

Poles Apart

*The Search
for Truth
in Cinema*

Peter Tammer

Introduction

by Geoff Gardner

Peter Tammer is a man of enthusiasm. While we were acquaintances for many years, it was not until 1981 at the Melbourne Film Festival that my path and his films really connected. He had submitted his latest film “***Mallacoota Stampede***” to the festival and had been honest enough to list its length at 61 minutes. When I informed him that it couldn't be accepted for the international short film competition, which was limited to films of less than an hour, he asked for the copy back and said he would snip a little out of it and send it back. Whether he did indeed take anything out I never bothered to check and nobody ever bothered to time it. Whatever, the film won The Erwin Rado Prize for Best Australian Film.

Next year Peter asked me to look at his latest film “***Journey to the End of Night***” and I was so taken with it that I programmed it for a prime time slot and it filled the Metro Malvern theatre. It was too long to ask him to snip a little bit out but Bob Campbell, then managing Melbourne's Channel 10, came to the rescue and gave MFF \$2,000 to establish a prize recognising an Australian independent filmmaker. We didn't run a competition for it. Bob Campbell handed me the cheque and the plaque when he walked in to see the film.

Decades before and after these events Peter trod an independent path. Occasionally he got some government funding but he made films regardless. He was a man of boundless enthusiasm and independent spirit.

I was reminded of that when there was a screening of Peter's two decades in the making “***Flausfilm***”. After reaching a 92 minute edited version Peter was unable to obtain further funding to complete this film. Others might have abandoned the project for good but Peter saw it

through and gave us a generous portrait of the great man John Flaus.

It was also a privilege to screen his recent film “**The Nude in the Window**” at the very first season of Cinema Reborn in Sydney in May 2018. That film started as just a recording of a conversation with his friend Paul Cox as Paul approached death. From a single afternoon, with Peter working the camera and sound recorder and with interviewing support from Kriszta Doczy, followed by much assistance from Peter’s lifelong friend Nigel Buesst in the editing room, came a remarkable record of Paul’s life. Peter is a man of enthusiasm and of loyalty.

Some little time ago he asked me if I would be interested in publishing on my Film Alert 101 blog some thoughts he had had about documentary film-making. He wanted, he said, to write about the first film ever made in Australia, “**The 1896 Melbourne Cup**”, made by an employee of the famous Lumière Bros film company of Lyon. I agreed and some time after received an essay of quite prodigious film scholarship devoted to what I had till then regarded as a mere historical morsel. Later he followed this with intense and erudite examinations of two more famous documentaries and documentarists - Frank Hurley and his filming of the Shackleton expedition to Antarctica, and Robert Flaherty and his film “**Nanook of the North**”. They were by far the longest and most detailed pieces ever published on the blog. There they were grouped as “*Peter Tammer’s Personal History of the Documentary*”.

The name change for this book is an appropriate one and it causes me to think that beyond enthusiasm and loyalty Peter’s life and work have been characterised by a dogged sincerity and a constant search for truth. It is manifest in his films whether they be dramas, experimental work, documentaries or mixtures of all and it is manifest here in these essays which reveal quite extraordinary close readings of the films and minute attention to detail all brought together by Peter’s filmmaker’s eye and his insight into the world around him.

The independent film-maker's life, especially when supported by teaching and the inevitable interaction with the young, is social and outgoing. Peter Tammer is all of those. Ultimately however, the best independent film-maker treads a lonely trail where the decisions are all on him, the obsessions are his own and the paths of expression frequently unique.

The essays in this book go to the heart of Peter Tammer's work and life.

Geoff Gardner

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CHAPTER 1: The Birth of Cinema

Throughout the history of the cinema there have been many debates concerning the veracity of some films which lay claim to “truthfulness” because of their very nature as “documentaries”. The class of films gathered together under this heading includes a broad range of

divergent styles and approaches to “reality”. All filmed works grouped under that heading were present in the very first years of the invention of cinema: images which were recorded by cameras shooting many different frames-per-second (**fps**), were then replayed on projectors displaying those images at a rate close to those recorded by the movie camera. Frame rates sometimes varied because movie cameras were hand-cranked. The speed only became settled when ‘governors’ were introduced to regulate the passage of film through the camera. In those very early days a rate of 16 or 18 **fps** was considered adequate to approximate naturalistic movement.

The frame rate increased in commercial cinema through the 1920s and became fixed at 24 fps with the coming of sync-sound to Hollywood in 1927. In Los Angeles in 1985 I saw a demonstration of a new system called “**Showscan**”. The frame rate they used was **60 fps**. Developed by “**Showscan**” under the leadership of **Douglas Trumbull**, that system used large format negatives (65mm) coupled with the higher frame-rate to create impressive three dimensional **grainless** images which made people and objects seem more solid and dimensional, at the same time creating much smoother motion.

Although most films shot prior to the advent of sound-on-film were filmed at 16 fps and replayed at that same speed, they were considered ‘realistic’, which means audiences of the time were surprised by their depiction of reality. To our eyes when compared with digital movies they seem quite fragmentary and clunky.

Central to this discussion is the very notion of *'reality'*. Can we call a moving image a realistic image of observed life if it is monochrome rather than colour? What if the image is not stable and floats on the screen? And what if the frame-rate does not produce smooth motion for people moving within the frame, nor for objects captured in tracking shots? What if images are covered with 'blotches' or 'streaks' as a result of poor development techniques? What is the 'reality' of an image if the *granularity* inherent in the filmstock looks like porridge bubbling in a pot? Many such faults are found in old movies such as this short film "***The Snowball Fight***" filmed in Lyon, France, 1897.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KL0th6vWe-8>

The good news is that many charming old movies can now be restored to their former glory, even better than the original quality, by *AI* techniques. Some appear far better than they could ever have looked in the old film printing days. Others are treated by *AI* techniques and are transformed into almost entirely new works of art. You can find some links for these at [Footnote 1](#).

In the early days although people were very excited about the new medium and the appearance of 'reality' it offered, a division between potential uses and aspirations for this new medium became evident in the first few months of the cinema.

In the late 1960s the Melbourne Film Festival showed a film of "***The 1896 Melbourne Cup***". The print was a gift from the French Government to the National Library. I imagine that this very short film was created by someone who was licensed or contracted to film the event for the

Lumière Brothers using one of their new-fangled magical movie cameras which had been invented in France just a few years before.

From Wiki:

When Les Frères Lumière's representative to Australia, Marius Sestier, arrived in Sydney in mid September 1896 one of his tasks was to not only show films but to make films. With his Australian concessionaire, Henry Walter Barnett, the pair made Australia's first film "Passengers Leaving SS Brighton at Manly" in Sydney.

Another film they made was from the Melbourne Cup Carnival Series shot in Melbourne in 1896 and was added to the titles already held. The Melbourne Cup film was readily identified as the weighing-in for the Cup, in which the jockeys ride their horses to the weighing room on the Flemington racecourse and are weighed for correct weight before the race.



Marius Sestier

When I first saw this film I was astonished. There were many reasons for my reaction: it was so fresh, so primitive, and so 'uncomplicated'. Another reason I recall it so well is because there was a gentleman who kept staring at the camera for quite a large portion of the film. Upon examining the film again recently I saw there were a number of people gawking at the camera.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOUxWVC90Fk&feature=youtu.be>

Another thing which astonished me was that the filmmaker only managed to capture about fifteen seconds of the finish of the race. It follows an earlier shot from the previous material of people on the lawn with horses passing through the frame, including a number of chaps staring at the camera which runs about 1 minute and twelve seconds. The final shot of the finish of the race was taken from a different angle.

But the main reason for my surprise and joy was that this was an unadorned "documentary"... a film which was doing nothing more than ***capturing a reality***, capturing a significant moment in time, a visual document of an important event... no frills, just a slice of life, yet even as far back as the first few days and months in the history of cinema there was always someone gawking at the camera.

Well, of course! Why should that gentleman, or any gentlemen, not be gawking at the camera? After all they probably had never seen anything like this before with an operator winding a crank-handle like a coffee grinder, making a huge racket, with someone standing by shouting at the many racegoers telling them to look away and watch the bloody race. They probably wondered what

the hell was going on and were trying to make some sense of it when in the heat of the moment they just forgot about the running of the famous horse race.

My friend Geoff Gardner suggested that this film presents the first moment of 'acting' ever to appear on an Australian screen:

"Peter, can I put into your thoughts that the Melbourne Cup film is also the first Australian example of fiction or at least staging? This is because at one point a bloke rushes in from the side of the frame and starts waving his hat. This is immediately taken up by a part of the crowd. I don't think it was spontaneous."

I agree with Geoff on this matter. Another account I read elsewhere says it was Sestier's offsider Henry Walter Barnett who rushed into frame to admonish the distracted crowd. As you can see all the elements of observational cinema are there in this first wonderful example of cinematic history. Melbourne was most fortunate to be chosen as the site for filming one of the earliest actualities in the history of cinema.

Now we come to the part which really engages me and it has done so since my very earliest interest in films and filming, also cameras, both still and movie. It all comes down to a simple choice: *the choice between filming something which exists in its own right as distinct from creating an event to be filmed*. This brings us to consider the two opposing views of what the new medium might offer: either recording the world around us for scientific or educational purposes as the Lumière Brothers proposed, or frivolous pieces of wizardry for the entertainment of a public hungry for such things which was the contribution of Georges Méliès.

Occasionally each of these teams produced works which crossed over to the territory of the opposing side.

CHAPTER 2: *The Cinematograph*



Auguste and Louis Lumière

From Wiki:

The Lumières held their first **private** screening of projected motion pictures in 1895. This first screening on 22 March 1895 took place in Paris, at the "Society for the Development of the National Industry", in front of an audience of 200 people – among which Léon Gaumont, then director of the Comptoir de la Photographie. The main focus of this conference by Louis Lumière were the recent developments in the photograph industry, mainly the research on polychromy (colour photography). It was much to the

Lumières' surprise that the moving black-and-white images retained more attention than the coloured stills photographs.

The brothers stated that "**the cinema is an invention without any future**" and declined to sell their camera to other filmmakers such as **Georges Méliès**. This made many filmmakers upset. Consequently, their role in the history of film was exceedingly brief. In parallel with their cinema work they experimented with colour photography.

The Lumière Brothers invite Georges Méliès to a private event!



George Méliès

Somewhere in the mists of my memory I recall a letter inviting Méliès to attend an "**event which we believe will astonish even you**". This wording came about because Georges Méliès was a famous theatrical person, an illusionist and owner of ***Théâtre Robert-Houdin***. The

story has been told and retold that Méliès immediately offered to purchase the Lumière's "cinematograph", but that his offer was rejected because the Lumières had a particular view about the 'purpose' of their invention: they intended it to be for scientific observation rather than mere entertainment.

From Wiki:

On the evening of 28 December 1895, Méliès attended a special private demonstration of the Lumière brothers' cinematograph, given for owners of Parisian **houses of spectacle**. Méliès immediately offered the Lumières 10,000F for one of their machines; the Lumières refused, anxious to keep a close control on their invention and to emphasize the scientific nature of the device.

Many of their early filmed events were of '*actualities*' such as the arrival of a train at the station, the felling of a factory wall at their own factory and another showed some of their employees departing after a day's work.

"Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory"

<https://youtu.be/DEQeIRLxaM4>

"The Disembarkment of the Congress of Photographers in Lyon"

<https://vimeo.com/645029946>

and here's one of the earliest "home movies" ever made:

"Baby's Dinner" (enhanced version)

<https://vimeo.com/645029267>

The programme also included a short comic film which was a set-up event (i.e., fictional/narrative)... I think it was entirely set up. It's a performance piece.

**“Le Jardinier” or “l'Arroseur Arrosé”
("The Gardener" or "The Sprinkler Sprinkled")**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_vGEbwUWQ0&feature=youtu.be

This division between the 'interests' or 'purposes' imagined for the new invention not only existed at the time of its first airings but it also set up a dichotomy which followed from that time till today. A number of questions arise from this dichotomy such as “What is a Documentary?” “Are all films which contain observations of reality Documentaries?” There are many more questions to ask!

Why do we use such an omnibus term as 'documentary' to cover a huge range of different sorts of films, different genres and styles and subject matter? Some people have a preference for documentaries over fictional films but the general public soon decided in favour of those events which were 'entertainments': stories, dramas, re-enactments of historical events, etc.

Fortunately Georges Méliès was not easily deterred by the Lumière Brothers' rejection of his offer to purchase the '*cinématograph*'. The story I heard in the late sixties was that he just went back to his studio/workshop and decided to build one for himself, having already worked out what it might entail. I'm sure it was not that simple. I imagine he did a fair bit of research into what was required to copy what the Lumière Brothers had already created.

All over the world there followed a period in the cinema when individuals and companies created the earliest films including some which were made in Australia such as ***“The 1896 Melbourne Cup”***, ***“The Story of the Kelly Gang”***, etc.

Many films were created specifically to cover notable events which we call ‘news events’; some of these became *“newsreels”* while others remain as entire films of an event. In these sorts of events the ‘staging’ was pre-arranged, the role of the team making the film was to select the best vantage points from which the event could be recorded. Often such an event would require multiple camera placements so co-ordination of the team was incredibly different from those simple few shots taken at the Melbourne Cup 1986 by a single cameraman and his offsider. These films of important or ‘significant’ events return us to an earlier meaning of words such as ‘document’ or ‘documentation’:

“The Funeral of Queen Victoria”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9yiG3EUz_A

“The Coronation of King Edward VII”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVNFeQe4Nhk>

The work of Méliès was decidedly created for public amusement, his films were made to entertain, to amaze and to make money. Although they also included a mixture of documentary type subjects as well as his famous fantasies, my own special favourite of his early films is the ***“Indiarubber Head”***.

From Wiki:

This effect was used again in “The Man with the Rubber Head”, in which Méliès plays a scientist who expands his own head to enormous proportions. This new experiment, along with the others that he had perfected over the years, would be used in his most well-known and beloved film later that year.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DExmCKwQ8o>

In creating this film Méliès invented the process of superimposition ***without any sign of transparency***; in other words both heads were solid rather than ghostly. He had previously made films where he specifically wanted the double exposure to be of a ‘dreamlike’ or ghostly nature, but he did not want that effect for **“The Indiarubber Head”**. Later on this ‘solid’ superimposition technique came to be called ‘*matte*’ work and was most often achieved using ‘*optical printers*’. However in this very early attempt I think he merely used a technique of *re-exposing* the film after its first ‘pass’ through the camera and giving it a second exposure run ***before developing the negative***. This technique could only be successful in **“The Indiarubber Head”** film because of the black area in the doorway behind the expanding head, otherwise the head would have been transparent and audiences would have seen extraneous architectural features through the facial features of the head.

This little gem of a film was beautifully orchestrated, including a TRACKING SHOT: i.e., a shot ‘tracking in’ towards the head to make it enlarge, as well as ‘pulling back’ to make the head shrink back to normal size. And to achieve this I think he must have used some sort of ***focus-pulling*** technique to keep the details of the head in focus throughout the tracking in or out, whether enlarging or shrinking.

Another beautiful piece of 'orchestration' is in the handling of the 'head' as he takes it from the container and elegantly places it upon the table. This occurs about 37 seconds from the start of the film. His acting is graceful, flamboyant, and very quick in order to avoid any transparency showing during the move. I think he also employed a jump-cut between the extraction of the head from its container and its placement upon the table. The result is very slick, a well constructed bit of cinema magic.

Implicit in the recipe for this wonderful little film are the following ingredients:

The entertainment factor.

The magical trick.

The performance of the mad scientist (Méliès himself) with his bellows and his own disembodied head on the table.

An extra person (a wife or maid?) who becomes a witness to the event, provoking the next move in the development of the 'story'.

And finally, the pay-off at the end... the over-enlarged head explodes.

This recipe has served cinema well for more than 120 years so far!

