

The Aesthetics of the Image in the Classical Documentary Cinema: Semiological Analytical Study of the Movie “Nanook of the North” as a Model

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Abstract

The genesis of the documentary movie dates back to the start of the international cinema, as most historians see the first movies produced by Louis and Auguste Lumière in 1895 as documentary movies that depict reality without any intervention from the movie producer. However, the real birth of the documentary cinema has began in the start of the 20th century thanks to the works of Dziga Vertov, Robert Flaherty, and John Grierson, which creatively dealt with reality and rejected imagination that is the cornerstone of the novelistic movie. In this regard, this study uses Roland Barthes' theory to provide a semiological analysis of Robert Flaherty's "Nanook of the North" that is a prominent movie in the international cinema. Findings show that image has diverse expressive items, as the producer relied most on the wide shots to introduce the general settings of the story, and the close and very close shots to introduce the characters and psyche's of the protagonist, with a major focus on their face characters. In addition, Flaherty used the parallel montage that was introduced by the US producer, David Griffith, to depict two scenes simultaneously and create suspense.

Keywords: aesthetics of the image; cinema; documentary movie; semiological analysis; Nanook of the North.

1. Introduction:

Man has so long attempted to record the body movements and his lifestyle through images, starting with the ideographic and hieroglyphic writing in ancient Egypt and the Sumerian writing in Mesopotamia around 3000 BC. The status of the image has seen different changes throughout history, as the image enjoyed a magical nature that is seen from its name "imagery" and, then, gained a sacred position after it has been used in religion to garment churches and temples. Later, the image became exclusive to aristocrats who had used it to decorate their houses until the 18th century (Laayadi, 2003, p. 35).

In 1826, the French Joseph Nicephore Niepce managed to take the first photograph and hang it on a glass plate painted with silver nitrates layer after many hard attempts by the German Johan Enrich and the Swedish Karl Wilhem Sheele (Abderrahman, 2009, pp. 28-29). The invention of photographs changed the social status and use of the image and broke its monopoly by a given stratum. Later in 1882, the French Etienne Jule Marey invented the photographic gun that allowed for taking photographs of successive movements of a moving body, marking the achievement of a dream that had so long been aspired by other scholars, saying: "I dreamed about inventing something like a photographic gun that can photograph the bird during his flying and take pictures that express the successive phases of the wings movement" (Ibraken, 2001, p. 131).

On 28 December 1895, the first cinematic movie was presented in le Grand Café in Paris by Louis and Auguste Lumière who invented the cinematograph that marked the

real birth of cinema. Their first movies were documentary and depicted reality as it is without any modification. Nevertheless, this trend had rapidly changed with the invention of new techniques and patterns in cinema, such as scenario, montage, and cinematic tricks. In this context, the documentary cinema is an artistic genre that targets the creative treatment of reality and depicts daily life and real issues for educational, cultural, and historical purposes. Despite the success of the novelistic movies in the history of international cinema, the documentary movie still has its place for cinema audience.

The aesthetics of the visual discourse in the cinematic image expresses many syntagmatic meanings that convey different connotative and aesthetic cues, even in black and white, as the lack of colors did not hinder producers from depicting all important details and parts of the plot without effect on the realistic aspect. Based on what was said, this study shall use Roland Barthes's Semiological theory to investigate the aesthetic items in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, which is one of the classical movies in the international cinema.

2. Methodology:

2.1 Problematic and Sub-questions:

What marks the aesthetics of the image in the classical movie "Nanook of the North"? From this question, sub-questions arise as follows:

- What photographic techniques did Robert Flaherty use in producing *Nanook of the North*?
- What method did Robert Flaherty use in producing *Nanook of the North*?
- What are the main artistic styles used by Robert Flaherty in the movie?

2.2 Method and Tools:

This study is analytical descriptive and focuses on the documentary movie as an artistic cinematic material that is distinct from the other materials produced in cinema since the 19th century. In this regard, we shall use the semiological analysis to reveal the aesthetic dimensions of the image in *Nanook of the North*.

