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## Local and Universal: The Canadian Inuit and the Irish Aran Islanders in the Films of Robert J. Flaherty

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The article considers the question of locality and universality regarding two locations and populations: the Inuit of the Canadian North, and the Aran Islanders living off the western coast of Ireland. These locations provide the setting for Robert J. Flaherty's documentary films *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934). The two films attempt to reveal the essence of human nature through illustrations of human beings living under elemental conditions. Comparing the two films, this article explores tendencies toward locality and universality. It addresses the cinematic medium in relation to Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) and the effects of the culture industry as described in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critical essay, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' (1944). The article considers whether Flaherty's films prove wrong Benjamin's argument that modern technology erases the aura surrounding works of art in pre-technological times. This article argues that the aura of Flaherty's films may instead be considered an artistic effect that is specific to modern times, expressing the poetic vision of their maker.

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## Introduction

This article addresses locality and universality through a comparative analysis of two documentary films by Robert J. Flaherty (1884–1951): *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934). The films offer images of two distinct peoples, the ‘Eskimo’<sup>1</sup> and the Aran Islanders and depict their locations, habit of living and modes of survival. Consideration of their traditional ways of living involves a movement into the historical past, one that highlights the ties of tradition to locality. This connection to locality is encapsulated by the way that these people are not shown as owners of land and sea; the land and sea own the people, in the sense that the forces of nature rule and determine their lives. However, the tradition and history of Aran Islands have been accommodated to an Irish myth of origins; by contrast, the Inuit are missing from the Canadian national myth of origins (as is the case for the Indigenous peoples of North America in general). Informed by the traditional concept of the ‘northern myth’, which views the north as an empty space, a *terra incognita*,<sup>2</sup> the Inuit do not feature in the early literary and artistic representations of the Canadian north.<sup>3</sup>

Flaherty’s documentaries attempt to reveal the essence of the human condition through illustration of humans living in conditions that people living in contemporary technology-driven societies would consider primeval. This article considers Flaherty’s films as attempts to convey the experience of humans who live in direct relation to nature: the noble savage. I explore the representation of the ‘Eskimo’ and the Aran Islander through the lens of this idea, one that is most strikingly associated with the French eighteenth-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Through comparison, the article navigates the tendencies towards locality (a specific community of people) and universality (the nation as a totality of diverse peoples).<sup>4</sup> The comparison itself may be viewed as universalizing: analysis moves beyond the specifics of Canadian and Irish cultural representations into an international terrain.

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<sup>1</sup> Inuit has become the accepted term since the 1970s. I will use the term Inuit in the article, and only revert to the term ‘Eskimo’ in reference to Flaherty’s documentary, which uses this term throughout. The word ‘Eskimo’ is now regarded as offensive, partly because of its etymological link to ‘one who eats raw flesh’.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is used to highlight the notion of the northern territory as unexplored and uninhabited, suiting a coloniser perspective, and belying the fact that the Inuit have populated these areas for thousands of years.

<sup>3</sup> Sherrill E. Grace in *Canada and the Idea of North* (2002: 32) provides a detailed overview of the secondary literature on the critical, descriptive, and theoretical writings of the Canadian North, and illuminates the myriad discourse about the North and its representations.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson defines this as the ‘totalizing classificatory grid’ in *Imagined Communities* (1983: 184). The reference implies that the ‘state’s real or contemplated control [...] of peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth’ become a part of the nation’s wealth.

My analysis will consider the medium of the cinematic in both films with regard to Walter Benjamin's critical essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', which was originally written in 1935 during the Nazi regime in Germany. Benjamin's article offers decisive arguments against the existence of artistic aura in works of art that involve mechanical reproduction, such as photography and film. Furthermore, Benjamin's article involves interconnected themes: the relation of humans to the forces of nature, and the authenticity of art and human experience. Consequently, any examination of the relation between locality and universality in Flaherty's films in terms of Benjamin's thought must take the concept of authenticity into consideration.

### Distinctive Localities

Flaherty's films depict communities in the localities of their historical origin. These are distinct communities that evolved over the course of centuries, fashioning their own ways of life, languages, and forms of survival. The Inuit people have long inhabited the extreme northern areas of Canada, beyond the arctic regions (the 49th parallel), and the Aran Islanders live off the coast of mainland Ireland, on a group of three islands: Inishmore, Inishmaan, and Inisheer.

