming breach of taboo with growing concern. In this sequence, the interactions between Reri and the chief are staged as a complex second axis of action: The exchange of glances between Hitu and Reri as eyeline match are identical with the second axis of action. The camera is moved along this axis with alternating positions and distances of framing: as shot / close up (picture 17) and medium long shot (picture 18), reverse shot / long shot (picture 19) and medium close-up (picture 20) and over-shoulder Reri / long shot (picture 21):

picture 17 *Taboo*: Hitu, looking at Reri

(shot, close-up)

picture 18 *Taboo*: Hitu, looking at Reri

(shot, medium long shot)

picture 19 *Taboo*: Reri

(reverse shot, long shot)

picture 20 *Taboo*: Reri

(reverse shot, medium close-up)

picture 21 *Taboo*: Reri and Hitu

(over-shoulder, long shot)

The above sequence from *Taboo* -- a film Flaherty began in collaboration with Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau -- is a good example for the application of the 180° system as it is set up in an intra-scenic way and makes one understand why Murnau's work was labelled with the term "unchained camera" since his 1927 Fox film *Sunrise*. Similar to *Sunrise*, a dramatic love story is told in *Taboo*: A young woman from Tahiti is destined to enter priesthood. For that purpose, a taboo is put on her according to an old religious custom, which means she is devoted to the gods only. Mahati desires her and abducts her from the sanctuary inducing the tragic ending of their love story. During the shooting of the film originally planned as a collaborative effort, Flaherty left the project owing to differences of opinion with Murnau. Murnau is said to have put more emphasis than initially intended on the acting elements in *Taboo* (interestingly, this film turned out to be his last work as a

director). This may well be the reason for the sad ending of the joined project during the shooting of the film. In fact, the plot does appear to correspond to Flaherty's intentions of former films, such as to show the triumph of single heroes over nature and not their fall. It is thus, I propose, that Flaherty left and Murnau finished the project alone (however, Murnau did not live to see its public screening since he died after a car crash). Whatever the reason for Flaherty's early leaving may have been (too many sequences of acting or an ending he did not agree with), he had made crucial new experiences and despite the fallout with Murnau, Flaherty is listed on the credits of *Taboo* as scriptwriter and as cameraman (with Floyd Crosby). Most importantly, he had become acquainted with the new cinematographic innovations through his on-the-set work with Murnau. Not only the already mentioned intra-scenic resolutions of sequences are part of his development, he also adopted new transscenic codes of narration, such as cross-cutting.

Let me get back to the example of my analysis: The sequence is marked by an even greater complexity than already stressed. Reri and Mahati's dancing which triggers the later abduction, is happening at the end of the sequence. At first, the celebrations start without Mahati, and Reri dances alone. By using parallel editing features, Murnau first shows Mahati lying on the floor of his home in a sad state (he had fallen in love with Reri shortly before but given up on her due to the taboo). Then he slowly shakes off the depression and rushes to the party to dance with Reri. Both of these narratives are edited to create suspense rising gradually and that builds up more and more towards their meeting at the ceremony. Eventually, the two protagonists are brought together at the same time and place. In sum, the joint project with Murnau introduced Flaherty to new features of film dramaturgy, the 180° system with its intrascenic resolution-patterns and its transscenic narrations such as cross-cutting. Flaherty then completed his ways and means of expression with those two new continuity editing features. Insofar, it is not surprising that Flaherty presented himself as a skilful expert of the cinematographic state of the art in his next film *Man of Aran*. In this film he started in 1932, Flaherty describes the hard and tough fight for survival of the fishermen and farmers of Aran, a group of barren rock islands off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. It is not my intention to contribute to the discussion about whether the film is a documentary film at all or rather a feature film with amateur actors. Instead, I am interested in the description of the integration of the new methods in Flaherty's third big epic film. *Man of Aran* starts off as a widely-framed parallel montage. At first we see a narrative thread, a farm, a woman, a child, cattle, the land. Then, as a second thread we see the rough sea, huge waves, and a fishing boat arriving home. The woman and the child are walking towards the boat. While the boat is being carried ashore, the woman discovers that the precious fishing net is being pulled back into the sea. What follows is a three minute take of the fishermen fighting the rough sea and its waves to claim back their fishing net. In the end, the family is going home with the net, exhausted but happy. This introductory sequence is another variation of any heroic story, similar to such in *Nanook* or *Moana*. The difference is that Flaherty tells the story in a cinematographically new and exciting way. Instead of joining the antagonists (the sea and the people) in a linear fashion, he brings them together simultaneously by using the advantages of parallel editing. The first battle between nature and humans is staged like a classic fight, according to the rules of the 180° system, the continuity-editing system and the shot-reverse-shot shifts, using the dramatic effects of ever closer distances of framing. To underline this complexity a few screenshots of this fight are following, with the establishing shots taken from over-shoulder position to identify the view with the axis of action, as well as to frame the action:

picture 22 *Man of Aran*: group of people,

running towards the fishing net to save

it from the sea

(establishing shot, over shoulder, long shot) longshot)

picture 23 *Man of Aran*: group of people,

walking back ashore with fishing net

(re-establishing shot, over shoulder,

longshot)

The duel-like fight is edited in the rhythm of the shot-reverse-shot system and runs through all possible variations in the distance of framing. The following pictures show only long shots, medium shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups:

picture 24 *Man of Aran*: the sea, waves

(shot, long shot)

picture 25 *Man of Aran*: the group

(reverse shot, long shot)

picture 26 *Man of Aran*: the sea, waves

(shot, medium close-up)

picture 27 *Man of Aran*: the group

(reverse shot, medium close-up)

picture 28 *Man of Aran*: the sea, waves

(shot, close-up)

picture 29 *Man of Aran*: the group, hands

(reverse shot, close-up)

Again, to give credit to Flaherty, this way of editing cannot be credited to the editor, John Goldman -- who did not leave any other mark in film history except this collaboration -- but, rather, to the consciously planned recording, the alternating distances of framing of Flaherty's camera at the scene of action. Thinking of the difficult conditions at the scene, one understands why Flaherty kept asking for better lenses with longer focal length and a higher sensitivity to light: Without them it would not have been possible to get any detailed, close-up shots of people and waves over those long distances. Flaherty may have been self-taught at first as mentioned previously, but he changed his style by continuously adopting new cinematographic codes during his work on *Nanook* and *Moana*. In this sense, the Flaherty's statement introduced at the beginning of my paper, "First I was an explorer; then I was an artist" takes on a whole new meaning: Flaherty was also an explorer of the art of cinematography. In the case of *Man of Aran* it is very obvious

that Flaherty, because he has worked with Murnau, adopted his "unchained camera" and integrated it into his own work creatively. This is why I believe that most of the criticisms on Flaherty's dramaturgy, filmic narrative, and art of montaging/editing are inadequate and are in need of revision. Furthermore, sound specialists could analyze the sound motion pictures of Flaherty and try to answer the question of whether *Man of Aran* was really as much backward as often claimed. The quality of its later setting-to-music seems to be within the technological possibilities of his time. For example, in Fritz Lang's *M - Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931) sounds are set to music illustratively e.g., cars have no engine sounds but are identified with a horn; in a similar fashion -- by using the sound of wind -- landscape is set to music by Flaherty. Overall, I propose that to "rehabilitate" Flaherty and his work, further source studies beyond what I concluded from the original material would be necessary. Archives need to be visited to look through letters, diaries, work papers in order to find hints or notes on Flaherty's reflection of his work, how he was aware of the development of the art of cinematography, and how if and when he used such consciously in the making of his films.

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