CHAPTER 3: Early Developments in Cinema

Between 1895 and 1910 there was an explosion of early cinema all around the world. Many inspired and energetic characters were engaged in their own explorations of the

medium. Some of those people were mainly interested in what we would call story films, narrative dramas of one sort or another. Others were inclined to the observation of events such as documenting the funeral of a queen or the succession of a king. I imagine people were filming things which just occur naturally, spontaneously, but often with some comic basis. Comical events and curiosities such as the Lumieres' "***Snowball Fight***" which I mentioned earlier. Or Méliès' "***A Trip to the Moon***":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLVChRVfZ74>

One of the very earliest feature length narrative dramas "***The Story of the Kelly Gang***" was filmed in Melbourne, Australia, 1906:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYGdLcFJm6k>

In this clip we see serious damage caused by the disintegration of the old nitrate film stock:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZYRCzMYCvI>

Nowadays such old and damaged footage can be very well restored by AI processing. If you would like to see examples of these modern restorations see [Footnote 1](#).

Recently a friend introduced me to '***Rescued by Rover***', made in England, (1905), directed by Cecil Milton Hepworth. This film is a very early short narrative drama of the genre which would later come to include "***Lassie Come Home***" and many other films featuring children and their love for dogs or horses:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlhNxHfyWTU>

This stream of narrative cinema led to the great silent comedies from 1910-30 and the explosion of more ambitious story films such as “**Birth of A Nation**”, “**Intolerance**”, “**The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari**”, etc. Later, we have the amazing classic ‘art’ films of other German cineastes, the Russians, and then it all cuts loose: Gance, Eisenstein, Dreyer, von Stroheim, far too many to name. While all this was going on there were also more experimental or avant garde works being created, such as “**L’Age d’Or**”, “**Un Chien Andalou**”, Duchamp’s “**Anemic Cinema**”, and Dziga-Vertov’s “**Man with a Movie Camera**”.

After 1895 many filmed works were created which could be described loosely under two headings: entertainment or education. Very early in the history of cinema confusion between these two streams which often strayed into each other’s territory started to cause argument and controversy, some of which still remains in our time when we see ‘documentaries’ produced for TV which pretend to be about history although they may present not entirely accurate accounts of historical facts. More about this later.

Throughout that period there was a steady stream of films about events which were happening around the world. Visions of exotic places, expeditions, newsreels, and then an assassination occurred which led to the outbreak of war in Europe.

CHAPTER 4: The Great War!



At this time the “newsreel” existed as standard fare in picture theatres, accompanied by other entertaining shorts. When the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand occurred in Sarajevo, 28th June 1914, war clouds gathered over Europe. Here’s a newsreel of the funeral which followed shortly after:

“Funeral of Franz Ferdinand”.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjP2Rwk6Jj8>

Forty years later when I was still a child, whenever I went to see a movie at the local “picture theatre” on a Saturday afternoon a newsreel was presented before interval, even for childrens’ matinees! They were also run before interval at evening screenings of adult features. It’s quite likely that WW1 fueled the expansion of newsreels in every country. However at the same time there were other sorts of films being made for theatrical distribution and for lecture tours. Some films were made at opposite ends of the Earth: the North Pole and South Pole. As I can’t address them all I’ll focus on just two incredible

filmmakers who have shaped my life: from Australia and the bottom half of the world, **Frank Hurley**, from the USA and the top end of the world, **Robert Flaherty**. Each of these wonderful *photographer/filmmakers* created work which was astonishing for its time, singular, and poetic. Both men were castigated by critics of the day and even down to our time on the basis that they 'faked' their work, that they presented work which was ostensibly 'documentary' when in fact it was constructed or set-up. Both were extraordinary individuals, adventurous, deeply committed to the art and craft of film production, very different in character. They produced iconic works of cinema which have endured until our time which were, and still are, controversial.

Now let me introduce to you someone who has written extensively on these matters: a large essay was written by **Quentin Turnour** and published in the **NFSA JOURNAL Vol.2 No. 4, 2007: "A.K.A. Home of the Blizzard"**:

The division between **scientific uses** of cinema and **entertainment** ones was a continual source of debate throughout the history of what is called '**Research Film**' (see science journalist Anthony Michaelis' book RESEARCH FILM from 1957). Most 'hard' scientists with an interest in using cinema in fields such as ethnography, biomechanics, social science or biology were pretty dismissive of the 'documentary' movement, thinking it just a gloss of their work. Douglas Mawson, for example, hated Hurley's documentaries, such as his 1929 BANZAE film SIEGE OF THE SOUTH, for the entertainment skip they'd take on the expedition science. Modern ethnographic filmmakers in the 1960s were often making films in reaction to Flaherty, even though they'd often fall for many of his same techniques to get their films completed, such as editing together two different scenes.

I've prepared an ***approximate timeline*** for a period of twelve years comparing the lives and works of these Hurley and Flaherty:

1910 FLAHERTY

Robert Flaherty was hired as an explorer and prospector along the Hudson Bay for the Canadian Pacific Railway.

1911 HURLEY

Hurley departs for Antarctica with the Douglas Mawson Expedition in December.

1912 HURLEY

Hurley is still engaged with the Mawson expedition in Antarctica.

Hurley completes the Mawson expedition in **March 1913**.

1913 FLAHERTY

From wiki:

In 1913, Flaherty went to **prospect** the Belcher Islands; his boss, Sir William Mackenzie, suggested that he take a motion picture camera along. He brought a **Bell & Howell** hand-cranked motion picture camera.

Another source presents it this way:

“Flaherty decided to bring a camera with him on his third expedition in 1913, but knowing nothing about film, Flaherty took a three-week course on cinematography in Rochester, New York.”

However I'm fairly certain that this mention of his 'third expedition' is incorrect. I'll address this discrepancy later.

From: <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/robert-flaherty>

In 1914, he married his fiancée **Frances Hubbard**. Hubbard came from a highly educated family, her father being a distinguished geologist. A graduate from Bryn Mawr University in Pennsylvania, Hubbard studied music and poetry in Paris and was also secretary of the local Suffragette Society.

From Wiki (about Frances Hubbard):

On November 12, 1914, she married Flaherty in a civil ceremony in New York City; it is not clear how their relationship was renewed: "Legend has it that she sent him a congratulatory telegram on hearing reports of his return with the rediscovery of the Belcher Islands confirmed; and he shot back a reply that included a proposal of marriage."^[8]

1914 HURLEY

In various accounts it has been written that Hurley returns from Antarctica and edits a film called "***Home of the Blizzard***".

But **Quentin Turnour** refutes this:

This is one of the key points of my essay; **Hurley never did this**. He shot the footage, but the various versions of the HoB film were edited by either staff at Gaumont Australia or later by Mawson. As soon as Hurley was back from the summer 1913-14 Mawson rescue expedition he was off with Shackleton. In the Australian winter of 1913, when he could have been editing his 1911-13 footage, he was in Java making a film for Shell and being chased by Edgeworth David, the Chairman of the AAE, to come home and meet his contractual obligations

In **October 1914** Hurley joins **Sir Ernest Shackleton's** ill-fated expedition in Buenos Aires.

Hurley was filming in Queensland when Sir Ernest Shackleton sent a telegram inviting him to join the *Endurance* expedition, which became exploration's greatest story of survival. Despite the risks, Hurley leapt at the chance, particularly when he secured a lucrative

deal to take a 25% share of the expedition's film rights. Hurley and Shackleton first met in **Buenos Aires in October 1914** and soon found they both treated triumph and disaster in the same unruffled manner.

1915 HURLEY

Hurley is in Antarctica with Shackleton. In February the ***Endurance*** is caught up in the ice. After some openings and closings it is finally crushed by the ice in October. With the ***Endurance*** now destroyed by the ice the crew endured many months floating on various ice floes. After months of effort they found that they had actually not progressed, rather drifting backwards, away from their goal. Then Shackleton decided they must use the boats and try to reach the nearest island, Elephant Island.

From wiki:

After five harrowing days at sea, the exhausted men landed their three lifeboats at Elephant Island, 346 miles (557 km) from where the *Endurance* sank. This was the first time they had stood on solid ground for **497** days. Shackleton's concern for his men was such that he gave his mittens to photographer Frank Hurley, who had lost his during the boat journey. Shackleton suffered frostbitten fingers as a result.

From:

<https://www.seeker.com/100-years-ago-today-shackleton-rescues-his-men-1992394719.html>

Mountainous and ice-covered, Elephant Island sits just a couple hundred miles off the north-northeast tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. Inhabited by penguins and elephant seals, it's no place for humans to dwell. And yet, for 4 1/2 months 22 men did just that until, on **Aug. 30, 1916**, they saw a ship approaching.

In **November 1916** after the men were rescued by Shackleton, Hurley assembled the photographic materials from the Shackleton expedition.

1916 FLAHERTY

Flaherty's smoking habit causes a fire in his editing room, destroying much of the original material from his first two expeditions:

From Wiki:

In **1916**, Flaherty dropped a cigarette onto the original camera negative (which was highly flammable nitrate stock) and lost **30,000 feet** of film. With his first attempt ruined, Flaherty decided not only to return for new footage, but also to refocus the film on one Eskimo family as he felt his earlier footage was too much of travelogue. Sometimes this loss of footage is stated as 70,000 feet of film.

Another source says:

"From 1913 to 1915, on **two expeditions**, Flaherty shot **70,000** feet of motion picture film of Eskimo life. The negative of this film was destroyed in a darkroom fire when Flaherty dropped a cigarette; the one surviving **positive print** has been lost."

As you can see, these reports contain many discrepancies.

1917 HURLEY

Hurley returns to South Georgia to complete his film "**In the Grip of the Polar Ice**".

Quentin Turnour comments:

Hurley shot footage to complete the film, but the work doesn't see release until 1919. "IN THE GRIP OF THE POLAR ICE" is the title of the Australian lecture film; the UK release is called "SOUTH".

In August 1917 Hurley joins the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as Official Photographer (rank **Captain**) stationed in France and Belgium where he shoots stills and the film, '**Morning at Passchendaele**'.

Quentin Turnour comments:

Much of Hurley's key AIF work was done in the middle-east. Most of the classic Western front AIF footage was filmed by Hubert Wilkins.

1917 FLAHERTY

Flaherty is now engaged in raising funds for a new film about the Inuit.

<https://www.thunderbaymuseum.com/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/robert-joseph-flaherty/>

Articles on the Ungava Crossing and Belcher Island adventures were published in the **Geographical Review** in **1918**, but, after the loss of his film, they weren't much comfort.

1918 HURLEY

Hurley spent some time in Palestine over Jericho filming aerial footage of the Light Horse Brigade.

1919 HURLEY

Hurley was Invited to join Sir Ross Smith on his historic flight from England to Australia

1920 FLAHERTY

From Wiki:

Flaherty was eventually funded by French fur company Revillon Frères and returned to Northern Canada where he shot footage for "**Nanook of the North**" from August 1920 to August 1921.

On 15 August 1920, Flaherty arrived in Port Harrison, Quebec to shoot his film. He brought two **Akeley** motion-picture cameras which the Inuit referred to as "*the aggie*". He also brought full **developing, printing, and projection equipment to show the Inuit his film**, while he was still in the process of filming. He lived in a cabin attached to the Revillon Frères trading post.

1921 HURLEY

Hurley produces "**PEARLS AND SAVAGES**" a doco by Hurley about the people of Papua New Guinea and Torres Strait.

1921 FLAHERTY

In August 1921 Flaherty completes filming of "**Nanook of the North**".

1922 FLAHERTY

"**Nanook of the North**" was released in **June 1922** to modest reviews and box office receipts but has for many decades been regarded as a classic.

Read more at:-

<http://biography.yourdictionary.com/robert-flaherty#hDh27jJE7C1tmQOV.99>

I must apologise to my reader for the brevity and inconsistencies noted in this rough timeline. Some accounts contradicted other accounts and got the dates wrong. However, what I've presented covers a period of about twelve years when these two extraordinary men were working at opposite ends of the Earth, often under tremendously difficult conditions. There were some gaps between their expeditions, such as Flaherty not filming between 1916-1920. I'm not saying he was inactive then, merely that he was not filming in the Hudson Bay area in

that four year period. I imagine he was busy trying to raise funds for what later became "**Nanook of the North**", perhaps showing some *printed footage* filmed during his first two expeditions which had survived the fire, to assist in that fund-raising.

On the other hand Hurley had escaped from the Antarctic expedition with his life, some photographs and some movie footage. So, was he safe? Not a bit of it! Now he was in the thick of the action of "The Great War", filming for the military. After the war he went back to what we might call his 'documentary' filmmaking, but still that term might be debatable.

Now we return to my central theme: "*The Search for the Truth in Cinema*". There are many significant discrepancies in the accounts of the lives of these men. The fire in Flaherty's editing room reveals one such discrepancy which is mentioned in many accounts. Did Robert Flaherty shoot 30,000 feet of film or 70,000 feet over the period of his first two expeditions? I think these figures have been garbled by some historians as they seem to have fused the two early expeditions into one single period, as distinct from his later filming event in 1920-21. I also think the reference to his third expedition is incorrectly placed in one quotation. I'm certain the third expedition was the one Flaherty made in 1920 when he set out to make "**Nanook of the North**".

When we address the life of Hurley as represented in that timeline you will find different accounts of how he came to be involved in each of his Antarctic forays. There are also disputes about how much of the footage which is currently regarded as **his** personal contribution to existing copies of films from that time is often confused with footage shot by

others who were there at the same time, but who may not have been credited.

CHAPTER 5: **Old-style Movie Cameras**

While I was wondering how I might approach this complex history I emailed my friend Tom Cowan, well known in Australia for his fine feature films and also his cinematography on numerous works of other filmmakers, including some of my own early films. We met in 1962 when I was working at the State Film Centre in Melbourne. I dropped out of Uni and got a job at the Film Centre where I was most fortunate to have access to their film library. I had also started experimenting with film at that time when my sister Maureen introduced me to Tom. Very soon we started working on each other's baby films at first using Standard 8 and Super 8 cameras. Then Tom came across a 16mm camera which we bought in partnership.

Why do I bring that up? Well that camera was very similar to those which *might* have been used in Antarctic filming, not in Hurley's time, but later. I asked Tom if he recalled the clunky old camera we had when we started out 57 years ago, an awful Bell & Howell 16mm with 3 lenses and its "butterfly shaped" handle for winding it up which would allow us to shoot only 25 seconds of action? As I recall it also could be "hand-cranked" like a coffee-grinder and it also had a parallax viewfinder which was a devil of a thing to operate, having to reset it every time you had to take a shot. It was a monstrosity!



We started making our first 16mm films on that ancient monstrosity. First Tom shot a film for me with my sister Gabrielle running down streets near my home and then he made a film called **“Nimmo Street”** set in South Melbourne. Later he bought a Pathé 16mm ‘reflex’ movie camera which was a big step-up indeed. He could now view shots he was filming using the reflex viewfinder, bypassing the horrors of the parallax one. On another friend’s Bolex Tom filmed **“The Dancing Class”** which won awards and landed Tom a job at Commonwealth Film Unit in Sydney.

