

Robert Flaherty

b. February 16, 1884, Iron Mountain, Michigan, USA

d. July 23, 1951, Vermont, Montana, USA

filmography bibliography web resources

Robert Flaherty is often proclaimed one of the founding fathers of documentary film. Flaherty indirectly became part of the mythology of the burgeoning world-wide documentary movement of the 1930s when John Grierson was said to have originated the usage of the term 'documentary' in relation to film when he wrote, "of course, *Moana* [1926] being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value." (1)

In recent times Flaherty's oeuvre has been unfairly caught up in the ongoing debates about the ethnographic worth of his early pre-modern films *Nanook of the North* (1921), *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926) and *Man of Aran* (1934). (2)

Nanook of the North

Flaherty's first film, *Nanook of the North*, is possibly one of the best known of the silent era documentaries. Flaherty had visited the sub-Arctic eastern coast of Hudson Bay previously on behalf of mining companies during which he filmed the countryside and filmed Eskimo communities. Flaherty's idea was to make a film in collaboration with the local communities. A famous quote from Flaherty pertains to the instance when he was discussing the filming of the walrus hunt with the Eskimo community and explained to them that they may have to give up the kill if it interferes with the film. The reply was "yes, yes, the Aggie will come first, not a man will stir, not a harpoon will be thrown until you give the sign." (3) This idea of the community's structure being altered almost immediately for the film points to the idea of the film's problematic methodology; of representing the Inuit community as some kind of timeless, noble race that exists in isolation from outside influences. In *Nanook*, nevertheless Flaherty found an episodic and elliptical structure which he was to employ for the rest of his career

Nanook began a series of films that Flaherty was to make on the same theme; humanity against the elements. Others included *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* set in Samoa and *Man of Aran* set in the Aran Islands of Ireland. All these films employ the same rhetorical devices; the dangers of nature and the struggle of the communities to eke out an existence.

At the heart of Flaherty's corpus of works lies an ongoing negotiation with the forces of modernity. While the early films have largely been framed by the discourses of exploration and colonialism, the later films have had little examination apart from those

less critical biographical writings or in relation to the more tedious aspects of truth-telling or questions of authentic documentary filmmaking, (4) locked away from the more sophisticated film theory of Flaherty's contemporaries such as Siegfried Kracauer. In this essay I'd like, with some assistance from Kracauer, to redeem Flaherty's oeuvre through a discussion of *The Land* (1942) and *Louisiana Story* (1948) in terms of their realisations of Flaherty's concerted attempt to address the problems facing contemporary communities.

To take this approach it is useful to begin with the project that became the unfairly maligned *Industrial Britain* (1931). Although this film obtains the kind of nostalgia that permeated all his works, it has often been subsumed by the understanding that the film was completed by John Grierson, Basil Wright and Arthur Elton.

Industrial Britain is an example of a state-sponsored documentary that emphasised people and work in an uneasy combination of the worldviews of both Grierson and Flaherty. Over the years this film has been understood through the more hagiographic writings about both men. Grierson brought Flaherty over from Berlin where the American was trying to get a film project up. In late 1931 Britain's Empire Marketing Board Film Unit had obtained some credibility, a broader terms of reference and, more importantly, an increased budget enabling John Grierson and Stephen Tallents, the Unit's leaders, to employ the highest profile documentary maker of the period. (5) Flaherty brought with him not only a status as the crafter of great works such as *Nanook of the North* and *Moana* but also a reputation for loose production methods such as a high ratio of shot footage to useable material.

John Grierson

Grierson wanted to employ Flaherty not only to make *Industrial Britain* but also to draw attention to Britain's Documentary Film Movement as well as to teach the likes of Basil Wright and John Taylor about filmmaking. Grierson was well aware of Flaherty's methods and managed to obtain a large budget of £2,500 for him to work with. (6) Nevertheless the production quickly ran into trouble when Flaherty had spent his budget and film stock. Caught between Flaherty's comparatively extravagant production methods and the civil service constraints of government filmmaking with which Grierson had become used to dealing, the production was always going to be a difficult one. It seems that the footage was edited by Grierson with Edgar Anstey's assistance. The final film was eventually put together with half a dozen two-reel documentaries to form what became known as 'The Imperial Six' that British Gaumont distributed theatrically. Flaherty had nothing to do with the narration which sounds like Grierson's words.