2.3 The Study Concepts:

The Aesthetics of the Image: It is composed of two terms, namely the image and the aesthetics. The first is derived from the Greek "Imago" that denotes something that resembles or belongs to representation (Laayadi, 2003, p. 35). It shows the description, nature, or reality of a thing. In addition, it is a non-verbal communicative item used by man to embody meanings, ideas, and feelings, incarnates a signifying visual structure, and holds different methods, relations, and places (Bouali, 2010, p. 38). On the other hand, "aesthetics" designates beauty and marks our feeling about the thing, as Kant puts, adding that the beauty of the thing has no relation with its nature, rather it depends on the aesthetic prosecution that comes from within us using thought and imagination (Izzat, 2007, p. 23).

Moreover, al Ghazali distinguishes between the material and moral beauty and states that the beauty of meanings perceived with actions is greater than that perceived with the eye (Izzat, 2007, p. 24). Besides, Lalande's philosophical dictionary defines aesthetics as a discipline that formulates judgments about what is beautiful and what is ugly (Ramdan, 2009, p. 63). As for aesthetics in the cinematic movie, Mostefa al Idrissi sees that it can be achieved through the movie's ability to raise pleasure, surprise, and attraction of the audience, and to touch their ideas thanks to its creative photography, montage, writing, and details (al Idrissi, 2023, p. 874). The image aesthetics in cinema designates the attraction of the image in the movie, as we cannot discuss the movie aesthetics without correlation and harmony in its elements, including music, montage,

decoration, and production that make up an aesthetic artistic work (al Idrissi, 2023, p. 875).

Cinema: It is a mass media tool that aims at direction, persuasion, acculturation, and education. It has started in France when the first movie was presented in the le Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895. Later, cinematic movies and cinematographs were exported to other countries, including England and USA that showed high interest in this industry (Hejlab, 2003, p. 1451).

The Documentary Movie: According to Larousse, it is a distinctive educational and cultural cinematic genre that is based on documents (Passek, 2001, p. 228). It was the first cinematic genre initiated by the brothers Lumière and named by John Grierson who initiated the expression “documentary movie” in an article to refer to Moana movie of Robert Flaherty, who was one of the biggest founders of the meaning of the movie (Merzouki, 2011, p. 126). George Sadol defines the documentary movie as any cinematographic production that depicts reality far from imagination, and a scientific and philosophical choice of the 07th art (Brik, 2021, p. 209). In addition, the Cinematic Encyclopedia defines the documentary movie as the opposite of the imaginary movie, as it aims at education and information and places a major focus on content rather than shape (Brik, 2021, p. 210).

The Semiological Analysis: Semiology has rapidly developed in the 20th century, mainly after the issuance of De Saussure’s Lectures in General Linguistics and the works of Roland Barthes and Christian Metz. According to De Saussure, semiology is the study of the life of the sign within the society (Toussaint, 1994, p. 05). In addition, it is defined as the science of the natural or industrial signs, marks, and linguistic or symbolic signifiers. In this regard, signs may be invented by men who agree upon their meanings and connotations, such as the case of the human language and the traffic lights. On the other hand, they may be natural with no human intervention, such as the case of animals’ and natural elements’ sounds (Hamdaoui, 2011, p. 67).

The semiological study of cinema is part of a defined dimension to study the audiovisual signs and focus on the image and sound, and on the formal and connotative relations (Toussaint, 1994, p. 53). Simultaneously, we can argue that cinema has not been studied from a Saussurean semiological perspective, save by Christian Metz to whom we owe the first work “Is Cinema Language or Langue?” that was published in 1964 in the Parisian Telecommunications magazine (Ibraken, 2001, p. 196). The first works of Christian Metz aim at building a methodological net that can be applied on the imaginary novel according to the criteria of the classical semiology (Toussaint, 1994, p. 54).