These distinct localities feature in Flaherty's documentaries, *Nanook of the North* (1922)<sup>5</sup> and *Man of Aran* (1934). *Nanook* was Flaherty's first documentary and a silent film, whereas the 1934 film used the technology of sound. Flaherty is generally regarded as the 'Father' of the documentary, consistently concerned with 'telling his stories of mythical battles of man against the powers of nature in always the same old-fashioned way' (Lampe, 2005: 2). He was a self-taught filmmaker, who was credited with 'photographic seeing' (2). Flaherty was said to describe himself first as 'an explorer; then [...] an artist' (Barsam, 1988: 5). However, contrary to this self-definition, film critics have 'tended to perceive him as an explorer rather than an artist' (Lampe, 2005: 2). Flaherty's dramaturgy, film narrative and editing have been subject to substantial criticism. Richard Barsam, for example, sees a lack of cinematic development in Flaherty's work:

Flaherty's career was paradoxical in many ways. During his lifetime, the style of the American motion picture evolved constantly, yet the distinguishing characteristics of Flaherty's work remained virtually unchanged from *Nanook of the North* in 1922 to *Louisiana Story* in 1948 (1988: 4).

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<sup>5</sup> Like all American films from 1922, the picture entered the public domain in 1997.

Lampe, however, emphasizes that Flaherty was familiar with the cinematography of his time and aware of the newest technological tendencies, which he adopted to expand the genre of his own work (2). Barsam, nevertheless, maintains that ‘all of Flaherty’s films are variations on one ideal: happiness exists when man is free and lives simply and harmoniously with nature’ (Barsam, 1988: 7).

The locality presented in *Nanook* is an empty, barren, snowy landscape: ice floating on large stretches of water, extreme temperatures, and no human habitation. The theme of humans struggling with the forces of nature is the main subject that surfaces. The main characters within the film are Nanook (his real name was Allakariallak), and his family. They are described as the ‘Itivimuits of Hopewell Sound, Northern Ungava’ (Flaherty, 1922). Flaherty spent sixteen months in the Arctic, filming the everyday life and traditions of the Inuit people. He intended the featured ‘Eskimo’ family to represent the Inuit living in the region. No other Inuit people appear on the screen, though the intertitles inserted in the film mention ‘three hundred souls’ inhabiting the locality (Flaherty, 1922). According to Lance Pettitt, the documentarist has ‘the intent of claiming the real as opposed to creating fictional worlds for entertainment purposes’ (2000: 71). On this basis, Pettitt sees the film as a romantic dramatization of ‘essentially nostalgic attitudes towards the pre-modern cultures’ (72). Since *Nanook* is a silent film, musical accompaniment is added, and Flaherty’s intertitles combine poetic language with description. Gerhard Lampe writes that Flaherty’s technique is a ‘linear narrative in chronological order’ that, to highlight dramatic suspense, allows ‘pictures to run slowly, disclosing their meaning and purpose only gradually’ (2005: 3). Accordingly, the opening sequence introduces the characters of the film as they emerge one-by-one from the inside of a kayak. This bizarre and comic introduction illustrates the description of Nanook and his family that is given in the intertitles: ‘the most cheerful people in all the world’; Nanook is described as ‘the fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo’ (Flaherty, 1922). Recent criticism of the documentary, however, has pointed out that many of the scenes in the film were staged: the igloo building, the phonograph, and the seal hunting scenes.<sup>6</sup>

The film was a commercial success both in the United States and internationally, inspiring a Broadway song entitled *Nanook*, with the lyrics ‘ever-loving Nanook, though you don’t read a book, but oh, how you can love’ (Zimmermann, 2015: 1). One critic sees in this song the ‘racialized, orientalist Western discourses present at the time of its production’ (Tobing Rony, quoted in Zimmermann, 2015: 2). Another line of criticism,

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<sup>6</sup> *Nanook Revisited* (1990) is a documentary that revisits Inukjiaq, the original location of Flaherty’s 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*. Locals clearly identify these scenes as staged and consider them comical and inaccurate.

however, suggests that the film was a ‘collaboration’ between the Inuit and Flaherty; and, according to Jay Ruby, the ‘conditions of its production, the culture, ideology and intentions of the producer and the contexts in which it is displayed’ underlines this joint work (quoted in Zimmermann, 2015: 2). The collaboration between Flaherty and the Inuit that Ruby alludes to presents an image of the ‘Eskimo’ as the ‘cuddly’ and ‘happy-go-lucky’ figure, which is a romanticized idea of the ‘noble red man or blood-thirsty savage, [that] recall the stereotypes of Western history’ (Deloria, 1983, xiii). The film also shows Nanook and his family joyously eating the raw flesh of the seal and the walrus following the hunt; another example of Western European preconceived notion. The film, therefore, presents the ‘Eskimo’, not the Inuit.<sup>7</sup> Flaherty’s intention was not to offer his audience an objective and historically authentic interpretation of the Inuit and their locality, but to create an entertaining, marketable story with drama and suspense that requires no previous knowledge or understanding of Inuit culture. Hence, he disregarded the originality of the culture and its traditional way of life, fashioning this into a marketable entity to suit the expectations of white, Western society.

