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Nanook of the North
From 1922 to Today
The Famous Arctic Documentary and Its Afterlife
1. Introduction

Robert J. Flaherty’s (1884–1951) first film *Nanook of the North*, which was to remain his greatest success, is often described as “timeless”, “classic”, and “unique” (Griffith & Mayer 1957, 211). It is characterized using terms and phrases such as “best-known”, “most popular” (Kobel 2007, 78), and “a new kind of motion picture” (Ellis & McLane 2005, 12). Although the film’s authenticity has been disputed since the very beginning (Stefansson 1928), Flaherty’s name has become inseparably connected with documentary film: *Nanook* is described as “pioneering” (Dixon & Foster 2013, xvii), “the first straight documentary” (Dixon & Foster 2013, 42), and “a prototypical documentary” (Nichols 2001, 21). Documentary filmmakers often consider *Nanook* one of “the greatest documentaries of all time” (Barnouw 1993, 43); stories told by Flaherty and his wife Frances about the making of the film have been repeated over and over (see, for instance, Barnouw 1993, 35 or Ellis & McLane 2005, 12). Even scholars who think that Flaherty’s “reputation is overblown”, like Brian Winston, consider *Nanook* to be Flaherty’s “one real and indisputable contribution to the development of the cinema” (Winston 2013, 89).

*Nanook* is probably one of the most seen and best-known feature films of the silent film era, “screened throughout the world, by culturally diverse audiences” (Berger 1995, 177), thus “familiar to every school child as well as every film buff” (Shepard 1974, 60). *Nanook of the North* has been “widely studied and written about” (Shepard 1974, 60), but regardless of whether the respective works focus on the relationship between fiction and truth, the features of documentary films or Flaherty’s representation of the Inuit, they all speak of the film *Nanook of the North*, usually in combination with the year 1922, without mentioning the existence of different versions of the film and stating which version they are writing about. This is often the rule rather than the exception when writing about films from the silent

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1 On this, also cf. Fienup-Riordan 1995, 48–51 for Stefansson’s critique of *Nanook*. Cf. also Canavor, 1980, 148–149 about the staging in *Nanook*.
era; although various formats, screening situations, and textual variations\textsuperscript{2} are sometimes discussed, “the fundamental questions of transmission and access to source material” (Keitz 1998, 7)\textsuperscript{3} are usually ignored.

Given that about 93 percent of all silent films produced between 1895 and 1930 no longer exist (Horak 1998, 48),\textsuperscript{4} the question not only of why \textit{Nanook of the North} has survived the ravages of time, but of what changes the film underwent is a highly interesting one and will form the present book’s main focus.

Taking Gérard Genette’s concept of the paratext as my point of departure, my study will focus on the altered elements both within (opening credits, preface, intertitles, and film music) and outside (mainly promotional material) the different versions of the film from 1922 until today. My study will therefore be structured chronologically, starting with the film’s previewings and its premiere at the New York Capitol on June 11, 1922, continuing with the sound version of 1947, the film’s restoration in the 1970s, and later editions on VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray, always taking into account the paratextual elements connected to the various versions and screening situations and the importance of these elements for our understanding of the film.

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\textsuperscript{3} My translation (orig. “die elementaren Fragen der Überlieferung und Quellenerschließung”).