Thus, the movie is the much diversified synthesis of visual, oral, and metaphorical signs that the audience try to create a meaning to based on their knowledge of signs and common terms (Bignel, 2011, p. 248). In this context, the movies meanings clearly rely on the structure of the oral and visual signs of the plot, the narration method, and the effect on the characters’ role by conjuring the common behavioral codes and the contradiction between the ideas (Bignel, 2011, p. 252).

3. The Practical Framework: The Semiological Analysis of Nanook of the North:

3.1 Introduction about Robert Flaherty:

He is a US producer who was born in 1884 in Michigan from a German mother and an Irish father. He grew up in Canada and went back to USA as a gold digger after graduation from university. He had travelled a lot with his father since the age of 10 to dig gold in North Canada before starting his own journeys in Hudson Gulf. In addition, he had worked in a railroad company in North Canada and was supported by its head to explore Bletsher Islands. His movies do not focus on civilization, as he depicts man in his primitive

conditions. His journeys towards the North have started since 1910. After the big success of *Nanook of the North*, Paramount Company, one of the biggest Hollywood companies, signed a contract with him to produce his second movie “*Moana*” in 1926; later, he produced many movies, including *Man of Aran* in 1934, *Earth* in 1939, and *Louisiana* in 1948.

3.2 The Movie Card:

- Title: *Nanook of the North*
- Producer: Robert Flaherty
- Duration: 1 hour and 18 minutes
- Production company: Réveillon Frères
- Distribution: Pathé Pictures.
- Year: 1922.
- Photography and montage: Robert Flaherty.
- Music: Timothy Brock.

3.3 Information on the Movie:

Flaherty produced the movie after many journeys to the North Pole in Canada. In 1910, he visited Hudson Bay for gold digging and started drawing maps and exploring the region. He was awarded a Bill and Haul 16 mm camera and was encouraged to photograph the unknown. This helped collect 30000 feet of photographs that were, unfortunately, lost because of a cigarette he consumed in a Nitrate movie. Later in 1920-1921, he was funded by Réveillon Frères Company and equipped with two more sophisticated cameras to resume his passion (Thomson, 2016).

Robert went back to the North to produce another movie, but with one family unlike the previous movie that depicted the daily lives of many Eskimo families. Moreover, he decided to take all the cinematic production tools, including the camera and montage tools to end the work in the North and avoid any accidents. The new movie used the ethnographic method that is much used in anthropology to focus on the study population through participative observation and living with them without making them feel they are closely observed. However, Flaherty faced funding issues because most of the US cinematic production companies refused to provide financial help and were not convinced with the success of the documentary movies that had never been seen in the US cinema. Therefore, he resorted to the French production company “Pathé”, mainly “Réveillon Frères” that exercised bartering oil, wood, and some fishing with Eskimo tribes in return for animals’ fur and leathers. During his career, Flaherty produced only some movies that were a reference for assessing the documentary movies, mainly *Nanook of the North* that gained much success and inspired producers all over the world, including the Russian Sergei Eisenstein, the British John Grierson, and the French John Roch (Aufderheide, 2013, p. 32).

3.4 Movie Synopsis:

The movie narrates the story of Nanook and his family who are part of Eskimo people in the North Pole. The first scenes show the settings, wide shots, and lateral movements. Then, the movie shows the main characters through close shots that focus on the face expressions. Later, the producer shows the life of Nanook and his family in the Northern harsh environment, where they struggle to provide food through fishing in the sea and frost and to provide shelter by building Igloos. Flaherty uses the written comments instead of dialogues to avoid any vagueness or misinterpretation of scenes, in addition to music to add vitality and suspense, mainly in the scenes that show Nanook struggling with his preys.

3.5 The Denotative Analysis of the Chosen Sections:

Section 01: from the beginning to 18 mn and 57 s:

The producer shows the story settings through wide shots of the sea and the frost. Then, he shows the main characters, namely Nanook the father and Neila the mother, with a major focus on their simple face characters.