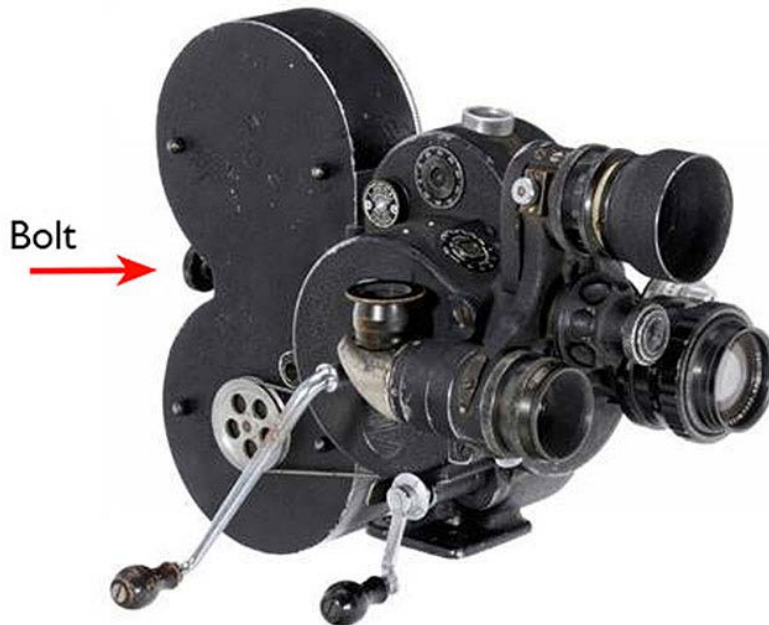
Why do I recall these semi-related events? Well, because I’m trying to come to terms with Flaherty’s **“Nanook of the North”**. I kept getting struck by the tremendous difficulties he must have faced making that film at Port Harrison in the wilds of Hudson Bay up near the Arctic Circle. I realise I shouldn’t just be concentrating on the

difficulties he faced, the immense challenges which stood in his way, but I can't help it. I had also started thinking about Frank Hurley and his various escapades in the Antarctic, at first with Mawson and later with Shackleton.

One day about 1972 I got the bug to make a 35mm film! Yes, indeed! I saw an old camera in a shop in Lonsdale St. Melbourne, a **35mm Eyemo** just like the one Robert Flaherty might have used on his first expedition to Hudson Bay in 1913 when he was prospecting for a company which had interests to exploit that area. Perhaps Flaherty's camera was an earlier version of Bell & Howell cameras as Quentin Turnour told me that the 'Eyemo' dates from 1925.



The Eyemo I bought also had two 400ft mags, and this image shows you what it looked like with one of its 400ft magazines attached:



You can see the head of a bolt protruding from the rear of the magazine: as my camera had been used in Antarctica the bolts of my Eyemo were crumbling from **metal fatigue**. The bolts were cracking up, the metal was fragmenting. I had to get them replaced which led me to meet Reg Robinson about whom I later made the film ***"Here's to you Mr. Robinson"*** with Garry Patterson. Reg solved the bolt problem by making new ones. I mucked around with this ridiculous camera for about a year before I became totally exasperated with its clumsiness, its weight, its clunkiness, and that awful parallax viewfinder problem!

I wondered if Hurley had used such a terrible camera? So that gives you some idea why I'm thinking about Flaherty,

how he ever made his film *“Nanook of the North”*, or how Frank Hurley ever got any shots at all in his Antarctic expeditions. How did these amazing guys function under the difficulties which faced them with such primitive gear?

CHAPTER 6: *“Home Of The Blizzard”*

I began to investigate the types and brands of movie cameras which were used by Flaherty and Hurley on those early expeditions. I came across the film which is often attributed to Hurley on YouTube: **Frank Hurley: “Home of the Blizzard” (1913)**

https://youtu.be/pn_cONfmenE

Again I refer to Quentin Turnour’s essay published in **NFSA JOURNAL Vol.2 No. 4, 2007:**

<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/latest/aka-home-blizzard-part-one>

Quentin concentrates on the Mawson expedition and the film/s which arise from that event. He describes its scope at the head of his essay:-

The subject of this essay is the official motion picture record of the first Australian-backed expedition to Antarctica, the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) of 1911–1914, and footage from this record that is preserved today in the NFSA. At issue is a problem of Australian cinema historiography.

I don’t intend to quote very much from this superb essay. It is incredibly detailed and Quentin has presented an amazingly thorough investigation into all the issues he

has raised. However, I will quote a summary of those issues here:-

That Frank Hurley directed or was the film's auteur.

That he subsequently lectured with the Australasian Antarctic Expedition film.

That Hurley owned the Australasian Antarctic Expedition film and must be the source for the surviving film material.

That the film was called "*Home of the Blizzard*" on its release.

Let's take the title of the film represented in that YouTube clip: Quentin asks whether the title "*Home of the Blizzard*" might be a title given to a **single** film entity, rather than a title applied to cover a number of events depicted in different films which were released at the time:

The NFSA's preserved AAE film footage is spread over at least **five title numbers**. As well as three reels catalogued as *Home of the Blizzard*, the NFSA also holds four reels of different footage catalogued under the title:

The Mawson–Antarctic Expedition, 1911–1913, Version 1;

two 16mm reels as:-

The Mawson Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911–1913, Version 2;

and one described as *The Mawson Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911–1913 [Offcuts]*

Despite having a reputation as a work of cinema, none of the footage from *Home of the Blizzard* seems to exist as a complete released feature.

The Mawson Australasian Antarctic Expedition, Version 1 and 2 material often repeats scenes or alternate shots, suggesting it is

fragments of more than one complete work. The three *Home of the Blizzard* reels have some consistent episodic continuity, suggesting they might be part of an incomplete film. However, neither version has head or tail credits, continuous intertitle cardsor a clear narrative continuity.

Thus, for the NFSA there is a factual conflict between the canonical, classic Australian title *Home of the Blizzard*, with what many believe to be its history as a film, and a collection of footage that clearly has a shared, but obscured provenance and release history.

Another film listed on YouTube as *Hurley's historic Antarctic footage* comes in for close scrutiny and detailed examination by Quentin:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-D6tK-8mn4>

The issue is simply this: how many men filmed the departure of the *Aurora*? Was Hurley the only cinematographer covering this historic event, or were there others whose work has not been properly credited? Here is a small sample of Quentin's investigation:

But there was no need to wrestle with the logistics of trying to place Frank Hurley everywhere. Surviving footage in *The Mawson Antarctic Expedition, Version 1* and *2* material demonstrates that there must have been at least two film units. Shots of the Hobart throng (Fig. 8), along with those of the *Aurora* drawing away and crossing wakes with the chase flotilla (Fig. 9), must have been taken on board the *Aurora* simultaneously to the departure footage used in *Home of the Blizzard* (most likely from the upper deck). Although frustratingly out of shot in the sequence of the departure in *Home of the Blizzard*, a cinematographic camera and tripod can just be seen in the bottom left (Fig. 7), on the stern of the *Aurora* as it travels down the Derwent River. In *The Mawson Antarctic Expedition, Version 1* and *2* material the likely reciprocal on-shore camera position would have been used (perhaps by Primmer) to film the *Aurora's* departure.

Quentin's essay is a serious investigation into so many aspects of the history of the Mawson expedition and of

the filmmaking, the screenings, the publicity, the preservation of the original film negatives, and the total lack of care in regard to these most unstable and degradable materials. Finally, there is a question as to ***who was the owner*** of the footage?

Most importantly Quentin unveiled the nature and personality of Frank Hurley, the difference between what are perceived to be the facts of his life and the various mythologies which have arisen from accounts of those events. Some of them seem to be deliberate misrepresentations, others accidental, and yet even when they were probably not deliberate Hurley seems to have used the publicity for his own ends. I don't think Quentin would mind me saying this: he gives a very different picture of Frank Hurley from that which is so often presented which makes him into a sort of hero.

On the other hand I wish to separate out Hurley's involvement with Mawson's expedition from his subsequent work with Shackleton. If every issue which Quentin raises in his essay is true, and he has given them the deepest investigation and consideration, nevertheless the two expeditions are distinctly different from each other and the events which occurred in Shackleton's expedition were truly staggering by any measure.

CHAPTER 7: North Pole and South Pole

While the 25 year old Frank Hurley was busy on his first visit to Antarctica with Douglas Mawson, Robert Flaherty, who was one year older than Hurley, was sent "prospecting" for iron ore in the Hudson Bay area of

Canada in 1910. His boss, Sir William McKenzie, suggested that he take a motion picture camera on his trip. He was particularly intrigued by the life of the Inuit people and spent so much time filming them that he had begun to neglect his real work.



Robert Flaherty

Upon his return to Toronto with 30,000 feet of film, the nitrate film stock was ignited in a fire started from his cigarette in his editing room. His film was destroyed and his hands were burned. Although his **editing print** was saved and shown several times, Flaherty wasn't satisfied with the results:

"It was utterly inept, simply a scene of this or that, no relation, no thread of story or continuity whatever and it must have bored the audience to distraction. Certainly it bored me."

As you can see from the above a remarkable serendipity was at work for Flaherty. If he had not been employed as a prospector for iron ore we may never have had the film "**Nanook of the North**". I don't know if Flaherty's first camera had 400 ft magazines like mine, but in any case, those early experiences led him to a life of filmmaking because he became much more serious after the

accident. Imagine anyone being stupid enough to smoke in an editing room full of explosive nitrate film! I think it was an experience which dramatically changed his approach to the filming of "**Nanook of the North**".

What impresses me most about this part of Flaherty's life is not just the story of the fire in his editing room. I'm also impressed that Flaherty had spent so much time making his 'observational' film coverage over the two early expeditions but then became completely disenchanted with it. There are numerous reports that he found it deeply unsatisfying, even though by current standards to do with ethnographic filmmaking it must have had some redeeming features, some charm. After all it was filmed at a time when the Inuit were in the early days of Europeanisation, by which I mean European culture was destroying the culture they had formed over thousands of years.

Flaherty was forced by the outcome of that fire to revise his concept of **the sort of film** he wished to make about the Inuit people. This revised concept became the basis for "**Nanook of the North**", a scripted and planned film rather than casual observational footage, which has been often criticised for being 'fake'. Even audiences from the time of its release seemed to read it as a 'documentary' rather than what it really is, a narrative drama. I think it's fair to say Robert Flaherty was inventing a form of film which had not been created until that time! My friend Tom Cowan made the comment that Flaherty's filming of Nanook must have been deeply "informed" by all the observations he had made during his first two trips.

While Flaherty was revising his plans and raising the funding for his third expedition, at the other end of the Earth another serious expedition was underway. Under the leadership of Sir Ernest Shackleton the young Frank

Hurley was taking photographs and shooting movie footage as the official photographer of Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition which did not come to fruition, instead becoming a most extraordinary tale of loss and survival, one of the great expedition sagas of the 20th century. Some of it was recorded on film but a lot of the material is only available in still photographic form.



Frank Hurley

Recently I came across this passage in an essay about Hurley written by my friend and fellow filmmaker Andrew Pike whom I had first met in the 1960s:

"In October 1914 he joined Sir Ernest Shackleton in yet another Antarctic expedition and produced his most famous still photographs—a series showing the ship *Endurance*, being gradually destroyed by pack-ice, and the heroic struggle for survival of Shackleton's men.

He ended the adventure in November 1916 in London where he assembled the film and photographs, including colour plates. Early

in 1917 he briefly visited South Georgia to secure additional scenes to complete his film, *'In the Grip of Polar Ice'.*"

There's some debate about what sort of camera technology would have been available to Hurley to film the expedition. Tom Cowan recalls seeing his Debie movie camera on display when he went to Sydney to join the Commonwealth Film Unit in the early sixties:

"I saw that Debie Parvo at the Commonwealth Film Unit - or maybe it was at Colorfilm Laboratories in the sixties. Frank Hurley had been around the CFU a few years before I got there."

From Wiki:

Hurley also used a movie camera to record a range of experiences including the Antarctic expeditions, the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and war in the Middle East during World War II. The camera was a Debie Parvo L 35mm hand-crank camera made in France. This camera is now in the collection of the National Museum of Australia.

But I'm certain Hurley had taken more than one movie camera with him on that expedition. Here's a photo of Hurley on the ice, with two cameras, one either side of him. It certainly shows him on the ice, the ***Endurance*** behind him, with two movie cameras: a Prestwich on his left, and under the jacket on his right I think is a DEBRIE:



I did read somewhere that he had **three** movie cameras with him, including this Prestwich model:



Hurley filming under the bows of the *Endurance* 1915,
with a **J. A. Prestwich Cine Camera**

I'm not sure when the next photograph was taken. It looks like the Debie camera, with an electric motor attached to

the rear, just above the tripod's pan-handle. Rather than a motor to run the camera it may be some sort of **focus control** fitted to the camera lens. It's possible that this photograph comes from a later period in Hurley's life, not from the Shackleton trip. The camera certainly looks like a later model and the lens also appears more modern than those used about 1915.



Tom Cowan also commented upon the primitive equipment available to Hurley:

“How exciting it must have been for young Hurley and for Flaherty to be recording the world for the first time with their cumbersome primitive cameras. Funnily enough when I went to Antarctica it was with equipment just as primitive and more cumbersome than Hurley had: **70mm Imax** cameras. And that was over 80 years after the Mawson expedition that Hurley accompanied. We re-enacted Mawson's fall into a crevice on his lone trek across the ice shelf, probably the most awesome feat of physical endurance known. Just filming the re-enactment was one of the most arduous jobs I ever had. I had a few thoughts about Hurley on that trip and some

of his pictures appear in the film as they have in almost any documentary from anywhere about Antarctica.”

This next photograph is *not* Hurley’s actual Debie movie camera, but I imagine it was similar to the Parvo model displayed in this photograph:



A 1927 Parvo

Moving on from the sort of cameras Hurley had available to him in 1914 leads me to discuss Flaherty’s camera equipment when he set out for the final shoot in 1920 to film “*Nanook of the North*”.

From Wiki:

Flaherty was determined to make a new film, one following the life of a typical Inuk and his family. In 1920, he secured funds from Revillon Frères, a French fur trade company to shoot what was to become *Nanook of the North*. On 15 August 1920, Flaherty arrived in Port Harrison, Quebec to shoot his film. He brought two Akeley motion-picture cameras which the Inuit referred to as "the aggie". He also brought full developing, printing, and projection equipment

to show the Inuit his film, while he was still engaged in the location filming. He lived in a cabin attached to the Revillon Frères trading post.

As you can see from the above, Flaherty's new expedition was extremely different from anything he or Hurley had done before. Not only did Flaherty buy two new **AKELEY** cameras, he also bought processing equipment to develop the film. He also purchased printing equipment to make positive copies from the camera negatives and projection equipment to show the unfolding work to his Inuit cast and crew.



Serial number 108 makes this camera date of manufacture somewhere around 1919 or earlier. This camera is now nearly a hundred years old and will still shoot today.

<http://www.samdodge.com/html/akeleypancake/FrameSet.htm>

I'll discuss the *developing/printing and projection* equipment later, but for now let's concentrate on the differences between the AKELEY and the DEBRIE cameras. Obviously the change of the shape of the package: the circular shape allows for the reel of negative

inside the envelope. From my experience of other camera designs I'm sure it was 'co-axial' where the film feeds from one light-free compartment, through a loop and the "gate" into the other light-free compartment, on the other side of the camera, after the images are exposed in the aperture. Other cameras such as the Bell and Howell Eyemo were quite different in design, they were not co-axial, and that made them much more bulky to hold 400 ft. of filmstock. Improved versions of co-axial cameras such as the ECLAIR NPR (noiseless portable reflex) greatly assisted the rise of **Cinéma vérité** films in the 1960s.

Once again similar problems were shared by these earlier cameras: the subject was not viewed *through the lens which was filming the event*, (reflex), but via an adjacent viewfinder which produced the **parallax** problem: the closer the camera was to the subject, the viewfinder had to be adjusted to avoid the framing becoming quite lopsided, i.e. instead of the subject being central in the frame, he or she would be off to one side. This was not such a problem when the subject was more distant. At a distance of 10 metres, the discrepancy would be negligible. But it would also be more significant when filming with any telephoto lens.

The AKELEY camera displayed in the photograph looks like it was totally hand-cranked rather than relying upon a spring which is wound up (as in the Bell & Howell which had both options). Hand-cranking allowed the operator to make much longer takes than the length of time one wind-up could deliver in spring-wound cameras.