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{A Study of the Current State of American Film Preservation} stated in 1993 that “fewer than 20 \% of U.S. feature films from the 1920s survive in complete form in American archives; of the American features produced before 1950, only half still exist. For shorts, documentaries, and independently produced works, we have no way of knowing how much has been lost” (Melville and Simmon 1993). Cf. also Shepard 1980, 345: “Approximately 85 percent of the American films made before the coming of sound have been lost […].” These numbers are not surprising considering the materiality of film as “fragile, ephemeral, and short-lived” (Jones 2012, 7). More recent estimates are lower than these numbers from the 1980s and 1990s. Given the state of the records, we probably will never know the correct numbers. The amount of material held in archives is overwhelming (for U.S. archives, cf. Jones 2012, 27), and films thought to be lost continue to to turn up from time to time.
Today’s audiences can get hold of *Nanook of the North* relatively easily and cheaply as a DVD,\(^5\) or access the film in online archives such as the Internet Archive\(^6\) or on YouTube.\(^7\) Presumably those viewers willing to pay for the film will prefer the *Criterion Collection* DVD, as this series has established a certain reputation for presenting films of historical importance in their original version (cf. Kendrick 2001). Although the film’s elaborate restoration procedure has been described and David Shepard has thus been able to show how difficult it is to speak of the original (Shepard 1980, 348) of a historic film such as *Nanook* without taking account of its various versions, the back cover of the DVD by *Criterion* promises viewers a version of the film that corresponds to Flaherty’s original ideas: “Criterion is proud to present the original director’s cut, restored to the proper frame rate and tinted according to Flaherty’s personal print.”

By focusing on the shifting elements of *Nanook*’s paratext, thereby comparing the different versions of the film, the present study aims to challenge this notion of the one original version of *Nanook*, demonstrating the importance of these elements for our understanding of the film.

### 1.1 Genette’s concept of the Paratext

In his study *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (which appeared in French under the title *Seuils* in 1987), Gérard Genette talks about books, stating that “the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (1997, 1). Genette

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\(^5\) In 2013, a further two-disc Blu-ray deluxe edition of *The Flicker Alley Collection* was issued, including *Nanook of the North*, *The Wedding of Palo* (1934) and six bonus films such as *Arctic Hunt* (1913), *Primitive Love* (1927) and *Nanook Revisited* (*Saumialuk*, 1988). Cf. http://www.flickeralley.biz/.

\(^6\) https://archive.org/details/nanookOfTheNorth1922, accessed October 28, 2015. Direct access comes at the cost that the film starts with the preface and is lacking extra materials.

\(^7\) A search on YouTube reveals several uploads of the film. Uploads using the Criterion DVD version of the film vary in where the film starts: with the preface (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGXsTNxWWzU, accessed October 26, 2015) or with the slide announcing the film’s title (www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4kO1zMqso0, accessed October 26, 2015). The number of viewings varies, but almost 140,000 viewings for the one with preface during the last two years is a rather high number. The Internet Archive had only slightly over 11,000 viewings in October 2015.
uses numerous examples to demonstrate the role played by the title, subtitle, forewords and cover blurbs in interpreting a text, as well as the degree of an author’s celebrity, his age and gender, awards, honorary degrees, and so on. Genette divides the paratext into a peritext and an epitext: the former consists of aspects that are relatively closely associated with the book itself, such as the dustcover, title, genre indication, foreword and epilogue or even various themes, while the latter consists of statements about the book beyond the boundaries of the book itself, such as interviews, correspondence and journals. In doing so, Genette also explores nontexual elements such as format and cover design. Genette concludes that “the other arts have an equivalent of our paratext” (1997, 407). Film scholars have started to use his concept when analyzing the importance of opening scenes and credits in films (cf. Kreimeier/Stanitzek 2004), or the significance of different technologies in providing the viewer with extra material about the film (cf. Gray 2010). Applying Genette’s concept to Nanook and its different versions, we find a large range of elements that can be investigated using Genette’s term of the paratext, as shown in the following schema:

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\text{Paratext} = \text{Peritext} + \text{Epitext}
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- Opening credits
- Prefaces, dedications
- Film music
- Intertitles for the silent film
- Narration (1947 edition)
- Closing credits
- Restoration credits
- Different formats (video, DVD, Blu-ray)
  - Chapters
  - Part of a serial like the *Criterion Collection*
  - Extra materials
  - Cover with similar elements like a book cover
- Promotional material
  - Film posters
  - Advertisements
  - *Campaign Book for Exhibitors*
- Film Reviews
- Publications by Robert and Frances Flaherty related to Nanook
- Publications by Pathépicture and Révillon Frères related to Nanook
- Academic writings about Flaherty and Nanook