Nevertheless, *Industrial Britain* manages to reconcile the aims of, on the one hand, Grierson and Tallents' Film Unit, to produce socially purposive films that were not delimited sponsored, product based films but publicity films with a wider market appeal, and on the other hand Flaherty's pre-modern romanticisation of folk life. The film that Flaherty envisaged strives to posit that the craftsmen of England were the real heroes of the industrial revolution; that it was the people that enabled fine products to be realised

rather than the then contemporary emphasis on machinery. At the same time Industrial Britain straddles the strikingly composed images of large-scale industry and the close-ups of men toiling away at their craft. It could be that Flaherty was not responsible for all of the footage that found its way into the finished film and that Basil Wright and Arthur Elton were brought in to shoot extra footage, (7) yet this awkward production history doesn't diminish the film's appeal.

It is the reconciling, the in-between, that marks Industrial Britain as one of the most interesting of the British Documentary Film Movement films. In what seem to be Flaherty's images of rows of chimney stacks and urban residences clouded in smoke and grime there is a classical quality that rhymes with the intense close ups of working men. These images of the faces of workers are not unlike those portrait-like images of the United States Roosevelt government's Farm Security Administration photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. In this insistence of these images, on the personalising of the industrial revolution, alongside the broader industrial landscape images, Industrial Britain employs a "poetic ambiguity" – containing the "metaphoric and associative possibilities of the montage juxtapositions" (8) in a somewhat haphazard organisation of numerous images of workers and their workplaces.

In attempting to reconcile Grierson's socially purposive aesthetics with Flaherty's pre-modern romanticism, the film can be read as an uneasy paean to modernity. The broader images of an industrial landscape in which the British worker performs his noble work create a filmic world which is not only about the craftsmanship that lies behind the facade of chimney-stacks and production lines. It is also about how these workers are a part of a human army of craftsmen who maintain their grace and humanity in the face of the mechanisation of industry, whilst themselves appearing somewhat machine-like. The images of workers in Industrial Britain are not images of the automatons of capitalism but rather they are remnants of a time past, a time when craftsmanship belonged to the kinds of folk culture that Flaherty locates in *Nanook of the North*, *Moana* and the later *Man of Aran*.

While it is difficult to say whether *Industrial Britain* is a Robert Flaherty film or a John Grierson film it may be that a more interesting proposal is that the film produces resonances with the world views of both men in an uneasy commingling of romantic celebration and the kind of sponsorship imperatives that Grierson was responsible to.

Flaherty's essay-film *The Land* (1942), made for the United States Agricultural Adjustment Agency of the Department of Agriculture, has been understood as a turning point in Flaherty's oeuvre. Originally commissioned by Pare Lorentz on the recommendation of Grierson, the project was ill-fated from its inception when Lorentz's Film Service was wound down on the tail-end of the New Deal impetus for such projects. Due to Flaherty's penchant for loose production schedules and the attendant problem faced by Helen Van Dongen in synthesising the material, *The Land* was only completed as the United States had entered World War II and the resulting focus of the economy on the war effort diminished, in the Government's eyes, the problems that Flaherty had identified.

While *Nanook of the North*, *Moana* and *Man of Aran* reinvented past cultures to construct exotic documents of humanity, *The Land* was a representation of agricultural problems and their effect on people in contemporary 1940s America. Although almost universally dismissed, *The Land* signals a shift from the romantic pre-modernism of *Nanook*, *Moana* and *Man of Aran*, and even Industrial Britain, towards the lyrical negotiation of mechanisation and environmental wonder apparent in *Louisiana Story*.

The Land

While Flaherty's earlier films employed individual protagonists around which to spin a web of episodic accounts of the struggle to survive, often in harsh environments, *The Land* is all encompassing, ranging across many states and agricultural issues. Its concern is not for the land so much as for the people who depend on it. *The Land* employs static portraits of the people who work the land, including the opening images of a particular farm in which are imaged a farmer, his wife and child, recalling the photography of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans (as well as the portrait-like images in *Industrial Britain*) and establishing a 'farming type' similar to one that these Farm Security Administration photographers celebrated. Like these photographers' work, *The Land* is steeped in nostalgia, yearning for the kind of connection to the environment upon which *Nanook* and *Man of Aran* were based while perhaps clumsily proposing that the mechanisation of farming methods was the cause of erosion, dislocation and racism.