I think Flaherty probably did take some lessons when he bought the Akeley cameras. In some sources these

lessons are linked to the two earlier expeditions, but I think that was not so. I think it is much more likely that in purchasing two new cameras, and other new equipment for a more serious attempt at filming that Flaherty went to school for the three weeks to find out everything he needed to know for that expedition.

Now we come to the developing and printing equipment Flaherty took with him.

A film I made between 1973-1976 with my friend Garry Patterson, "***Here's to You, Mr. Robinson***", is available on YouTube and it features Reg Robinson who replaced the corroded bolts in my Eyemo. Reg was the cinematographer of a feature film called "***The Shattered Illusion***" made in Melbourne in 1926. He also built movie cameras in his backyard workshop! The next clip shows his processing set-up in his garage:

<https://youtu.be/3zPdMpFZbpQ>

I think Reg's developing bath and its rotating frame which you can see in that sequence could only handle 100 ft of film. I think he could process both 35mm and 16mm camera negatives. After feeding them onto the drying rack above the developing tank he would then need to copy them using a film-printer. After that he would have to develop and dry that printed footage to make *positive* film to place in his projector, just as he had done for the camera negative.

Obviously this is an arduous process. Filming with 400 foot camera rolls the problem would be much greater than for 100 foot rolls. So Flaherty was incredibly ambitious in filming, first processing the negative and then making positive copies for projection in a room attached to a

trader's hut. I don't know if he had a simpler arrangement available for developing his film than what Reg Robinson had set up in his garage.

When I was teaching in the Film and TV School at Swinburne Technical College in the 1980s we had a small bakelite developing tank which had spiral frames, enabling the development of 100ft of 16mm film. I don't recall it ever being used while I was in that department although it was certainly much less cumbersome, much more user-friendly than Reg Robinson's backyard processing plant!

So that gives you some idea of the mission Robert Flaherty undertook to create that wonderful film. What dedication he displayed!

CHAPTER 8: Hurley and *"The Endurance"*

I wonder if you have ever seen the TV movie ***Shackleton*** starring Kenneth Branagh in the lead role? I had not seen this film since its first release on Australian TV in 2003. It made a huge impression upon me. This film was bound to captivate audiences around the world because of the immensity of the ordeal suffered by the entire crew, including Shackleton himself as leader of the expedition, and also Frank Hurley who was the official photographer on this ill-fated adventure. The images which Hurley recorded from the first part of this expedition up until the men reached Elephant Island in April 1916 have remained powerful icons of polar exploration and failed expeditions since they were released to the public in 1919, although newspaper accounts of the entire event

including the rescue had been available after August 1916.



Movie footage from this expedition was used to create films for release under two different titles: “**South**” and “**In the Grip of the Polar Ice**”. In his NFSA essay ‘**AKA. Home of the Blizzard**’, Quentin Turnour wrote:

[Hurley shot footage to complete the film, but the work doesn't see release until 1919. “IN THE GRIP OF THE POLAR ICE” is the title of the Australian lecture film; the UK release is called “SOUTH”.](#)

Some years ago when I tried to find a copy of the “**SHACKLETON**” movie, the local video store was just about to close down owing to the incursion of the Internet and their copy was out on hire. So I watched the Nova documentary called “**Endurance**” instead.

Although I had not seen that documentary previously I found it totally gripping. I won't bother to list its few shortcomings as I was quite overwhelmed about this account of the expedition in so many ways! The ship was well named “**Endurance**” despite the irony of the fact it failed to endure the onslaught of the ice. Because the

ship was so named, the word '*Endurance*' now stands for Shackleton's entire mission from the beginning to end. It stands for the mighty effort of all the crew and team members, their heroic performance under the most trying, debilitating circumstances; the fact that they survived as a team despite their different personalities and temperaments; and most of all, the astonishing qualities of leadership Shackleton provided throughout the whole crisis. Shackleton's great achievement was to get every member of his expedition home alive against all the odds stacked so heavily against them.

This documentary raised many of the questions concerning my theme, the search for truth in cinema. Here we encounter a huge conundrum: the veracity of the original films which were released about the Shackleton expedition compared with the truthfulness of any films which *derive* from those early films, including a TV documentary such as the Nova one, or a dramatised TV serial account such as "*Shackleton*", directed by Charles Sturridge and starring Kenneth Branagh.

Let's go back to the rare film and photographic footage of the period **1914**, because that is when Frank Hurley joined Shackleton's expedition and I'll end with **1919** because that is when these early versions of the filmed footage were released as films. This also coincides with the period of **WW1**. Hurley was engaged as a photographer in action from 1917 to March 1918.

From Wiki:

In 1917, Hurley joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as an honorary captain and photographed many stunning battlefield scenes during the Third Battle of Ypres. In keeping with his adventurous spirit, he took considerable risks to photograph his subjects, also producing many rare panoramic and colour

photographs of the conflict. Hurley kept a diary in 1917-1918 chronicling his time as a war photographer.^[7] In it he describes his commitment "to illustrate to the public the things our fellows do and how war is conducted", as well as his short-lived resignation in October 1917 when he was ordered not to produce composite images.^[8] His period with the AIF ended in March 1918.

I'll return to many of the points raised in that account from Wikipedia later in the essay, especially the issue of "composite images" which caused so much criticism of Hurley.

On YouTube I found an interesting *compilation film*, a "tribute" to Shackleton and his expedition:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbRvegcbxU>

This is how it was described by its creator Pete Vassilakos:

"In tribute to Sir Ernest H. Shackleton. Unique version of The Imperial Trans Antarctic Expedition of 1914 filmed and photographed by Frank Hurley. ~ WITH SOUND!"

Centenary Celebration. Edited by *Pete Vassilakos*.

This tribute piece is created from some of the movie footage and some of the stills shot by Frank Hurley. Running only 21 min 36 secs it is accompanied by a soundtrack of music and sound effects, plus some human voices mumbling from time to time, but it is presented without any narration. I draw your attention to this two minute sequence, have a good look at the shots as they now appear, without audio, and see what conclusions you draw from them.

<https://youtu.be/W2cVdZ9DWoA>

Here is *shot list* such as a film editor would use:

- 0.00** A man playing with a dog, other dogs in kennels, still on board ship.
- 0.15** Wide shot, the ship in background, men and dogs running in foreground.
- 0.26** Putting the dogs into harness for pulling sleds.
- 0.40** Dogs pulling sleds through crevices in the ice.
- 1.02** Dogs and sled on flat ice.
- 1.25** Man playing with a dog, lifting a dog off the ground.
- 1.35** Four pups eating.
- 1.39** Happy man with pipe in mouth playing with four pups.

After you've thought about this ***mute*** assemblage of shots and also my descriptive notes, consider what you might add to them. Then play that same sequence again but now with the audio, and think about the difference this audio makes to your comprehension. How does it alter your feelings in response to the sequence? What impressions are made by the sound effects and what feelings are generated by the music?

<https://youtu.be/HK8uadqKCzQ>

I think you will find that these two versions, the first without audio and the second with audio, have a substantially different impact upon you as observer, changing what you make of them, what you feel about them.

Now take this one step further, these same images as they appear in the Nova documentary called "***Endurance***":

<https://youtu.be/cOrAeZAYOKQ>

This is **almost** the same sequence as shown in the mute images, but not exactly. It begins with the shot of the man jiggling the puppies. Now we are told his name is Tom Crean and we are told that he stole food for the pups!

If we skip on ahead we come to the shot of a man sitting in a kennel with a dog. His name is given as Frank Wild and he is followed by Frank Hurley bonding with 'Shakespeare' the "Holy Hound".

Then we see images of the men and the dogs, the men working to disentangle the traces for the sleds. There is conjecture about Shackleton watching and musing.

Later we see shots of the snow tractor with an interpretative ironic comment that it is "easier to pull it rather than to drive it".

What you see in these different versions are pretty much the same shots used in quite different ways. In the Nova doco they are 'explained' or 'contextualised' in some respects by the narration which was probably informed by diary entries of crew members, and also derived from recorded reminiscences or letters of crew members written to their family members.

Each way of presenting these events gives us different levels of information, and extremely different emotional responses to the visual material.

Now I want to add something which will distress animal lovers. This is not included in the "tribute" piece made by Pete Vassilakos, if I had not seen the Nova doco I would not know about it at all:

<https://youtu.be/QA-x3RyZVJA>

This extremely sad sequence gives us an altogether different take on everything which we have seen in the other clips. If you only watched Pete Vassilakos's tribute piece, you would have no concept of what happens afterwards, although you may have noticed that at some point there are no further images of the dogs.

Another video compilation of the Endurance story shows a man with a rifle going off to kill the dogs followed by a gunshot. That sequence seems to have been removed from the net. However the Nova documentary does give important background information relating to this momentous event in the unfolding of the story:

<https://youtu.be/Sslskl17sgs>

This extra information given in the Nova documentary is intensely moving because we have already been told of the deep bond which has developed between the men and the dogs; that was also clearly established in the silent footage.

All these differences, variations, raise another issue when it comes to finding the truth in documentaries: the very same shots can be used over and over, in different combinations and sequencing. Different producers, different script-writers and editors, will select bits and pieces of the original footage which best suit their own intentions, or agendas. How can we ever know what has been cut out, or what has been presented in a different order? Can we ever be sure that they have not introduced some footage from a different event which is not the one they purport to display in its entirety?

The answer is simply that we cannot be sure! So many documentaries derived from newsreels shot during World War 1 and World War 2 have shown that producers of compilation documentaries often plunder images from other events than the ones they are describing.

CHAPTER 9: **CONTEXTUALISATION**

You can see from what I have shown so far that anything we get from a film or TV documentary may suffer from lack of contextualisation or because some things are placed in a context which is unsupported by the material which has been selected. In the case of Hurley and fellow adventurers of his time, their movie footage and still photographs were often presented in the form of 'lectures' **accompanied by** still photographs and moving pictures.

Depending on whoever was the presenter, e.g., Shackleton in England or Hurley in Australia, the same material might have been used differently in each case, it might have been altered between an early presentation and any subsequent showing.

Hurley was an inspiring person. He was also a showman. From all accounts he had a lot of charisma and chutzpah! He went to a great deal of trouble to get exciting shots to draw in the public when the film was completed and distributed. He was incredibly athletic and put himself in really difficult positions in order to get his images.

Let's look at this sample of some scenes of the *Endurance* which were filmed on her way south to the Antarctic circle. You see the ship rolling in the big seas, the men high in the rigging on a spar rocking from side to side. These images must have been filmed from a similar position in the rigging, high above the deck.

<https://youtu.be/PB0qRjkp-3o>

The next photograph clearly shows the deck of *Endurance* viewed from high above, camera tilted slightly downwards, a mast clearly in foreground. Where was the camera and the photographer (Hurley) positioned to get this shot? My guess is that he was stationed high up on a "spar", the horizontal piece attached to a vertical mast which had to carry the sail.



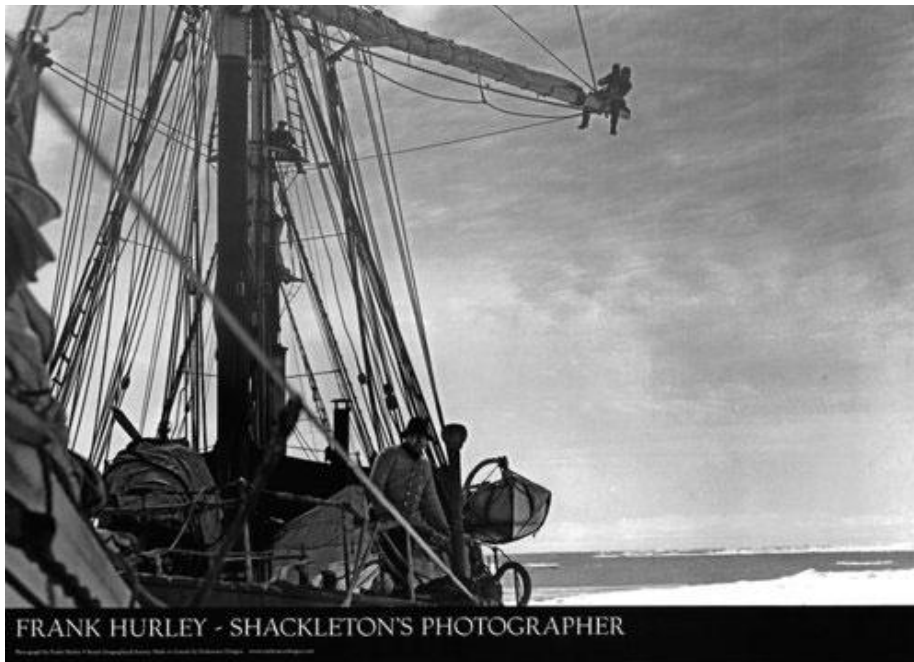
The next photograph shows Hurley clearly perched on a spar high above the deck with his camera **and his tripod** quite far away from the mast, hanging over the sides of

the ship. **Why was he using a tripod way up there?**

Tripods are usually used to support a camera and to level it on the ground or on the deck, so why use a tripod up on a spar? I guess that the brave and agile Hurley wanted the tripod up on that spar for the freedom to use his hands to crank the movie camera. It would also permit him to “pan and tilt” his camera, while secured to the spar and therefore freed from shaky handheld movements. I have never been brave enough to film off the ground more than a couple of metres and I’ve never put myself in such an uncomfortable place to get shots. I prefer to make films in safe places wherever possible so I could never have achieved the spectacular results Hurley got. He belongs to that tradition of cinematographers who go to great lengths, risking life and limb to get spectacular shots.



In the next image we see that Hurley has no tripod this time. He's clearly hand-holding his camera as he films from high on that spar overlooking Shackleton on the deck, and note how far that spar protrudes from the side of the ship. I wondered how he was able to climb out there carrying his camera, but of course it was most likely raised up to him via pulley.



The following clip presents a sequence I've created from a few shots selected from Pete Vassilakos's tribute footage:

<https://youtu.be/H5v7QhoZzVA>

Here's a **SHOT-LIST** of that sequence, or its **Edit log**:

It begins with the ship having left Buenos Aires, now heading south to the Antarctic, the sea ice being split apart by the ship's prow.

From **21 to 38 secs** there's a beautiful shot of the **Endurance** approaching camera, including **camera stops**, (jump-cuts). The ship is still moving through water but she's not under sail, so she must be powered by engines at this time.

From **39 secs** the ship is now trapped in much thicker ice and men are using picks and crowbars, trying to open up a channel.

From **52 secs** through to **1.20** we see men using long ice-saws, two men pushing down while four others are pulling on a rope to draw the saw upwards after each downstroke.

1.20 - 1.29 Some men are trying to push the ice away with long poles.

1.30 - 1.38 A long line of men pulling a rope coming away from the ship.

It's possible to form your own interpretation from these images which might be misleading. We now view many of these same images used in the Nova assembly, and we can see that they have been contextualised. They remain just as dramatic but they also are given new "meaning" and "atmosphere":

<https://youtu.be/Ty-L9hxuch4>

From 2.32 - 3.04 we get an explanation for the square shape cut into the ice and the chain of men pulling the rope which hoists up the scientist's net. This context is rarely explained in other films which use the same shots. However in the next shot the context is clear: they are trying to cut a passage in the ice for the progress of the Endurance!



CHAPTER 10: *Verisimilitude*

1. *the appearance or semblance of truth*; likelihood; probability:

"The play lacked verisimilitude."

2. something, as an assertion, having *merely the appearance* of truth.

I find it interesting that this word can be used both as praise or as a put-down! Let's compare the ending of the **Vassilakos's** tribute film with the TV documentary "**Shackleton's Voyage of Endurance**".

At **14.35** we saw Hurley bonding with his favourite dog "Shakespeare" the "Holy Hound" which I showed previously.

From the **15 minute** mark to the end of the film (20 minutes) we see the arrival of the men in the boats at

Elephant Island, farewelling the rescue team as they leave for South Georgia in the *remodelled* lifeboat the “**James Caird**”.