8 Gray’s study “is a look at how much of the media world is formed by ‘book covers’ and their many colleagues – opening credit sequences, trailers, toys, spinoff videogames, prequels and sequels, podcasts, bonus materials, interviews, reviews, alternate reality games, spoilers, audience discussion, vids, posters or billboards, and promotional campaigns” (Gray 2010, 4).
Genette’s division of the paratext into peri- and epitext is not completely unproblematic, as for both books and films, elements of the peritext can change their position and become epitext and vice versa. In addition, in many cases it can be difficult to decide where to draw the line between text and paratext and between paratext and nonparatext. In our case, where writings about Flaherty and about the film are concerned, the number of paratextual elements is growing steadily. In my study of Nanook, I therefore focus foremost on elements of the paratext that underwent changes over the course of time and from edition to edition. These elements are to be found both within (peritextual elements such as the title, subtitle, foreword, but also the intertitles and/or narrator and film music) and outside the film (epitextual elements such as promotional material). The different modes of exhibition and the importance of the surrounding program as well as the different technologies used to distribute the film to different audiences are elements that lie somewhere in between the internal and the external. These elements are particularly interesting as, on the one hand, they highlight the fact that elements of the paratext “appear at any time, […] may also disappear, definitively or not” (Genette 1997, 6) or change position, while on the other hand these are precisely the elements most often overlooked when talking about a single film like Nanook. In ignoring the different modes of exhibition for a silent film like Nanook, most of the writings about the film also ignore discussions in the field of film studies about films as events (cf. Allen 1990 and 2006) and therefore the importance of the exhibition context.

By focusing on the film’s paratext, this case study tries to avoid the two extremes encountered in discussions of Flaherty: either “portraying him in mythical terms and ‘worshiping’ his films or debunking them as fakes and frauds and castigating him for a lack of social and political consciousness”

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9 There are of course film scholars engaged with the changes that cinema underwent since its invention and especially in the digital age. Anne Friedberg’s question “how […] the material differences between cinemtic, televisual, and computer media [have] been altered as digital technologies transform them” (Friedberg 2010, 271) is an important one, but we also have to bear in mind that cinema itself has undergone tremendous changes during the 20th century that influence our experience of a film on the screen. Today, it is hard to imagine what it would be like to watch a film together with several thousand other spectators at one of those large first-run deluxe theatres of the 1920s.
(Rotha & Ruby 1983, 3). In focusing on the importance of the paratext for our understanding of the film, I am not interested so much in the film’s content, the film itself, or the discussions of whether Nanook is a documentary or not, but rather in the film’s different versions and their context, thus seeing the film as a product of its time and of changing times. In providing a case study based on archival material that has not been used before and is not available to a wider public, this book will demonstrate the importance of considering the paratext when writing about film, offering readers new insights into film history and showing that the history of exhibition was not so much an evolutionary development as dependent on the size and equipment of the individual theater. Accordingly, in the 1920s different forms of exhibition already existed side by side. Although many books (mainly biographies) have been written about Flaherty,¹⁰ there is not a single book about the film Nanook and the history of its development. This will be the first book about the film to give as complete an outline as possible of the film’s history by analyzing its changes and variations from 1922 until today.


Even though my focus is not primarily upon on the content of Nanook and thus on the film itself, several of the film’s scenes will be mentioned and discussed in the course of this study. A brief introduction to the film therefore seems pertinent here:

Nanook of the North tells the story of Nanook and his family: his wife Nyla, their two children Allee and Allegoo, and Cunayou, the second woman who lives with Nanook. The family lives in the harsh climate of the Barren Lands. We witness their daily life, including hunting, igloo building, traveling in search for food and shelter, and scenes of family life like eating and sleeping, Nanook playing with his children, or Nyla preparing the igloo for the night. The life of Nanook and his family is presented as very close to nature; they depend upon Nanook’s hunting skills to provide enough food for their survival. White man and civilization are only present in one of the film’s scenes, starting with the intertitle “Landing at the white man’s ‘Big igloo’ – the trading post”.