Elliptical and episodic in structure, *The Land* divines its own *raison d'être* from the material it has to organise. Refuting the linear narratives that Lorentz employed in *The River* and *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, *The Land* negotiates a host of agricultural, social and economic problems stretching the economic imperatives of the Department of Agriculture out on to the broader canvas of American life in a specific yet crucial moment in that country's history.

Based on the early work of Russell and Kate Lord whose 1950 book *Forever the Land* contains most of the commentary, Flaherty's film wanders across vast geographical spaces which ultimately form the web of images, comments and traces of stories that forms the film. Flaherty's personal tone, accentuated by his narration, is the organising principle around which the glimpses and comments adhere. Siegfried Kracauer saw Flaherty's role in the structure as the film's strength:

All these deficiencies are not weighty enough to injure the true merits of *The Land*: its deep honesty and the beauty of its pictures. Indeed the whole is impregnated with a sincerity that cannot but impress. Flaherty may be naïve: in his naïveté, however, he really says what he feels and avoids making hasty conclusions. And if he does not always come to grips with the problems he wants to expose, he proceeds, nevertheless, with an instinct so infallible as not to endanger future solutions. It is important that his own voice sounds throughout the film; this voice has the power of convincing and efficaciously bolsters the content of his pictures.

The secret of these pictures is to include time. They resemble fragments of a lost epic song that celebrated the immense life of the land; nothing is omitted, and each episode is full of significance. (9)

Often considered to be Robert Flaherty's masterwork, *Louisiana Story* is the culmination of Flaherty's poetic method, formally and thematically drawing together the promise that can be seen in *Nanook of the North*, *Man of Aran* and *The Land*, with a mediation between modernity and regionalism. While *The Land* marks a shift from the pre-modern nostalgia of the early film to an engagement with modernity, *Louisiana Story* directly addresses the issue of the environmental impact of mechanisation upon the pristine environment of the bayous of Louisiana in a film sponsored by Standard Oil albeit with the approval of the sponsor.

Louisiana Story tells the tale of the disruption that mechanisation, in particular the speculative oil drilling performed by an oil company in the hitherto untouched, pristine environment of a Louisiana bayou, can bring to the environment. The film focuses on the Cajun Latour family, in particular Alexander Napoleon Ulysses Latour, whose youth and innocence personifies the virgin wetlands, recalling the figures of *Nanook* and *Moana* from the earlier films. Of course, being a sponsored documentary, while the presence of the oil derrick initially disrupts the environment, normality is returned when the mobile oil drilling mechanism moves on.

Robert Flaherty and Helen Van Dongen

Like many of the classic documentaries of this era, *Louisiana Story* employed some of the foremost practitioners of the time. Helen Van Dongen was an experienced editor who had worked with Joris Ivens on films such as *Rain* (1929), *Borinage* (1933), *The New Earth* (1934) and *The Spanish Earth* (1937). She had also worked on *The Land* with Flaherty and therefore was used to his more speculative approach to narrative construction. Richard Leacock was a young camera operator who, of course, was to forge his own career in the Direct Cinema. Frances Flaherty, Leacock and Van Dongen also provided production and editorial assistance. Another member to join the production was composer Virgil Thomson who had provided the scores for Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937). Thomson's role was crucial in incorporating the multitude of natural sounds into a variety of themes associated with the different characters. Thomson achieved this remarkable feat mainly through his early association with the production. He viewed early rushes and versions of the film and became an integral part of the working-up of the final film, rather than being presented with images and dialogue upon which to layer music. (10)

Of all these people it is probably Van Dongen who warrants further mention. She had the unenviable task of working without a shooting script with Flaherty insisting on obtaining a vast amount of material that for him contained particular "symbols" or "tones" with little thought to their effectiveness in the overall script. Van Dongen's concern for continuity and narrative combined well with Flaherty's search for tonal images; not one aspect forsaken for the other but a dilution of narrative imperatives to accommodate the naiveté of Flaherty's vision for the world seen through the eyes of the Cajun boy.

Louisiana Story recalls Grierson's enthusiasm for Flaherty's employment of "the found story." It is said that in their research trip through the southern states of America, Frances and Robert Flaherty stumbled across an oil derrick being relocated and that this provided the initial images and commencement point for the production. In Louisiana Story it is possible to see a convergence of the found story and the "slight narrative" that Kracauer derives from Paul Rotha. (11) Flaherty's notion that the documentary narrative should "come out of the life of a people, not from the actions of individuals" as part of the daily routine of his native people (12) is utilised in the rendering of a life lived on the Bayou. The slight narrative is affected through the ripples created by the appearance of the oil derrick, making for a tendentious narrative device that recalls Flaherty's earlier films such as the hunting of the walrus in Nanook and of the basking shark in Man of Aran. Yet in Louisiana Story the episodic nature of Flaherty's oeuvre is restrained, less melodramatic and more concomitant with an appeal to the fragility of the world initially under threat from the industrial world of oil production.