The second film under scrutiny is *Man of Aran* (1934) an Irish, fictional documentary (also defined as an ethno-fiction). Gerhard Lampe sees a ‘structural identity of theme, a generalizing tendency’ and its ‘anthropological and ethnological values’ as distinctive features of both *Nanook* and *Man of Aran* (2005: 5). He asserts that by the 1930s, Flaherty had acquired greater technological skills and became the ‘explorer of the art of cinematography’ (2005: 12). Pettitt regards the film as ‘structurally and formally [...] rich, fascinating, but flawed’ (2000: 79). Furthermore, ‘the overheard speech is poorly synched with the visuals’; there is ‘no spoken commentary and three intertitles contextualise the action for the viewer’ (79). The music is employed to accentuate the notion of an essential Irishness, supposedly based on traditional Irish lyrics. However, Pettitt notes that ‘traces of folk authenticity are deracinated by the full orchestra arrangement: cosmopolitan high-culture transforms the indigenous in a London recording studio’ (79). Flaherty shot the film on location in the Aran Islands, featuring local people; Pettitt asserts that Flaherty selected these people based on how appealing their faces would look on camera (78). He sees in this directorial practice evidence of Flaherty’s ideological tendency and economic motive: ‘Flaherty’s desire for photogenic faces arose from a mix of racial attitudes and commercial savvy’ (78).

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<sup>7</sup> The prefabricated stereotype of the ‘Eskimo’, like the ‘Indian’, is contested in *Indianthusiasm, Indigenous Responses* (2020), edited by Hartmut Lutz, Florentine Strzelczyk, and Renae Watchman. The volume examines the European fascination with, and fantasies about, Indigenous peoples of North America, which have roots in the 19th-century German, colonial imagination. Research on Indigenous peoples’ languages, knowledges, cultures, histories, politics, arts, and intellectual traditions is relatively recent and one-sided, which means that Indigenous populations were rarely asked their opinion.

As in *Nanook*, locality is the theme of *Man of Aran*. Both films focus on a remote community where tradition is tied to locality; land and sea determine the native inhabitant's means of survival, whether through hunting in the Arctic or fishing in the Atlantic Ocean. Both communities suffer from poverty and their means of survival depends on communal efforts to hunt and fish together. The films portray numerous instances of the hunt for seal and walrus in the Arctic, or men at sea in currach boats, battling with the huge waves of the Atlantic Ocean and struggling to catch sufficient fish to feed their families. One scene in *Man of Aran* offers a glimpse of communal activity, when a huge shark is caught and hauled ashore; a scene which was, however, entirely prefabricated. This specific scene also features in Martin McDonagh's 1996 play, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*; the Aran Island natives watch the shark-hunting scene in Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. Kate, an elderly woman, remarks, 'that's a big fish', which the others quickly correct as being a shark (McDonagh, 2008: 392). Young Bartley comments: 'It's rare that off Ireland you get sharks. This is the first shark I've ever seen off Ireland' (393).

Flaherty sought to create a heroic, epic story of two distinct communities in *Nanook* and *Man of Aran*, where the forces of nature that rule the land and the ocean dominate its people. Both films focus on one family, taken to represent the larger population of each locality. While *Nanook* and his family are credible, because they offer an innocent perspective of 'how life is' (Pettitt, 2000: 72), the characters featuring in *Man of Aran* are carefully chosen actors. Both films document the Inuit and the Aran Islanders; the storyline which runs parallel with the ethnographic angle, however, offers a romanticized plot with sufficient drama and suspense, and a final happy end. It is ambiguous as to whether the romanticized vision of the 'happy Eskimo' defines his distinctive locality more authentically than the boy fishing from the top of cliffs and the Man of Aran who seemingly conquers deadly Atlantic Ocean waves. The films offer a romantic vision of primitive life, where man can overcome the hardships of the natural elements and emerge a 'happy' winner. These are the marketable images—hence the superficial portrayal—of two basic cultures, defined by their localities. Yet Flaherty's ultimate intention may still have been to 'reveal truths' and offer convincing scenes from everyday life, even if he fabricated many of the scenes that feature hunts and fishermen battling the waves (Pettitt, 2000: 72).

### **Reflections on the Human Condition**

The raw relation between the human and the natural environment can be regarded as Flaherty's reflection upon a universal human condition. One may justifiably consider how these works reveal the 'essence' of human nature through their illustration of

humans living under basic conditions. To illuminate this idea, it is helpful to explore the historical resonance of the term primitivism. According to Robert Berkhofer,

primitivism postulated people dwelling in nature according to nature, existing free of history's burdens and the social complexity felt by Europeans in the modern period and offering hope to mankind at the same time that they constituted a powerful counter-example to existing European civilization (1979: 72).