There are also some shots of the men on Elephant Island waiting for the return of a rescue ship. These are followed by Shackleton’s return in a steamship to rescue the men on Elephant Island. This five minute section of the tribute film is mainly constructed from *still photographs*.

It’s lucky we have these five minutes because they certainly represent a most important part of the entire expedition. From what I have seen in all versions, I don’t think Hurley used his movie camera very often, if at all. No moving pictures since the time the dogs were put down!

This “**Elephant Island**” period should contain three categories of images:

- a) What occurs as Shackleton and his small crew sail to South Georgia and land on that island.
- b) What happens with the men remaining on Elephant Island while Shackleton is away hoping to secure rescue for his men.
- c) And finally, seeing the men being rescued by Shackleton returning from South Georgia.

At **20.10** we are shown images including information about Shackleton’s death, and credits. But the film’s coverage of the expedition has really come to an end by 20.10.

Here is a short breakdown of what is actually shown from 15 mins to 20.10:

15.10 Stills of the men landing the boats and pulling them onto the shore.

Unloading the boats, setting up camp. Food and mugs of warm drinks?

16.34 Preparing the “*James Caird*” for launch after the re-modelling which raised the height of the hull by a few inches.

17.30 Waving farewell and “safe return” to the departing men of the rescue mission.

17.53 Making the camp more weather resistant, they have combined two boat hulls to form a hut with a sail covering, then we see shots of the men waiting.

19.04 Title: “*August 1916*” followed by steamship approaching.

19.16 A life-boat arrives at, or departs from shore, steamship in background.

19.38 The steamer arrives at a busy port? We are not told where that port is.

19.57 The rescued crew, all cleaned up and a much happier looking group of chaps.

Now dear reader, please remember, as I stated earlier, my comments are not an attack on Pete Vassilakos’s work as his tribute film is very good. I’m merely pointing out that so much of what is important is not addressed by such a brief film, it simply cannot be addressed and I’m sure there are many good reasons for that.

Anyone who stumbles upon that film but who does not see any other documentary covering this same subject would be quite unaware of what a monumental and miraculous escape the crew lived to celebrate, and unless they had read about it they could have no idea of the

hardships encountered by the men who went to South Georgia, nor the men who remained on Elephant Island.

This is where the Nova documentary called **“Endurance”** comes into its own. I will now show a few clips from this historical doco which will give you some idea of the incredible daring of the rescue mission as well as some experiences shared by the men who waited on Elephant Island.

What an extraordinary expedition this was in the same time as the first part of World War 1. At the ‘other end of the Earth’ so far removed from all the terrible things going on in Europe, 28 men fought for their lives against the great adversary ‘Mother Nature’ in the icy seas of the Antarctic. They also fought against the vagaries of temperament and idiosyncracies which would most likely be found in any group of 28 men as listed below. The five highlighted names are the men with Shackleton who sailed the **“James Caird”** to South Georgia.

From Wiki:

- Sir [Ernest Shackleton](#), Leader
- İ [Frank Wild](#), Second-in-Command
- İ [Frank Worsley](#), Captain
- İ [Lionel Greenstreet](#), First Officer
- İ [Tom Crean](#), Second Officer
- İ [Alfred Cheetham](#), Third Officer
- İ [Hubert Hudson](#), Navigator
- İ [Lewis Rickinson](#), Engineer
- İ [Alexander Kerr](#), Engineer
- İ [Alexander Macklin](#), Surgeon
- İ [James McIlroy](#), Surgeon
- İ [Sir James Wordie](#), Geologist
- İ [Leonard Hussey](#), Meteorologist
- İ [Reginald James](#), Physicist
- İ [Robert Clark](#), Biologist
- İ [Frank Hurley](#), Photographer

- George Marston, Artist
- Thomas Orde-Lees, Motor Expert and Storekeeper
- Harry "Chippy" McNish, Carpenter
- Charles Green, Cook
- Walter How, Able Seaman
- William Bakewell, Able Seaman
- Timothy McCarthy, Able Seaman
- Thomas McLeod, Able Seaman
- John Vincent, Boatswain
- Ernest Holness, Stoker
- William Stephenson, Stoker

Their extraordinary story really falls into two main parts, the first part ends when the entire crew arrive at Elephant Island, exhausted and starving. After a period of resting the crew is split into two groups: a rescue mission led by Shackleton with 5 other men, while 22 men remain behind on the island, including Frank Hurley. On board the “**James Caird**”: Frank Worsley, Harry McNish, Tom Crean, John Vincent, Timothy McCarthy and Ernest Shackleton.

Now the story becomes **two separate stories** but the images relating to the Elephant Island party are only a few still images captured by Hurley. I think he was using a small “hand camera” rather than a large-format plate camera.

The still photographic images showing the steamer arriving to rescue the men are not “actualities” they were **a set up**: they were most likely re-enacted for the purpose of the film lectures which would follow on return to Europe.

So in Pete Vassilakos’s tribute film all that you could possibly see, which runs from the 15 to the 20 minute mark, were stills taken by Hurley on Elephant Island. And

there are not many of those used in that film. Perhaps Pete Vassilakos used every one he could find? The incredible voyage to South Georgia and the crossing from one side of that island to the port is ***not covered by any footage of any sort***. That is where a dramatised documentary comes into its own because it has so many ways of giving the viewer additional information. The most obvious ones are:

Narration formed from research of all the records left by the men who were involved.

Interviews with descendants of the men.

Re-created footage standing in for missing actuality footage, but made to look like Hurley's footage seen in the earlier part of the expedition.

Interviews with historians.

Observational material featuring modern day adventurers demonstrating the difficult situations which would have faced Shackleton, e.g., taking accurate readings of the sun while at sea in heaving waters, huge waves and wind, and almost sunless cloudy skies.

Animated maps which indicate the trajectory to be sailed compared with the actual journey which got them to the island of South Georgia.

The Nova documentary *Shackleton's Voyage of Endurance (2002)* uses all of the above techniques and more, especially sound effects and music to heighten the drama of the events which are depicted. It's a fine piece of television documentary. I place it right at the top when it

comes to documentaries which present historical events for TV audiences. I can't vouch for its *absolute* accuracy, but it certainly gives the impression that it has been rigorously researched and scripted and that it tries to depict the events "truly", even when it uses dramatised reconstruction to represent what could not have been filmed at the time. It feels "authentic" all the way through.

Although I had seen "**Shackleton**" the film directed by **Charles Sturridge** starring Kenneth Branagh previously, and again quite recently, in many respects I preferred the Nova doco. Why do I think the doco is so much better?

It's more thorough, it gives overviews, it gives the viewer many important details. It is a bit sentimental and romantic in its portrayal of heroic status, but so too is the Sturridge film. It does not wallow in sensationalism. It's not mushy. It is also critical when it needs to be. But the overriding impression I took from it was it **has the appearance of being as truthful as it could be** to the subject, from small details to the broad scope of the whole endeavour and its place among the actions of the world's nations during WW1. The feature length drama **Shackleton** with Kenneth Branagh playing Ernest Shackleton is also a very fine piece of work, it covers many of the events mentioned in the documentary and the performances are engaging. Branagh gives a fine portrayal as Shackleton, I can't ask for more than that! However there is something about the documentary which appeals to me more! I'm sure this would be arguable for every person who has seen both works.

The movie had enormous power in presenting the trip of the **James Caird** on its way to South Georgia, and the arrival of the exhausted men at the settlement. But the

doco presented more about the lives of the men on Elephant Island which I found deeply moving.

The differences between these two genres are considerable. The movie has the advantage of the great charisma of Branagh playing Shackleton, and some of the men cast in the film as crew members are excellent also. But the representation of Frank Hurley was less successful for me. The reasons for this are complex, I knew what Hurley looked like from photographs and the actor did not look like him. In the documentary format we are able to 'fill in' for the character of Hurley and shots of the man keep his physical presence alive for us. The movie also introduced us to a complex series of events leading up to the expedition, the struggle Shackleton faced in getting the funds required. That struggle is not a large part of the documentary, but I did find it fascinating.

Another bit of important information I got from the longer version of the Nova doco relates to Shackleton supervising Hurley smashing some of his photographic plates before their departure for Elephant Island.

https://youtu.be/Y1_7vNJhMpU

This was also covered in the movie and they represented Hurley risking his life to rescue some cans of film from inside the hull of the ship before she sank.

From 30.16 - 33.36

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQXk9beVXZk>

That is such a critical scene in the movie. It's also a critical moment in the expedition. Without Hurley's

extraordinary effort to save the film cans we would have no movie film record of this expedition as he states in the scene which follows his dive into the sinking ship. This expedition is a wedding between the actual events and the photographing and filming of those events. They are married for all time in our history books, our archives and our national pride, also Great Britain's national pride via Shackleton.

What a dilemma this is for the expedition! It's do or die! Shackleton knows how difficult the boats will be to move when fully loaded with necessities and, like a good military commander, he supervises the "culling". He probably upset McNeish deeply by refusing him permission to build a smaller boat. In any case these two had a rocky relationship that worsened as the crisis deepened.

Then there's the struggle between him and Hurley. They both knew the importance of the images which Hurley had so painstakingly captured along the way but the plates would be just too bulky and too heavy. As a filmmaker I can imagine how distressing it must have been for Hurley, but really, anyone who has lost family photos and films which are destroyed by fire or some other catastrophe would understand his loss.

But how about Shackleton *making sure* of it by supervising the destruction of the plates which were to be left behind? What a vital piece of information! It speaks volumes. Trust is a centrepiece of the Nova documentary's themes! Another bit of information I came across describes how Hurley convinced Shackleton that he should keep his "vest pocket camera" and 3 rolls of film.



CAMERA: FPK No. 3A



Shackleton permitted Hurley to carry that tiny little vest-pocket camera with him on the boat trip from the ice floes to Elephant Island. That was the sole reason we have the

very few images which we see in the last 5 minutes of Pete Vassilakos's tribute piece.

CHAPTER 11: **Types of Documentaries**

Do all films and videos which go under that heading deserve to be included?

Which of those I've already mentioned really are documentaries?

Or are they all just different types of documentary?

Is there a difference between a documentary and an 'actuality'?

What constitutes an 'actuality'?

What do you do when something purports to be a documentary but may be nothing but a fictional piece of work which looks like a documentary?

Or when a film is truly **observational** but when the subject matter under observation is changed under the scrutiny of the camera?

Let's consider some more recent well known examples, the Maysles Brothers' ***Salesman*** and ***Grey Gardens***. Are either of these films really documentaries? What I can say about each of them is that they are definitely observational films which 'portray and intrude upon' the lives of their subjects. The subjects were compliant with

the filmmakers, but in ***Salesman*** the central character starts to fall apart under the scrutiny of the filmmakers and also the assistance offered by his concerned fellow salesmen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loXi0jxZqdc>

There are also moments in ***Grey Gardens*** where elder Edie seems to be about to fall apart, lost, almost falling out of the film, but she hangs in there. Her daughter, Young Edie plays the filmmakers to the hilt. But what to call these films? They easily fall under the umbrella heading of documentary, and they do 'document' lives, but better terminology might be 'cinema-verite' or 'observational cinema'.

Getting back to Shackleton and Hurley... there are many images which Hurley took which are clearly 'set-ups'. You can spot these images immediately, situations where it's clear that he could only have taken the picture if people performed for him upon request. There are others which are more 'casual'... where action is happening, unfolding, the men are busy and all Hurley has to do is to be on the ball, ready to get the shot. And then there are some in which Hurley is being filmed as a crew member, shots he probably set the camera for and asked another person to operate the camera for him.

Should we make any distinction between these types of images as being more truthful or less so if they were set up for the camera, specifically performed for Hurley, rather than occurring naturally? If we were to reject set-ups as 'lacking validity' and not use them in an edited version of the work, the resulting movie would be extremely brief. Some events can only be represented if

they are 'performed upon request'. It would be virtually impossible for someone like Hurley to lug all the camera equipment around and always film things only as they occur. Even with modern highly portable equipment this is still the case.



Some events are premeditated... the camera operator knows that the dogs are going to be offloaded from the ship, sliding down a sail to the ice. So he selects the camera position knowing that this event will occur soon enough and he can capture it if he is prepared for the event. His only direct involvement in the action is in signalling that he's ready to film before they release the dogs:

From 10.30 - 10.42

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgH_77TtX5I

Another example similar to this is when the men are sledding through crevasses and you can see the dogs and the sled with the man behind it approaching the camera. How can Hurley get such a front-on shot if he can only record what is already happening? Well, if there are three sleds going in a similar direction, if he's quick enough he can see that the first one has done such and such, then he may hold up the second or third until he's got the camera ready:

From 12.29 - 12.50

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgH_77TtX5I

With extremely cumbersome equipment in such harsh icy conditions these sort of images are always going to be difficult to capture even as still photographs let alone as moving images which may require 'following' i.e., panning and tilting while cranking the camera with a crank handle like a coffee grinder. These days when all our new technology is so light and so brilliant in giving us superb images effortlessly, we still have the dilemma of how to capture events if they could not be 'repeated for the camera'.

Another stream of criticism often levelled at Hurley is his '*artifice*' in tinting his images, giving them some sort of **hue** additional to the Black&White of the old film-stock. He is considered by some people to be manipulating the viewer's response by giving a picture a bluish tinge, or an orange tinge, rather than leaving it black, grey and white. These techniques were becoming more common among moviemakers of all classes at that time, indicating perhaps a yearning for colour and the emphasis of the moods which such colour washes give, either a warmer or

colder feel.



Hurley didn't tint all his stills, he chose some over others, and he treated them with different hues and intensity. That's not very different from modern photographers changing the look of a film by using certain filters to accentuate things. But at the time when Hurley chose to do this he copped a lot of criticism, as if he was committing a crime against photography or filmmaking.



Looking at those images more than 100 years after they were created I feel a deep sense of enjoyment, appreciating them for their beauty which I'm sure Hurley was after at the time. I'm also confident that he thought the hue gave the images a more 'naturalistic' look than monochrome could give, as well as being more 'expressive'.



Another 'trick' if you want to call it that, is '*composite*' images made in collaboration with an artist who draws or paints onto printed photographs. Here's a sample of such a composite by artist George Marston:



Collaborating with George Marston also made it possible to create an image which showed how the men on Elephant Island lived beneath two upturned boats and survived until rescued by Shackleton. One man's toes had to be amputated because he was in danger of dying from gangrene. Whenever I see this 'cutaway' image which gives an impression of their confined living quarters I'm astonished at the hardiness of these men. Hurley simply could not have achieved it on his own with a small pocket camera.



Now we come to 'superimposition' of images where the photographer creates an effect by combining two or more images in the same print. This is more easily achieved with confidence when combining still images in a darkroom. But it can also be done with movie film, either by optical printing or by staging a double exposure as **Méliès** did in his film "**The India Rubber Head**". That would be extremely difficult for Hurley to do with his movie camera in those icy conditions unless he'd accidentally filmed over something he had already shot before

developing the negative, or unless he used optical printing later in the post-production phase.

As I can't find a clear example of this technique from his Antarctic expeditions I've chosen this photograph from his Australian Imperial Force's images shot during **WW1** to demonstrate it. This photograph is a photo-montage:



Hurley was castigated by many critics of his time for employing the whole range of 'tricks' in what people expected to be 'true' documentation, as if the truth could only exist *without adornment or manipulation*. My friend **Andrew Pike** has written:

"In August 1917 Hurley joined the Australian Imperial Force as official photographer with the rank of honorary captain. Shocked by the carnage in France and Belgium, he showed his 'burning resentment' in such photographs as 'Morning at Passchendaele'. At the same time he found Ypres 'a weird and wonderful sight, with the destruction wildly beautiful'. He ran great risks to film

exploding shells and clashed with Charles Bean, the official historian, over his desire to merge several negatives into one impressive picture: to Bean such composite pictures were 'little short of fake'."