¹⁰ These biographies have used Flaherty’s own writings from the archive, such as diaries and letters, but do not consider material about the film’s exhibition and promotion.
The scene in which Nanook is introduced to the gramophone and bites into the record to figure out “how the white man ‘cans’ his voice” in particular has formed the basis for many discussions both about Flaherty’s representation of the Inuit as well as about the relationship between fact and fiction and Flaherty’s staging of scenes.\(^\text{11}\) In addition to the gramophone scene, the seal-hunt scene is also widely discussed, as are the clothes worn by Nanook and his family and the absence of guns or any other modern technology in the film.\(^\text{12}\)

Flaherty’s focus was doubtlessly on telling the story of one Inuit and his family, and the presentation of their life in the Arctic as a constant struggle for survival and against starvation is described by himself in retrospect:

> Why not take […] a typical Eskimo and his family and make a biography of their lives through the year? What biography of any man could be more interesting? Here is a man who has less resources than any other man in the world. He lives in a desolation that no other man could possibly survive. His life is a constant fight against starvation. Nothing grows; he must depend utterly on what he can kill; and all of this against the most terrifying of tyrants – the bitter climate of the North, the bitterest climate in the world. Surely this story could be interesting. (Flaherty 1950, 12)

Flaherty wanted to tell a coherent story, but, as Brian Winston’s analysis of the film shows, the first part of the film consists “of a more or less random selection of scenes of Inuit life, some more specific than others, featuring Nanook and his family” (Winston 2013, 90). An attentive spectator will observe several inconsistencies in the first part that are not explained by the images or the intertitles.\(^\text{13}\) It is only the second part of the film, starting with “Winter…”, that presents a journey with a temporal logic and scenes that “depend on each other causally” (Winston 2013, 90).

\(^\text{11}\) Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Canadian-American anthropologist and polar explorer, characterized the story of Nanook as “as true as that of Santa Claus” (Stefansson 1928, 87). More recent research also reveals how Flaherty named his subjects, for instance how Maggie Nujarluktuk became “Nyla, the smiling one” (cf. McGrath 2008, 1).


\(^\text{13}\) One example of these inconsistencies is the age of the children, which differs in several scenes and does not correspond to the progress of time. At the white man’s trading post, for instance, Nyla first has an older child in her hood before she “displays her young husky […] one Rainbow, less than four months old”, a much younger child. Another puzzle is the presentation of Allegoo and another boy at about the same age as “Nanook’s children”, while only one of the boys was presented as part of the family earlier.
1.3 The search for the original

Due to the mechanical reproducibility of film, which was discussed by Walter Benjamin as early as 1936, it is difficult or even impossible to talk about the original of a film in a sense comparable to paintings or sculptures.14 “When it comes to film”, Janna Jones argues, “the attempt to replicate the conditions of an original is at work in such phenomena as the director’s cut or a film’s premiere” (Jones 2012, 147). Talking about the original of a film can refer to different things: “the film as it was originally shown to the audience”, film as “a technological artifact”, but also to “film as text where its integrity is measured in terms of completeness and continuity” (Fossati 2009, 117). Therefore, talking about the original of a film in many cases will be a construction, most often only focusing on one of these possible meanings.15 Nevertheless, the director’s cut of a film still seems to hold a special appeal to many viewers and is often used in the marketing of DVD editions to attract buyers. In a way, the director’s cut of a film also promises that it is possible to find one original or authentic version of a film,16 and that the director’s original intentions are important in finding this original.

For films from the silent era that have undergone restoration and digitization, the notion of the original becomes an even more abstract idea:

Moving image restoration moves away from the cultural belief that restoration references an original single artifact. The original film is not a material object; rather, it is a conceptualization of an artifact. To be specific: it is an idea of a film that existed prior to its first projection. (Jones 2012, 147)

14 Recent discussions in art history about the relationship between original and copy, about repetition and reproduction (cf. for instance Lampe 2012, 30–53 on Edvard Munch) and about variation and inspiration (cf. the exhibition The Botticelli Renaissance, accessed November 23, 2015) also demonstrate the complex issue of the original in relationship to art.