Section 02: from 10mn to 12mn: Fur Trade:

In this section, Flaherty shows different scenes that prove that the North is not an isolated place, and that its people can survive by fishing and bartering the fur of animals they hunt in return for oil, medicine, and other necessary goods.

Section 03: 13mn to 14mn 08s: Modernity VS Primitivism:

This section covers 03 scenes:

- The scene of the musical recording machine: The producer depicts the paradox between civilization and underdevelopment and shows Nanook checking the machine in wonder before gnawing it (a scene very close to the chest).
- The scene of children eating biscuits provided by fur traders (scene very close to the waist)
- The scene of medicine: The child Allegro feels stomach pain after excessive eating. Therefore, a trader gives him a spoon of castor oil (very close scene).

Section 04: Travel and Hunting: 18mn 57 s to 29 mn 47s:

Flaherty shows difficult moments where the father Nanook tracks preys and highlights the struggle between failure and success, death and life, and survival and disappearance; in addition to the harsh winter.

Section 05: Finding shelter; 37 mn to 45 mn

It contains many scenes showing how to choose frost, build shelter, and leave light holes. In addition, the scenes show the humanistic and spiritual sides of the characters, as they devote time for playing with children, as confirmed in the expression “time for work and time for play”.

3.6 Connotative Analysis:

A movie analysis should start with the title, as it is the key. From a formal perspective, “Nanook of the North” shows the name of the protagonist who is the most present. The name Nanook in Eskimo language refers to the bear. Thus, the denotative analysis shows that the title means the bear of the north. As for the connotative side, the producer inspired the title from the events environment, as he compared the very strong, rare, and important bear in the North Pole to the Eskimo man who struggles nature for survival. In this regard, the use of “Nanook” in the title is on purpose because the producer wants to reflect the metaphorical meaning and describe the protagonist who struggles for ensuring life and food for his family, just like the bear does.

In addition, the title includes the beautiful expression “A story of life and love in the actual Arctic” that expresses the movie’s general ideas. The producers usually write a synopsis on the tape façade; this is what Flaherty did through this expression. What does the producer want to tell with it? It shows the general idea and philosophy of the movie and implies focus on life, love, and struggle. In this context, the movie is a narration of the daily life of Eskimo families that struggle for survival in a deadly environment that has no food, water, or warmth.

The movie celebrates the noble primitive people; a very common concept that is deeply-rooted in the Western thought since the Illumination Age and mentioned in many writings, including those of Rousseau, to express an optimistic philosophy that the natural human is instinctually good (Aufderheide, 2013, p. 35). The movie shows how Nanook struggles for breadwinning by hunting animals in the frost and in the sea, how he treats

the animals' leathers to provide clothes and warmth, how he builds the igloo, and how he provides water by melting ice with fire.

Love: it is mentioned in the preface and is the main message the producer wants to send to the viewers, as he does not merely focus on a harsh nature and struggle for survival; rather, he tells a story full of love and happiness, as seen in the wide smiles of Nanook, Nayla, and the children, he successfully photographed in the wide and close scenes; every work they did, regardless its hardness, is done with love and happiness. Moreover, through his struggle against the nature, Nanook shows he does it for his family, not for himself. In addition, love is seen in the scene where Nanook plays with his son, saying "time for work and time for play"; a scene that targets many people who live in welfare and do not treat children with love.

Analysis of the Movie Ideas:

Life: The producer gives an introduction to the world of the North and to its geographical landscapes and living organisms. In this regard, most animals of the North Pole appear in the movie; the same method used in the documentary movies that show life in the wilderness today.

Struggle: The movie shows many struggle scenes, including the struggle between life and death, success and failure, and civilization and primitiveness. In this regard, civilization manifests in the way Nanook builds the igloo with a major focus on leaving light holes, in how he places the skiing board up the igloo in the night so as not to be eaten by dogs, in providing water by melting ice, and in tracing preys. On other hand, primitiveness appears when he eats uncooked meat and bites the music CD.