This criticism of 'fakery' has trickled down to our time and you can see that bias clearly in the following article published in **The Guardian** in 2004. In my opinion the headline was seriously biased, encouraging the reader to assume that Hurley was some sort of fraud. However the tone displayed in the headline is not the same as the tone of the following text:

Shackleton expedition pictures were 'faked' | UK news | The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com> › World › UK News

Aug 21, 2004 - **Shackleton expedition** pictures were 'faked' ... They are the photographs that show what is perhaps the greatest story of **endurance** and valour ever told, the epic ... **Hurley's frequent use of 'artistic licence'** was confirmed this weekend by ... of the **footage** from Antarctica in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide.

My own view is that Hurley felt he was entitled to do any and all of these things because they were all part and parcel of what a photographer could do and they were all viable techniques just like framing, panning or tilting. He also had some familiarity with selective focus: either 'pulling focus' or selecting one plane of focus so that only one part of a shot was sharp and the rest a bit soft and fuzzy.

It's never easy getting shots to look the way you want to have them.

Consider this image most likely taken with Hurley's 'vest pocket camera' with additional artwork by Marston.



Somehow Hurley achieved the image of the ice and Marston overlaid it with figures of the men and the boat. It's possible that this is close to, but still only an approximation of what actually occurred at some time in their ordeal. It was most likely impossible to achieve this shot at the time the event occurred.

Let me put a contentious argument here: if Hurley was to film a scene below deck on the Endurance before the ship became icebound and if he added some artificial light to enable the image to be caught, would we call that a fake?

When in Java Indonesia I was filming in a Batik factory where two styles of Batik were being produced. I had to resort to a 'trick' to enable me to get the shots of the 'stamped' Batik technique because the light level in that part of the factory was extremely poor and my battery-light had lost power. The only way I could achieve my

images in that room was to record at 8 frames per second instead of 24 FPS. I asked the women making the batiks to go very slowly, which they did at about **1/3** of their normal speed, so I achieved a sequence which would otherwise have been impossible or very poor. Was that 'faking it'? By the way, no-one ever spotted my fakery there and I never had to suffer any critical attack for employing that photographic sin!

I'm also confident to assert that Hurley did not see himself as a 'scientific recorder' like Muybridge with grids placed within shots to register images with precision. I'm sure that Hurley viewed himself as an artist, a *new kind of artist* who had cameras and a wide range of photographic techniques available to enable him to create images which would have emotional impact upon the viewer, whether in a gallery, a cinema, or merely attending a 'presentation' lecture which included slides and movie footage.

Frank Hurley's achievements were astonishing. As a filmmaker making films since 1962 I've experienced many of the same issues which faced Hurley in far less demanding circumstances. I have never had to film in conditions such as the harsh Antarctic environment with all its attendant physical demands, let alone the sheer dangers, the extreme hardships and exhaustion that these men endured.

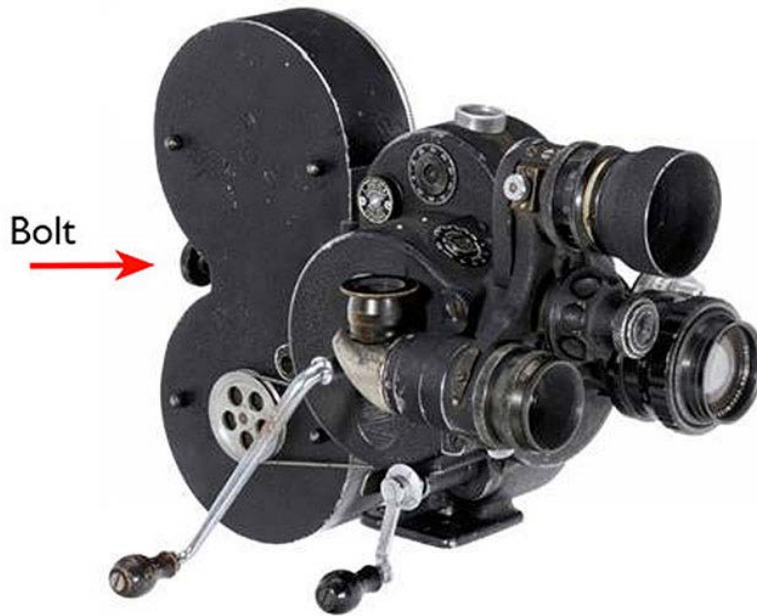


Launching the "*James Caird*" for South Georgia.

Image from CAMERA: FPK No. 3A

I often think of those intrepid people who make films of mountaineers. How in the world do they make a film in those situations when most of us could barely climb those rock faces with the experienced climbers who are the subjects of those films? Fortunately I have never been required to climb a mountain let alone film those events with climbers as they progress. I also experienced the problem of working with large, heavy, clunky cameras such as were available to Hurley and his contemporaries.

I presented this camera in an earlier chapter. It was the worst camera I ever owned, a Bell & Howell 35mm *Eyemo*. It was probably smaller and lighter than Hurley's movie camera but it was far too heavy and clumsy for me.



I can't imagine how I would have made any films at all if I had been forced to work with a camera as heavy, as badly designed, as limited in focussing, with such mediocre lenses such as this one had. And that's without taking it to the Antarctic! I was working in comfortable environments like Melbourne, Australia: no ice, no mountains and no crevasses.

Although we can't deny the fact that Hurley staged many of his memorable stills and moving images and that he embellished them with various techniques such as double exposure and adding hues, these *'tricks of the trade'* were later called into question and levelled against him mainly by people who had never done anything like it in their lives, people with limited imaginations who rejected his right to create images that would intensify emotional

responses in his viewers, giving us iconic images of an ill-fated expedition which will last forever.

How dare he be so bold!

CHAPTER 12: Flaherty and *Nanook of the North*

It has taken me a long time but finally I'm onto Nanook and Flaherty. I had been planning to write this chapter for three years, but what's three years compared with the one hundred years which have passed since Robert Flaherty set out to make the *Big Aggie*? Yes, he started filming in August 1920 and completed it in August 1921. I'm still trying to come to terms with this film *Nanook of the North* which I first saw at the age of twenty when I worked in the information section of the State Film Centre in Melbourne.

Many wonderful films were available to me at the time but two which made a most profound impression were "*Nanook of the North*" and "*Pather Panchali*". I was very fortunate that these films were available to me when I was only 20 years of age. I've seen them many times in the years which have slipped by since then. I showed both films to many student groups when I taught filmmaking at Swinburne and the Victorian College of the Arts. I recall a screening about 1997 when I introduced *Nanook* to my VCA doco students. I told them that although the film was made about 1920 "...it's still as fresh as a daisy". I also told them that 'documentary' might be a misnomer.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3 Flaherty set out for Hudson Bay in 1910, prospecting for iron ore magnate Sir William Mackenzie who suggested that Flaherty should take a Bell & Howell movie camera with him on one of those expeditions. This clip from the introduction to the film shows a map of the area:

<https://vimeo.com/385570388>

Flaherty shot a lot of footage over the two expeditions. 70,000ft is mentioned in some accounts. When he returned to the USA he edited it and showed it around, but he had an appalling accident when he dropped a cigarette into some nitrate film in his editing room and lost a huge amount of his negative. This photograph taken later in his life shows he had still not given up smoking:



He still had a positive copy left over from that disaster which we would call a 'cutting copy' or 'work print', i.e., a **positive** copy struck from the camera **negative** to enable editing of the footage without harming the original negative. He showed this positive cutting copy in various

screenings while he considered what he might do with his film.

According to the introductory graphics at the head of the film he was not pleased with his footage, he states: “*It didn't amount to much!*”

<https://vimeo.com/384442576>

I imagine from what he said in those captions and from what others have written that he found it too fragmented, lacking a thematic throughline or themes. It's possible he already knew that he needed a central character, maybe even a hero. From the outset I believe Flaherty was not trying to make an ‘*actuality*’ film as the Lumière Brothers did when they made “***Workers departing the factory***” or “***A Train arrives at a station***”.

I think Flaherty's motivation was to make a ‘*mythic*’ film that would present a passing way of life which could not easily be captured with the limited technology of his day, also considering the extreme conditions he had already experienced in the frozen wastes of the arctic circle. Returning from those earlier expeditions where he had tried to capture an ***actuality observational*** film he was quite disappointed with the results it makes sense that his next attempt might be a ***representational*** film.

From 1916 he set out to make the film we know as “***Nanook of the North***. He spent many years trying to raise the finance and eventually succeeded in obtaining the funds he needed from **Revillon Frères**, a French fur trading company. Some reports say he undertook a course in filmmaking in the period of 1913/14. I don't think that happened then. I think he would have needed to

learn much more about the **Akeley** camera which was quite different from the one he'd used in the past. There are different reports about when he took this course, some say 1914, others say after he'd secured the finance for **Nanook**. I suspect it was the latter, preparing for the major shoot in 1920. Perhaps he took a course on both occasions!

From WIKI:

“He bought two Akeley motion-picture cameras which the Inuit called 'the Aggie'. He also bought full developing, printing, and projection equipment so he could show the Inuit what they had filmed on location. He lived in a cabin attached to the Revillon Frères trading post.”

The two images below show the model of **Akeley** camera he used with two different lens configurations. The first has short lenses such as we would now call a “normal” lens. In 35 mm this would be about **50 mm** focal length and would present images in what we would call a **‘normal perspective’**.



The two lenses you see on this camera are identical.

The lens on the right allows the light to pass to the film plane.

The lens on the left side is for the operator to frame shots via the rectangular tube of the **'parallax'** viewfinder on the side of the camera above the crank handle.



This camera has two telephoto lenses, but only the longer one lets light through to the film.

The shorter one lets the operator see what he is filming, not precisely, but close enough.

Parallax viewing is never really accurate for framing.

Then Flaherty set off to the Hudson Bay area to make the film with his new equipment and his improved technical knowledge. He chose an Inuit man called **Allakariallak** to be the central character, re-naming him "**Nanook**" which means "**Bear**". He thought that name would make it easier for people to relate to his central character yet still remain in touch with Inuit culture. Two Inuit women played Nanook's two wives, but they were **not** Allakariallak's wives.

You can sense where I'm going with this line of thought. He intended to make what we would call a **narrative-drama** which would **represent** the lives of the Inuit as he knew them from previous trips, not an 'observational' film. Now I'm not saying there is no observational footage in **Nanook of the North**. I'm certain there is. But it's only a small percentage of the footage in the film, by far the

greater proportion being 'set-up' or 'dramatised' material. If you like, 'fake' observational footage. Take a look at this extremely significant scene filmed at the Trader's store:

<https://vimeo.com/384292245>

Nanook is seen listening to the voice coming from the phonograph. He appears to be hearing it for the first time and he actually bites the record to taste it. Like many other scenes in the film this is pure pretense. It's not 'actuality' footage of Nanook doing something *spontaneously* for the first time when the camera just happens to be rolling. It's acted and it's directed, and it's pretty good acting too.



You can see why many people from different eras might be confused about this film. It was controversial when it was first released to the world in 1922 and it remains controversial down to our time. Here are some comments by critics of the film:

Visit to the trade post of the white man

From Wiki:

"In the 'Trade Post of the White Man' scene, Nanook and his family arrive in a kayak at the trading post and one family member after another emerge from a small kayak, akin to a clown car at the circus. Going to trade his hunt from the year, including the skins of foxes, seals, and polar bears, Nanook comes in contact with the white man and there is a funny interaction as the two cultures meet."

"The trader plays music on a gramophone and tries to explain how a white man 'Cans' his voice. Bending forward and staring at the machine, Nanook puts his ear closer as the trader cranks the mechanism again. The trader removes the record and hands it to Nanook who at first peers at it and then puts it in his mouth and bites it. The scene is meant to be a comical one as the audience laughs at the naivete of Nanook and people isolated from Western culture. In truth, the scene was entirely scripted and Allakariallak knew what a gramophone was."

"In making Nanook, Flaherty cast various locals in parts in the film as one would cast actors in a work of fiction. With the aim of showing traditional Inuit life, he also staged some scenes, including the ending, where Allakariallak who 'plays' Nanook and his screen family are supposedly at risk of dying if they could not find or build shelter quickly enough. The half-igloo had been built beforehand, with a side cut away for light so that Flaherty's camera could get a good shot."

I had known from my earliest viewings that some scenes were 'set-ups', e.g., when examining the "family bedding down in the Igloo" scene. As a filmmaker I knew that Flaherty would have struggled to get a 'wide shot' inside an igloo and also that he would have struggled to get enough light there as film stocks were very **slow** in those days, meaning not as **light-sensitive** as they became many years later. Also, lenses of that period were also 'slow' meaning not permitting filming under low light such as modern lenses do. At that time lenses could not '**open**' to an aperture more than f.2.8, while a few years later

they could open to f.1.4 which is **two f. stops faster**. A lens opening of f.1.4 allows you to capture an image with $\frac{1}{4}$ the intensity of light which would be required for an aperture of f.2.8.

I was also doubtful that he would have had a really good *wide angle* lens and the shot inside the igloo shows no typical *wide angle distortion*. I was not too surprised when I read that he had built an extremely large half-igloo to avoid all those difficulties. Otherwise he simply could not have achieved that scene at all.

CHAPTER 13: **Hunting of the Walrus**

From Wiki:

*"It has been pointed out that in the 1920s when Nanook was filmed the Inuit had already begun integrating the use of Western clothing and were using **rifles** to hunt with rather than harpoons, but this does not negate that the Inuit knew how to make traditional clothing from animals found in their environment and they could still fashion traditional weapons. They were perfectly able to make use of them if found to be preferable for a given situation."*

"The film is not technically sophisticated; how could it be, with one camera, no lights, freezing cold, and everyone equally at the mercy of nature? But it has an authenticity that prevails over any complaints that some of the sequences were staged. If you stage a walrus hunt, it still involves hunting a walrus, and the walrus hasn't seen the script. What shines through is the humanity and optimism of the Inuit." (Roger Ebert)

So let's have a look at that sequence:

<https://vimeo.com/384399589>

The many criticisms raised against this sequence seem very strange as I've followed them as an active filmmaker from 18 till now at 77. When I first saw **Nanook** I saw a muddy 16mm print but I didn't know then that it lacked

clarity until I saw much better quality copies quite recently. And I'd never seen a film quite like it at the age of 20 even though I had seen hundreds of notable films by that time.

I didn't view it again until about 1986 and then I saw it with very different eyes from when I was only 20. I saw things as a filmmaker with more experience which had escaped me in 1963. But I did not see the gun! How could that be?

From 1986 I showed it to many groups of my students up to my retirement in 1998. None of them mentioned the image of the gun. Recently I noticed it was carried by the trader. I had not even noticed that the trader was one of the hunters in any of my previous viewings.

Now you might wonder why I missed this gun? Partly because the older copies were unclear 16mm prints, partly because I was concentrating on other things. I was probably concentrating on the plight of the harpooned dying walrus. I was aware that images of the Eskimos creeping up on the beached walrus herd were filmed in telephoto because I could see how **compressed** the perspective was: it was typically telephoto. I could also *imagine* why Flaherty used a telephoto lens for that sequence because the camera would have made a noise like a chaff-cutter so they were forced to keep it a good distance from the herd so as not to frighten the walrus away.

In later viewings I saw the rifle in the hands of the trader, both before and during the hunt. That was probably on my 15th viewing of the film! How could I be so slow? That raises another question: did they actually shoot the walrus

with the rifle and if so when? Did they shoot the walrus close to the time it was harpooned or only after it was harpooned, perhaps to shorten the pain of its death throes? If so, I applaud them.

And, of course, "So what!" So what if they used the rifle in the hunt as well as their traditional harpoons, because this film was clearly shot in a period of *transition* between the ancient unspoilt Inuit culture and the modern colonial trading intervention, long before what it is today with motorised sleds, etc. Flaherty was making a film which represented changes to the Inuit way of life during that transitional era which included their original culture as well as their adaptation to European trade and technology, as has so eloquently been pointed out in the Wiki quote from Roger Ebert.