15 At least some films that exist in different versions will spring to mind easily. Cf. for instance the different versions of Blade Runner (USA, 1982/1986/1992/2007) as one striking example where the director’s cut is only one of seven versions. Cf. also Garncarz 1990 on Fritz Lang’s M. Garncarz discusses “three different models of significant variation” (219).

16 Cf. Garncarz 1990, 219–220: “There is of course no analytical instrument necessary to see if a film has been dubbed. That is usually also true in the case of a reconstruction, as the knowledge of the authenticity of the reconstructed version is part of its image.”
As Giovanna Fossati demonstrates in her study, there are different film restoration practices based on different frameworks, whereby the framework “film as original” is one “central to film archival practice” (Fossati 2009, 71), discussing both material and textual variations. While digitization always will lead to material variations, the discussion of textual variations is often limited to the completeness and correct sequence of scenes within the film, ignoring changes in the film’s paratext, including the importance of exhibition and film music during the silent era.

When a film like *Nanook* is advertised as the “original director’s cut” or the “newly restored original version” of a classic film on a DVD cover, for instance, the main focus is on the film as a conceptual artifact and not so much on its materiality or its exhibition mode. Nevertheless, one should expect film scholars to be aware of the fact that films in general – and silent films in particular – often exist in different textual versions, and thus there is a need to clarify which version they actually are writing about. Most academic works written about *Nanook* do not provide this simple information, thus ignoring not only different modes of exhibition, but also internal changes within the film like different musical scores (cf. Melnick 2012, 21–23) and differences that lie on the borderline between internal and external, such as the existence of different prefaces or opening titles.

My personal interest in *Nanook of the North* began when I first discovered that the film on the DVD issued by *Criterion Collection* could not be the one shown in 1922, even though the DVD cover promised “to present the original director’s cut, restored to the proper frame rate and tinted according to Flaherty’s personal print.” First the layout and the length of the preface, but then also the new score by Timothy Brock set in motion a long process of visiting archives and collecting material, during which I was always looking for new information on what the film actually looked like in 1922. In a way I, too, was captured by that abstract idea of the original, and was trying to find my way back to the original film. If I could just visit another archive and find more material, I hoped I could find out what the film really was like in 1922.

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17 In the case of silent films, we can think about textual versions created by editing by different exhibitors or censorship in different countries, but also about variations that occurred over the course of time because of damage to or loss of first prints.
But at the same time as I was finding answers, new questions appeared that could not be answered with certainty. The only sources for writing about Nanook’s journey from 1922 to today are written materials from the archives and the restored versions of the film available on different platforms. As pointed out by Uricchio and discussed by Fossati,

archived films in general and their restorations in particular, are first of all “historized artifacts”. Restorations of archival films are not original film artifacts shown for the first time to an audience, but, conversely, artifacts that have been historized both on a material level […], and on a conceptual level (Fossati 2009, 104–105).

My investigation of both the restored Nanook and the archival material about the film is, of course, a historical one that includes my knowledge about Flaherty’s later career and Nanook’s status in film history. The following can therefore only be a reconstruction of Nanook’s journey over the course of almost a century; a reconstruction as close as possible to what might have been the original in 1922, focusing on the important changes that the film and its surrounding materials underwent from a silent film into a sound version and back to a silent one again. My main focus is on the textual variation, both in the film and in the paratext of the film, and on the different exhibition modes, while I am forced to omit many of the material variations from nitrate to digital film because of my lack of expertise in that field.

Even though we can assume that most of the academic works about Nanook written during the last decades are based on David Shepard’s restoration of the film during the 1970s, there are still – as this study will show – variations in the different editions available on the market. Accordingly, this study also wants to raise greater awareness of the existence of different versions. The recognition that several versions of a film exist side by side also means that the original version no longer is the focal point of my investigation. The different versions of Nanook, including its sound version, are therefore considered as expressions of a particular time, and not as “a form of textual corruption” (Bryant 2013, 50).