Unlike Flaherty's earlier films, Louisiana Story marks a reconciliation of industrial modernity, initially dealt with in *The Land*, with an edenic regionalism apparent in the likes of *Nanook* and *Moana*. In this reconciliation it is possible to understand Kracauer's enthusiasm for the film whereby the alienation from the modern world is directly addressed through its filmic representation. The response to modernity imposing itself on the environmental and psychic realms of post-war capitalism is countered through Flaherty's insistence on a naive vision that promotes a sense of wonder at not only the natural world but at how that natural world can be understood in the face of the industrialisation of this eden. For Flaherty and Kracauer, the poetic rendering of the world makes it possible to re-engage the spectator who feels that they have been alienated from things such as the "the ripple of leaves stirred by the wind" (13) or, in the case of Louisiana Story, the ripples on the water stirred by the passing of a canoe.

© Deane Williams, October 2002

Endnotes:

1. John Grierson, "Flaherty's Poetic Moana" in Lewis Jacobs (ed.), *The Documentary Tradition*. New York: Norton and Co., p. 25
2. See Peter Loizos, "Innovation in Ethnographic Film, 1955-85", *Innovation in Ethnographic Film: From Innocence to Self-Consciousness*, Chicago: University of Chicago P 1993, 5-15; David MacDougall, "Prospects of the Ethnographic Film" rpt in Nichols, Bill. *Movies and Methods Vol 1*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 135-149; Richard Meran Barsam, *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 12-27
3. Richard Meran Barsam, *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 17
4. Brian Winston, "The White Man's Burden" *Sight and Sound*, LIV: 1, Winter, 1984-85, pp. 58-60

5. Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 121
 6. Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert Flaherty*. London: W.H. Allen & Co, 1963, p. 135
 7. Calder-Marshall, p. 139
 8. Andrew Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film': The Documentary-Realist Tradition" in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, London: BFI, 1986, p. 79
 9. Siegfried Kracauer quoted in Richard Griffith, *The World of Robert Flaherty*. New York: Da Capo, 1972, p. 142
 10. Calder-Marshall, p. 223
 11. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. 2nd Edition. Intro. Miriam Bratu Hansen. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997: p. 247
 12. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*. With contributions from Sinclair Road and Richard Griffith, Glasgow: The University Press, 1968, p. 88
 13. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 31
-

Filmography

Nanook of the North (1922)

Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age (1926)

The Pottery-Maker (1925) short

The Twenty-Four Dollar Island (1927) short

Industrial Britain (1931) co-directed with John Grierson

Man of Aran (1934)

Elephant Boy (1937) co-directed with Zoltan Korda

The Land (1942)

Louisiana Story (1948)

Select Bibliography

Richard Meran Barsam, *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988

Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert Flaherty*, London: W.H. Allen, 1963

John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary." in Grierson on Documentary, Forsyth Hardy (Ed. and Comp.), London: Faber and Faber 1966, pp. 199-211

Richard Griffith, "The Land." Documentary News Letter, (February 1942): p. 27

Richard Griffith, The World of Robert Flaherty, New York: Da Capo Press, 1972

Siegfried Kracauer, Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, 2nd ed., Intro. Miriam Bratu Hansen, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997

Russell Lord, "Robert Flaherty Rediscovered America" Land, 1:1 (1941), p. 67-75

Russell and Kate Lord, Forever the Land: A Country Chronicle and Anthology, New York: Harper. 1950

Brian Winston, "The White Man's Burden" Sight and Sound, LIV: 1 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 58-60

Web Resources Compiled by Albert Fung
Film Directors: Articles on the Internet
Several here. Just scroll down.

Flaherty Index

Links to several articles online. Also, the entire book, Robert J. Flaherty, a Biography, can be found here.

International Film Seminars

A link to the Annual Robert Flaherty Film Seminar.

Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society

Biography and a link to a Flaherty photo collection at the bottom of the page.

Click here to search for Robert J. Flaherty DVDs, videos and books at