But the heart of the matter comes down to this: not only was I fooled by my earlier viewings of the film to see *less* in this sequence than I have seen in more recent viewings, but I think that was the same for many of the people who saw it on its first release when it created a sensation.

Why have these criticisms been raised to the level of 'controversy' to denigrate such a great work? Why does this happen over and over in cinema history? Is it just the shock of the new similar to the furore at the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913?

The denigration of *Nanook of the North* extends to many other scenes in the film. It seems that people desperately wanted to belittle or undermine the wonderful qualities of this beguiling masterpiece. Why did they feel the need to do so? Fortunately for people who revere the film it's so

great that it rises above these carping criticisms and is rightfully placed among the great works of cinema.

Let's take a look at a different kind of scene altogether, something which probably was **observational** in nature, Nanook *icing his sled runners* to prepare for a new day's trekking:

<https://vimeo.com/384408442>

You can see from the way this scene is shot that it is more casual and 'perfunctory'. It gives information which is intended to explain conditions in the icy wastes, difficulties which the Inuit must endure and overcome, including protecting a sled made of organic material from the hunger of the dogs, while also warming their own hands when icing the runners with the cold water. It also explains the necessity of protecting the young huskies from the hunger of their elders.

It's such a brief sequence. It has all the hallmarks of 'actuality observed' rather than set-up and performed filming. It could be considered as *'filler'* or it could be considered as *'essential to the unfolding narrative'*. I think it's essential for many reasons: it gives us some necessary information about their daily routines and it backgrounds the importance of those routines. It also speaks to the harshness of the conditions which threaten the lives of these people, even in an era of transition when they can trade skins for metal pots and tools from the trader's store. It also shows how they have to look after themselves with the cold biting into their hands, warming their freezing hands on their cheeks just as we might do when we visit ski resorts.



There are other small vignettes in the film which have this quality of information fill-in. This scene shows Nanook sewing hide onto his kayak frame:

<https://vimeo.com/384412315>

This scene of hide being attached to the kayak frame lasts only **20 seconds!** How extraordinary that Flaherty gives only 20 seconds to such a crucial piece of activity and information. A miracle of invention and construction, the kayak is central in the lives of these hunters as viewers will see in other sequences. Then we are shown the '*omiak*' or large canoe being carried by many Inuit from the river to the trading post.

We are told its frame is made from driftwood and covered with walrus and seal hides, but beyond this there is scant information about the construction of either a kayak or an *omiak*. From the 1.22 mark you can see clearly how the edges of the hides do not always reach the frame of the *omiak*.

At 1.42 they beach the omiak near the trading post. At 2.29 they start hauling it up the slope where fur pelts are seen hanging on drying racks. This omiak is quite heavy despite being made of relatively few pieces of driftwood. This is a **communal** vehicle, quite distinct from the kayak which usually serves one person, but not always as we shall see.

I always wanted to know how they managed to make these two flimsy craft waterproof. How come they weren't bailing out excess water all the time? No information like this can be found in the film as Flaherty was not making an instructional film on "**How to build a kayak or an omiak**". I wonder if there is a documentary available on that subject? (OK, you'll be pleased to know such information is currently available on many sites on the net.)

Although his film was confused with being a '**documentary**', *whatever that term might have meant in 1922*, it was not primarily intended as an *information* piece.

CHAPTER 14: **Nanook Goes Fishing**

Next we see a sequence which brings together a lot of things I've mentioned so far.

<https://vimeo.com/384417146>

This scene opens with a title which tells us the importance of Nanook's skills as a hunter when times are tough and

his people are facing starvation. Then we see him paddling his slender leaf-like kayak to take him to a spot where he will fish on the ice-floe. That's followed by a sequence of shots which show him using a **wicker mat** which he uses to protect himself from the cold ice while fishing.



This shot also raises the question whether Flaherty used two cameras when filming on that day.

Then we see him using a lure and a three-pronged harpoon to catch fish which he kills by biting them behind the head. Like any proud fisherman he shows off his large catch gleefully at 4.42. Then he packs up for the day and gives another Inuit man a lift home on his kayak, lying face down upon the catch of fish which Nanook had caught.

I love this sequence. It has been set-up but looks casual. The catching of the fish is entirely dependent upon chance, he doesn't get all the ones he goes after but the camera observes every move including those that got away. There are wide shots, medium shots and close-ups in this mix finishing with Nanook giving a "brother

fisherman” a lift. The final shot with fish draped over the front section of the kayak is what we might call “medium wide”.

Many components feed into this sequence. We see how traditional Inuit hunters used their tools, artefacts and weapons to hunt for fish. Their lives are dependent upon these artefacts and their skills as hunters. We can see that Flaherty has planned the structure of this scene, it has a beginning, a middle and an end. I’m guessing here, but I think even the “tag” of giving a fellow fisherman a lift was not serendipitous, it may have been planned before the shoot. In any case it doesn’t matter much about that, it could go either way. But I’m quite sure that Flaherty and **Allakariallak** knew exactly what **Nanook** had to do that day and had worked it out between them before they set out for the hunt.

CHAPTER 15: All is not what it seems!

In the next beautiful sequence Nanook discovers a seal’s breathing hole and we are told that seals have to surface every 20 minutes to breathe so they must keep their breathing hole open.

<https://vimeo.com/384422476>

1.20: We see Nanook in profile waiting for signs of the seal arriving.

1.29: He has his harpoon poised ready to strike.

1.30: He plunges his harpoon into the seal (it's a front-on shot) and then it cuts to a wider profile shot of him struggling to hold the cord in his hands. This is followed by a series of "antics" as he struggles to keep hold of the seal.

2.27: He seems to be getting the upper hand and can pull away from the hole, only to be dragged back towards the hole in the ice.

3.04: He signals to people in the distance that he needs help. More falls, and now we are closer on Nanook. Nanook draws back from the hole again as people arrive with a sled. They seem to be taking their time! Another great wide shot.



4.12: We now have four assistants on the spot ready and willing to assist.

4.30: Nanook reaches for his knife and starts widening the hole in the ice.

4.47: We see the seal being dragged up from the water by the entire group.

5.00: We read a caption about the dogs howling their typical wolf howls in anticipation of a feast. Shots of ferocious hungry dogs demanding some food. Definitely not acted. This is the real thing.

5.40: Now the entire seal is out of the hole and up on the ice.

5.53: The butchery commences with the cutting of the skin. Slashing through the blubber while the dogs make very fine snarling cutaways.

6.54: Now the blubber has been peeled off and we see the relatively skinny little carcass of the seal.

7.12: Nanook drags the skin and blubber away from the carcass.

7.25: They roll the carcass over and start cutting the meat. Now it's time to carve the fresh warm meat and have a feast, including the dogs who have all been acting as cutaways throughout this event. These dogs are not a bunch of extras, they are central to the action. Who needs meat to be cooked? Eating it raw sure saves on electricity and gas. Or in the Inuit's case dried moss for fuel. But what if you can't find enough moss to light a fire?

8.05: Another caption about the importance of seal meat for sustenance. It also explains that the eskimos savour

blubber as we do butter. This is followed by a shot of two children wrestling over a seal flipper, each of them has an end of it in their mouth.

9.24: Now it's time for the dogs to get some of the kill. Nanook throws them pieces of meat which disappear down greedy gullets at the speed of light. Up here in the icy waste you can't afford to be slow off the mark! Some dogs don't like other dogs getting anything. So now there's a dog fight. Nanook separates the dogs; the final caption for the scene tells us it's getting dark and the dogs have caused a dangerous delay.

As you can see, this sequence has so many elements including a lot of *information*. But is it primarily an information piece? No! It could be considered as an ethnographic documentary but I don't think it is that. It is also very entertaining. Every time I've shown it to people they have chortled along with Nanook's struggle to hold the seal. Then they pause when the Inuit are shown eating the raw flesh. This whole scene is a planned, dramatised and choreographed sequence which includes information and discomfoting reality.

But all is not what it seems.

Somewhere in the deep past I read that Nanook was pulling on the rope which went to another breathing hole some distance away which had a number of his friends pulling in a tug-of-war against him. If this is true then it clearly shows that Flaherty had a very liberal sense of what is true. He wanted to show a titanic struggle between man and beast and perhaps that's how he achieved it.

And behind that story there is another story.

When Flaherty was making the film he developed his **camera original negative** footage in the cabin attached to the trader's store where he had darkroom facilities for developing the **camera negative**, drying it, putting it through a printer to make a copy, and then developing that **printed copy**. After drying that **printed copy** he could show the eskimos the scenes that had been shot the day or so before.

The story goes like this: when Flaherty was showing the eskimos the footage of Nanook struggling with the seal they went up to the screen to try to assist Nanook in his dire effort, having forgotten (apparently) that they were at the other end of the rope only a day or so previously.

That reminds me of a scene from Godard's "**Les Carabiniers**" but let's not delve into that one right now.

CHAPTER 16: Where can we find 'Truth' ?

Is Flaherty being **fraudulent** when he creates a sequence which purports to show something as "actual" when it is in fact a "representation" or "facsimile"?

As I've mentioned earlier, it seems Flaherty wasn't interested in how to build a kayak or an omiak. But in the next sequence he has Nanook build an igloo. This might be the most famous igloo in the history of the world. It is certainly archetypal. It could also have been shown in a

series of *How to...* films such as we held at the State Film Centre in 1963. Our motto was:

“Films with a purpose!”

<https://vimeo.com/384434792>

I'm not going to describe every move in this sequence. If you haven't seen it, it's definitely worth a look. It runs about 8 minutes in total. I'm just going to make a few general comments about it.

The family arrive with their sled and dogs at a sloping site and Nanook starts looking for the right sort of ice, prodding with his spear. He finds the right stuff and starts cutting into it with his blade. We are not told whether this blade is metal or ivory. A caption tells us that it is “deep snow packed hard”.

Then in beautifully framed shots Nanook seems to be instructing others where to place the dogs. He starts cutting into the packed snow so that the cavity will be part of the structure when complete. Another caption tells us the blade is a **walrus** ivory blade. This is important because it would have different resistance to the cold than a metal blade of similar size about as long as a machete.

We're told it is instantly glazed with his saliva when he licks it with his tongue. While the father works the children play, sliding down the hill, a rather ancient game I think, one child using the other for a sled or toboggan.

Nanook manoeuvres large chunks of cut ice into place making a dome. The walrus ivory blade is a great tool

absolutely perfect for all the tasks which he performs. Cutting, shaving, shaping the blocks so they fit well together.

Another caption tells us that the women fill the gaps with snow to keep out the wind, no mortar is required. No spak-filler! Babies hide inside their mother's furry hoods for warmth while all the adults work on this igloo. It's a family job.

The children play with toy sleds, one of which is pulled by a husky puppy. They start 'em young!

Now Nanook reaches the top of the dome, the snow-bricks have to be cut precisely. He employs *gravity assist* in building this dome as all things incline towards the centre like a keystone in an arch.

More gap-filler while the baby sleeps on mum's shoulders as she works. Nanook places the topmost "brick" and now we have a perfect igloo. Final gap-filling.

Another caption "***Complete within the hour!***" Is this really true? Was Flaherty having a joke on us? Did these three adults really build the igloo in an hour?

From inside the igloo Nanook cuts a rectangular hole and sticks his head out smiling profusely, very pleased with himself. Just a bit of over-acting here!

Then he goes looking for real ice because he's going to make a window to let light into the igloo for Nyla. He selects and chips out a block which is quite different and much heavier than the blocks which he chose to build the igloo from and he carries it to the dome.

He places it against the dome and measures it to cut out a piece of the wall. When he has extracted it he fits the ice in its place, smooths it off, and uses the piece he removed to make a reflector to improve the lighting inside. The final shot of the scene shows Nyla cleaning “her new window” from the inside.

My thoughts about this sequence: this igloo would have astonished Brunelleschi! His dome could not have been built in an hour but I bet he would have been gobsmacked by Nanook’s dome. Second, every element of this dome is water! Okay, it’s water in solid state! But it is a home ***made of water*** which will protect this family from the biggest Arctic gales. It might get snowed over but it will never collapse.

Then we come to the filming. There are so many different choices of angle and view. It looks like “casual observation” but it clearly follows a plan. I think Flaherty had seen this construction process previously and had worked out a plan to show all the most important details. He also gives us essential information such as the ‘walrus ivory’ blade but does not tell us *why not* use a steel blade; they could have bought a steel blade from the trader’s store. On the other hand I suspect the tip of Nanook’s spear which he used to chip away at the ice is metal, but I can’t be sure.

So this sequence has many characteristics aside from the cutaways of the children playing childish games which occur everywhere across this planet. Every element he includes in this sequence has its own part to play in the whole, and the igloo is going to be crucial to the ending of the film, but I’ll save that scene for last.

CHAPTER 17: **Who is this Nanook?**

Now I'm going back a way, to the very beginning of the film. After Flaherty's intro which includes the history of his earlier trips and motivation for making his new film, we get to see two wonderful portrait shots, Nanook and Nyla. In style they are quite different from each other.



This famous still from the film is taken from the **movie image portrait** of Nanook seen between 0.16 - 0.27. Although it's a **portraiture shot** it is a **moving** image, and it is acted and directed. Nanook is clearly taking instruction from Flaherty and his weathered face shows he has had a very tough life. He seems to have suffered an injury to his left eye.

Nyla, the smiling one, (0.29 - 0.40) is the nymph. In the film she is seen rocking and smiling and also responding to direction from behind the camera.

<https://vimeo.com/385564573>

We now view the very first “sequence” of the film, Nanook paddling from the distance to the shore in his kayak:

<https://vimeo.com/385560078>

We are told Nanook is coming down river to the Trading Post. A child lies facing Nanook on the front end of the kayak. He “parks” the kayak carefully, alights from the kayak and lifts the child “**Allee**” off the kayak onto the rocky shore.

Then we see **Nyla** emerge from inside the kayak. Wearing all those furs it’s a tight fit and not easy for her, but she does eventually get out and onto land. Then Nanook passes the bare-skinned baby which had been left behind to Nyla.

Now **Cunayou** emerges from this mighty ship. She is no child, she’s a fully grown adult. She runs to shore.

The last to emerge from this ‘troop-carrier’ is little **Comock**, a husky puppy.

Okay, that’s how it unfolds. Every time I’ve shown it to a group of people they have all laughed along with it, full of acclamation at this lovely sequence. Last year I showed it to a group of elderly people, oldies like me, in Gisborne. None of the 24 there had ever seen this film and only **one** of them had heard of it before, but they all loved this film, and like me, they were captivated from the very first scene.

However, none of them questioned very deeply how it could have been achieved. And let me be honest, only after about 10 viewings of this film did it occur to me that it was a gag, a set-up, and quite an elaborate one for the time.

Even if all those people could have fitted into the hull of this little kayak it would have been really troubling for them, incredibly difficult to get them inside the hull in the first place, and extremely difficult for them to get them out.

I assumed after my numerous viewings that Flaherty had made use of the captions telling us the names of the family to allow him to “jump-cut” the scene. After the first child is put onto the shore, a **caption: “Allee”**, we go back to the kayak and later see the **caption: “Nyla”**... then she comes forth, with difficulty.

She takes the baby from Nanook and goes to shore, while Nanook stays there at the side of the kayak, **caption: “Cunayou”**. Cut back to kayak, as Cunayou emerges, like Nyla, encumbered by her furs, and then she dashes to shore.

Another **caption: “Comock”** and we see the little puppy lifted out by Nanook.

Now this is my contention: by the end of this charming sequence Flaherty has the audience, well, audiences everywhere, eating out of the palm of his hand. They love it. Just as I loved it in 1963, just as all my students loved it when I started showing it in 1986, and just as those elderly folk like me loved it last year. We were all captivated by this scene.