Love: Many scenes depict love as we previously mentioned in the analysis of the preface; love of survival, love of the family; love of the other, and happiness.

Analysis of the Expressive Elements of the Image:

The producer started the movie by a wide scene of the North and with maps to show the location of the events, with a lateral camera movement. Then, the producer introduces the movie characters in another scene from a normal angle and with a fixed camera. In the middle of the movie, we find many expressive elements of the image in Flaherty's direction, as he used more the wide shots to present the settings and the close and very close shots to focus on the facial expressions and introduce the psyche and personalities of the characters. In addition, he used special aesthetic items and expressed the characters' feelings through their movements and actions using the camera and music. In this regard, he smoothly moved from the close shots that capture facial expressions to the wide ones that focus on nature, marking a strong relation between man and nature, and between the characters and the movie place; this created big harmony.

Moreover, he used the parallel montage that was invented by David Griffith to film two scenes simultaneously and create suspense, such as filming Nanook's family while asleep inside their igloo, and filming the dogs outside to mark the difference between people and dogs that share food, water, and cloth in that environment, but differ in the need for warmth, as man needs comfort and warmth more than any other creature. Flaherty managed to add special beauty to the scenes by using music that serves as an additional dramatic item that complements the other audiovisual items in expressing given psychological states, as confirmed by Jonathan Bignell who states that music is a sign that reflects the emotions that accompany the scene and helps express the character's psychological state (Bignell, 2011, p. 248). This manifests in the scenes where Nanook hunts preys and music is played in the background to raise suspense and express danger.

In addition, Flaherty used the natural sources of light in the internal and external scenes. The analysis of the cinematic lighting shows deep connotations that reflect the

characters, the plot, and the general psychological state of the scenes. Thus, the light is a visual language that complements other items to provide a comprehensive message, and is a cinematic language that simulates the senses and raises emotions (Sourour, 2025, p. 06). The lighting conveys various connotations; for instance, the high lighting smoothens narration and predicts a positive end (Mahmoud, 2021, p. 09), as seen in the last scene that shows a strong lighting that draws happiness on the characters faces and mirrors and happy end.

4. The General Results:

- The title “Nanook of the North” is the key to the movie, as it paves the way for different readings by the recipient.
- Flaherty managed to express the characters’ emotions through their movements and actions, and to depict them using the camera and music. He smoothly moved from the close shots that focus on facial expressions to the wide ones that show nature, marking the strong relation between the human and nature.
- Flaherty used music as an additional dramatic element that complements the other audiovisual items to express specific psychological states and show suspense and danger in some decisive scenes.
- Flaherty used the natural sources of light in the internal and external scenes. The analysis of the cinematic lighting shows deep connotations that reflect the characters, the plot, and the general psychological state of the scenes. Thus, the light is a visual language that complements other items to provide a comprehensive message.
- Through the movie, Flaherty used the ethnographic method that is used in anthropological studies to shed light on a given population and show its culture and lifestyle.
- Flaherty used the parallel montage that was invented by the US David Griffith to film two scenes simultaneously.
- Through “Nanook of the North”, Flaherty used a unique style of depicting the reality of the harsh Arctic and included humanistic scenes that show Nanook the father with his family to break the harsh environment and isolation.

5. Conclusion:

The documentary cinema is an important mass media tool that promotes culture. Despite the widespread of the novelist movies all along the history of the international cinema, Nanook of the North, the Man of Aran, and Moana have a strong position in the international cinema because they deeply depict reality and the aesthetics of the image. In the end, we cannot celebrate the history of the documentary movie without making reference to the giant Robert Flaherty.

Appendices:

Picture 1: A close shot that shows the waist



Picture 02: A very close shot



Picture 03: A wide shot



Picture 04: An average shot



Picture 05: An average shot



Picture 06: An average shot



Picture 7: A close shot



Picture 7: A close shot that shows the wais



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