The scene is constructed like a good gag! Flaherty was an entertainer. He wanted people to see his film. He wanted them to love his film and he chose an opening sequence which took them by surprise and made them laugh. And from that moment on the audience was his.

But we all bought it as if it was a **single take** just cut up and with captions inserted to name the characters. I don't think so. You would need to measure the "waterline" as the emptying of the kayak progresses, but it's my belief that this scene was **created in stages**, as Flaherty already knew he could intercut every individual emergence with a caption.

Another thing which makes me feel that is the case: the hull of the kayak narrows towards the front and the back end. So the space inside is always becoming narrower, and its frame is quite delicate. There would be a real risk that people would get stuck if they were all packed in it together at one time.

From the very first scene of this film Flaherty was signalling a few things to his audience: I'm going to surprise and entertain you. I'll introduce you to a group of people whom you will accept as a family, although they are **not** a family in real life. I'm giving them names which you will remember them by even though their real names are quite unpronounceable, e.g., **Allakariallak**.

From the very outset he was telling a tale, a *fictional* account of the way of life of a band of ice-nomads in a period, which as the audience would see in later scenes, included the incursion of western culture at the Trading Post. The scene which opens the film gets it off to a great

start for all the audiences I have viewed it with. They are always hooked *into the world of the film* and the charm of the film. It sets a tone which will be sustained, although darker things will follow. It is a curtain-raiser. Flaherty was an entertainer. But he also was making a film which would bridge two cultures: the traditional Inuit world is present all the way through the film as if the Trader's shack and our techno culture had not arrived. But each sequence can only exist because our techno culture is already there, at the Trader's hut, the phonograph, the rifle which may have been used to shoot the Walrus, and Flaherty's camera upon a tripod.

Flaherty depicts the intersection of these two cultures, the culture clash, and the Eskimos' embracing of this new culture through every scene of this film.

CHAPTER 18: **Bedding Down**

The 'family' is inside the igloo preparing for sleep, the dogs are outside in the freezing arctic night.

<https://vimeo.com/384462814>

TITLE:

***“The shrill piping of the wind,
the rasp and hiss of driving snow, the
mournful wolf howls of Nanook's master dog
typify the melancholy spirit of the North.”***

When I look at the interior shots of the igloo now I can't believe I ever thought there could be so much room

inside! The shot of Nanook taking off his boots shows five people sitting almost side by side on a platform cut into the ice. (0.35)

Then we see Nanook from behind, bare-backed as he lies under some skins for blankets with the women on either side still in their furs. The baby is also bare skinned! Now the women take off their furs and lie underneath a thin-looking skin which covers the group like a blanket. This is all a single wide-shot, 45 seconds duration. Shots of the dogs outside, settling down in the biting cold. Back inside people are settling into sleeping positions.



The item hanging below here is a sort of cooking pot



More dog shots and icy drifts over landscape.

Now the interior shot shows the people up closer and from above, sleeping.

Nanook is centred.

More shots of dogs and the scudding icy waste.

Back inside the igloo we cut to a **rear** view of people sleeping.

Cut to Nanook seen from another angle, his face visible, sleeping.

It's a beautiful shot.

Very peaceful.

“Tia Mak” (The End)

CHAPTER 19: Well, just how large was that igloo?



But this was not Hollywood! This igloo ‘set’ was not art-directed and created in any studio lot. It is an artificial set which was meant to represent the real thing, but was built specifically to permit filming inside.

Aside from that question: “How large was this igloo in order to enable filming?” my overall reaction to this sequence is just how *poetic* it is. It's a piece of pure poetry from an era of cinema when filmmakers allowed themselves the freedom of poetic expression. In this case

the choice of images, the quality of *'being'* represented in those images, including the dogs settling stoically for the long cold night outside, it's pure poetry. But there is also a visual rhythm to this sequence which is poetic, not just because of the musical accompaniment.

I think the whole film is poetic in its inspiration. It may be a very practical film when it comes to showing the building of an igloo, or hunting for a seal or walrus, but every sequence is imbued with a different quality of poetry in cinema. Even when it is informative it's also entertaining. When I say informative, that is more the case in some scenes, less so when it comes to attaching hide to the kayak which I mentioned earlier.

In the igloo interior there's a shot which shows the people using a moss fire heating something in a pot. I wondered how this could be so inside an igloo? Wouldn't the heat from that little moss fire melt the interior ice of the igloo? Wouldn't the warm breaths of five people mean that the ice would melt and drip on them all night?

Enough of these little practicalities! The big issue is the debate over Flaherty being a faker! Pretending to show things as 'actual' when they were really set-ups. Showing us an Inuit family which is not really a family at all, just a group of individuals assembled for the making of a film. Showing us a seal hunt which was entirely set-up! Showing us an actual walrus hunt which included the use of a gun which may indeed have been fired to kill the walrus, or which may not have been fired at all. All these questions leading to endless claims of Flaherty faking it. And all these negative views are designed to tear the film down from its pedestal.

How dare a **documentary** filmmaker make such a fake film?

The controversies have been ongoing ever since the film surfaced, not among the many who love the film and found it charming, informative, entertaining, endearing. The negative critics had a field day and continue to do so right down to our time.

Who are these people who so desperately want to tear this film down?

And why are they so ferocious in their opposition to it?

From wiki:

*“As the first ‘nonfiction’ work of its scale, **Nanook of the North** was ground-breaking cinema. It captured many authentic details of a culture little known to outsiders and it was filmed in a remote location. Hailed almost unanimously by critics, the film was a box-office success in the United States and abroad.”*

*“Flaherty is considered a pioneer of **documentary film**. He was one of the first to combine documentary subjects with a fiction-film-like narrative and poetic Treatment. Furthermore, the film has been criticized for portraying Inuit people as **subhuman arctic beings, without technology or culture which reproduces the historical image that situates them outside modern history.**”*

*“**It was also criticized for comparing Inuit people to animals.** The film is considered to be an artifact of popular culture at the time and also a result of a historical fascination for Inuit performers in exhibitions, zoos, fairs, museums and early cinema.”*

From The Guardian:

*“When the film was released, it got rave reviews and **no one called it a documentary**. It simply seemed to be in a class by itself. It still is. Flaherty was never again to achieve such lack of self-*

consciousness and purity of style, though films like Moana, about the Samoan lifestyle, Man of Aran and Louisiana Story contained extraordinary sequences.”

In 2014 **Sight and Sound** film critics voted **Nanook of the North** the seventh-best **documentary** film of all time.

Who said it was a documentary? Did Flaherty ever say it was?

My friend **Andrew Pike** sent me a transcript by Pat Jackson from **Penguin Film** (3) Review 1947. Pp. 84-87

In that article Pat Jackson covers much more of the early history of “documentary” and the confusion which arose over terminology pertaining to that field. You can read the whole article by Jackson in [Footnote 2](#).

Since my first viewing of Nanook in 1963 I’ve been fascinated by the topic of Inuit or Eskimo people, not only from Canada and Alaska, but also from Iceland and Greenland. There are many reasons for this fascination which includes their artefacts, their way of life in such arduous conditions, how they managed to find ways to ensure the survival of their people, whether we regard them as individuals, families or tribes. My fascination also included interest in igloos, kayaks and harpoons.

Just when did that term **documentary** come into common usage, and how specific was that term in that period, or any subsequent period? Do you think this poster from the 1920s suggests a **documentary** film? I don’t think it does. To me it suggests adventure, entertainment and romance.

The truest and most human story of the Great White Snows

A picture with more drama, greater thrill, and stronger action than any picture you ever saw.



REVILLON FRÈRES
PRESENT

NANOOK OF THE NORTH

A STORY OF LIFE AND LOVE IN THE ACTUAL ARCTIC

PRODUCED BY
ROBERT J. FLAHERTY, F.R.G.S.

Pathépicture

“A picture with more drama, greater thrill, and stronger action than any picture you ever saw” !

“A STORY OF LOVE AND LIFE IN THE ACTUAL ARCTIC”

Nowhere is the word “documentary” present. Was this poster just designed just to get people to see the film? Yes, I think it was that, I don’t think it represents a change

of attitude on Flaherty's part from when he set out to make his film to a different attitude after shooting and editing in order to assist the release of that film.

I think it was a true statement about the nature of the film.

Peter Tammer 23/07/2020

Acknowledgements:

Many people have assisted in the writing of this book. In 2017 I started writing a series of essays which I offered to Geoff Gardner to publish on his blog, *Film Alert 101*. Geoff reported that the first essay received 100 hits on its first day out so that emboldened me to make another attempt.

The second essay was a reminiscence of the early days of "documentary" of giants such as Flaherty and Hurley, juxtaposed with my own feeble efforts when I was starting out as a filmmaker in 1962 along with my friend Tom Cowan. Tom and I purchased an old movie camera which should have been a museum piece and was tremendously difficult to use. That blog also seemed to go well and so I took it further. Eventually I had four essays on Geoff's blog. Earlier this year, Geoff suggested "Why not an eBook bringing the four essays together?"

So that's what has come out of all this activity. This book is my personal review of the very early years of the cinema and the division between "observational" or "narrative-drama" films, including reflections based on my own experience as a lover of the cinema, a fumbling filmmaker who has been fortunate to have taught filmmaking as part of my career.

Since 2017 I've received a great deal of encouragement from Geoff, Quentin Turnour, Andrew Pike and Tom Cowan, all of whom are quoted in parts of the book.

Other close friends have made contributions along the way: Kit Guyatt, Ken Mogg, Bruce Hodsdon, Richard Leigh. I hope I'm not forgetting anyone who has been kind enough to read my essays and make suggestions for clarification or improvement.

However the two mainstays all through this process have been Geoff Gardner and Bill Mousoulis. Bill has been incredibly supportive since I first published some pieces on the "[writings page](#)" on his Innersense site. This I can say for certain: without Bill's continuing support I would not have much to show for the past fifteen years!

Peter Tammer 23/07/2020

Footnote 1:

Restorations of old movies by **AI** techniques:

The Snowball Fight restored by Denis Shiryayev.

I really love the treatment Denis Shiryayev has given to this work, he keeps to the original format as filmed by the Lumière Brothers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQMMDGd4ciA>

The Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat

This film has been upscaled by Denis Shiryayev. Technically I was very impressed by it, but I personally do not really like the “wide screen” treatment as it loses much of the top and bottom of frame from the original footage.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RYNThid23g>

The 1911 Trip Through New York

Another wonderful effort by Denis Shiryayev, incredibly atmospheric and extremely dimensional.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ1OgQL9_Cw

“Light Is Calling” a film by Bill Morrison

This reconstruction is not really a restoration at all. The filmmaker Bill Morrison has created an entirely new cinematic event from old and seriously degraded film footage:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx0HzBiaVn4>

Footnote 2:

“YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED”

by **PAT JACKSON**

PEOPLE everywhere are becoming more interested in the artistic and social questions which face the film industry. We intend to put our readers' questions to the men and women who make our films. Send a *postcard* of

the points you would like to have discussed to Roger Manvell, *Penguin Film Review*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. This time we have asked Pat Jackson, director of *Western Approaches*, to answer a query which reads: "More and more studio feature films are adopting documentary technique on the one hand and fantasy on the other. Of these two powerful forces, reality and unreality, which is the more desirable, and which is the more likely to predominate?"

This question would be easier to answer if I could be certain what this wretched word *documentary* really means. Having spent eleven years in documentary, I should know by this time. However, there is consolation in the fact that even now film makers still argue about what is and what is not a documentary film. Consequently I am fairly convinced that there is no exact definition; so before answering the question, I must try to make clear what I mean by it.

Grierson's own definition, the '*creative interpretation of reality*,' should still serve, but somehow it doesn't, for there has been a far too rigid line of demarcation between his type of documentary and many studio films which, to my mind, are documentaries both in outlook and content. This originated because Grierson's filmic interpretation of reality-through no fault of his but the limited resources at his disposal-never had any flesh and bones; none of the emotions which make people glow with hope and sympathy, cold with fear and anger, or moved to tears and laughter. His interpretation could not transmit the very breath and beat of life, because he was never able to enter the field of drama. He transmitted information and a point of view. He traced the outside pattern of human conflicts, but he rarely if ever could step inside and

fashion a living drama out of his designs. He found a new subject-matter, and he taught that the contemporary scene is full of drama if the artist has the vision and the political insight to seek it out. He revealed much of it by a persuasive form of screen journalism. But this is not the end of documentary, it is only the beginning.

But it was this style which Grierson evolved that came to be classified as documentary, and I believe that now this word has come to mean something far greater than it ever did, something which cannot be defined by or restricted to any particular style, technique, method or even motive of production.

When, for example, I hear one of Mary Field's ***Secrets of Nature*** and John Ford's ***Grapes of Wrath*** both referred to as documentaries, I feel quite justified in drawing my own line somewhere. So I take the plunge and say here and now that to me a documentary film is one which seriously attempts to make a contemporary comment on the way of life, problems and true character of any people anywhere on this earth; and now may heaven preserve me. That definition must include films of the calibre of *Grapes of Wrath*, *Way to the Stars*, *The Way Ahead*, *Fury*, *Millions Like Us*, *Children on Trial*, *The Last Chance*, *The Southerner* and *The Overlanders*, and many others. To me, all these films are documentaries, for they tell a story of people in conflict with their environment. Parched earth, mob law, war, poverty. They have the courage to seek out the facts, and without falsification present them in a narrative form; they show us, not only the cause of conflict, but the effect of it on human beings; all the facets of human behaviour and the amazing qualities of people at grips with life and forces beyond their control. They help us to understand, not only the

world as it really is, but people as they really are and as they become when the odds are loaded too heavily against them. They establish an identity between ourselves and peoples of different nations. Surely, this is cinema being used to accomplish its greatest task - the destruction of prejudice and misunderstanding between the peoples of the earth; and if this is not the purpose of documentary; I would like to know what is.

The purist, I know, will argue that a commercial film which has for its motive profit never can be a documentary. It is, I think, idle to deny that this motive is a force which dictate a policy and the selection of subjects, and that it may limit the production of films which attempt to achieve a purpose beyond entertainment: This may be so; but to argue that because films are produced by this motive their integrity of purpose and social significance are destroyed seems to me to be complete nonsense.

It is impossible to say which type of film is more desirable: it's a matter of taste. But it would be regrettable if any one type of film predominated. I think we want a well-balanced output; we' want our escapist pictures and our realist pictures, but whether we shall get them depends upon the public as well as producers, who can hardly be blamed for studying box-office returns and gauging public taste accordingly; and whilst the general demand is for films which attempt nothing more than to provide entertainment, these are bound to predominate, but not, one hopes, to the complete exclusion of the story-documentary.

This, I think, raises a serious issue of principle. There can be no doubt that film is the most persuasive and forceful medium for the dissemination of ideas, and as such its

potential influence either for good or evil is immeasurable. The acceptance and appreciation of this fact imposes upon those who have the power to wield this influence the gravest social responsibility. The manner in which they accept this responsibility can only be determined by the production policy they formulate and the balance of output between the realist film, whose purpose is to dramatise an objective assessment of contemporary issues, and the entertainment picture pure and simple.

If for the sake of argument, our civilisation were in danger of being blotted out by an approaching ice age and the output from British and American studios was concerned with nothing but Wicked Ladies, Caravans, Carnivals, Magic Bows, Wonder Boys, Ziegfeld Follies, there can obviously be little merit in the inner realism these films achieve, because the overall policy of production is a deliberate retreat from a realistic point of view and appreciation of the dangers and possibilities of approaching catastrophe. In such a hypothetical situation cinema would have contributed nothing and achieved nothing but to have become an opiate providing more and more convincing means of escape from a world becoming more and more frightening.

An ice age does **not threaten us**, but an atomic age does.

PAT JACKSON

Penguin Film Review, 3, 1947
Courtesy: Andrew Pike.