The term evokes a dream of a paradise on Earth, that proves the existence of an alternative to the present. The primitivist tradition influenced the Renaissance explorers and their perceptions of the indigenous peoples they encountered. The travelogues and diaries describing these encounters entered the literary works of European writers; in particular, those of the French. Most of these narratives relate to the American Indian, a figure who became 'part of the bon savage or Noble Savage tradition so long an accompaniment of the Golden Age or paradisiacal mythology of Western civilization' (Berkhofer, 1979: 73). Berkhofer recognizes that the shift from the depiction of the American Indian as a Noble Savage to the 'Noble American Indian as a critic of European society and culture' is difficult to date but is generally placed between the 16th century and late 17th century (Berkhofer, 1979: 75). Its major tenets were established in France, crediting Montaigne's 'synthesis of French and Spanish accounts of Mexican and South American Indians with French scepticism and humanism' that provided 'the first full-length portrait of the Noble Savage as critic of contemporary European civilization and model of what men ought to, and could, be' (Berkhofer, 1979: 75). Berkhofer remarks that Rousseau and other contemporary philosophers needed only to continue with this tradition of using the 'Noble Savage in general and the American Indian in particular for their critical moral and political purposes' (Berkhofer, 1979: 75). The 'cult of the Noble Savage', specifically regarded as 'rational man' (75), was not widely known outside France and any satirical usage of the noble American Indian found in England also originated from France.

In England the term 'Noble Savage' first appeared not during the Romantic era, but earlier in the Restoration period, in John Dryden's heroic play *The Conquest of Granada* (1672). Dryden writes:

[...] I alone am king of me.  
I am as free as nature first made man,  
Ere the base laws of servitude began,  
When wild in woods the noble savage ran  
(1672: 403).

In the above, the freedom of the Noble Savage is linked with a pure, uncorrupted nature, where rules and laws do not exist. Man lives in harmony with nature and is therefore responsible only for himself, free from the influences of any form of corruption or evil. With the emergence of laws, however, man is subjugated, and the original attributes of innocence, purity and freedom are lost. Dryden's verse thus sees civilization destroying an original, inherent state of human innocence. Therefore, Dryden's idea of an innocence originating in nature reflects Rousseau's sentiments when he writes:

[...] that moment, when right taking place of violence, nature became subject to law;  
 [...] that chain of surprising events, in consequence of which the strong submitted to serve the weak, and the people to purchase imaginary ease, at the expense of real happiness (1755: 35).

The inequality between 'savage man' in nature and social man originates within nature, according to Rousseau:

The first man, who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. [...] you are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong equally to us all, and the earth itself to nobody! (1755: 541)

In the original state of nature, according to Rousseau, the 'savage man' was peaceful by nature, uncorrupted and innocent – without knowledge of evil. Rousseau states that humankind lost this peaceful state of innocence in line with the development of society, which brought inequality and interdependence between people.

Rousseau's name has been, and remains, connected with the theme of glorifying the 'Noble Savage', though some critics have refuted this claim. As mentioned, Ter Ellingson observes how 'Rousseau is identified not as the original author of the Noble Savage but rather as the most effective agent of its promotion' (2001: 2). Moreover, Rousseau does not use the term 'Noble Savage' in any of his works, providing only a widespread interpretation of the concept in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755). My present concern is not with an examination of critical responses to Rousseau's philosophical thinking; my aim, rather, is to illustrate the development of the 'idealized concept of uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization' (Britannica, 2019). Accordingly, the artist's main duty is to inspire an emotional response of sentimentalism, passion, and love, combined with symbolism as it looks toward Romanticism. Berkhofer's comments emphasize that:



Whereas the true Noble Savage of rationalism comprehended nature's laws through reason as well as instinct, the romantic savage depended upon passion and impulse alone for a direct apprehension of nature in all its picturesqueness, sublimity, and fecundity (1979: 79).

Barsam's view of Flaherty's films chimes with Berkhofer's observation: the films were intended to show how 'happiness exists when man is free and lives simply and harmoniously with nature' (Barsam, 1988: 7). *Nanook* and *Man of Aran* both display a highly romantic and emotional portrayal of distinctive elemental cultures and do not strive for historical authenticity.

### Universalizing Tendencies

There are two noticeable parallels within the films: the natural landscape and the traditional methods of human survival. The natural environment offers a picturesque landscape that is at once sublime and overwhelmingly powerful; the peoples portrayed practice modes of survival – as hunting and fishing under extreme conditions – as well as an ancient form of traditional existence, largely unknown to an international public.

To understand this gradual movement toward universalization, Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is instructive (published just one year after *Man of Aran*). Benjamin's essay is a response to the rapid advancement of photography and film, illustrating how 'mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art' (Benjamin, 1969: 14). With the emergence of photography, the creation and perception of art underwent rapid change, which had an immense effect on the public. Benjamin explains that, throughout human history, a work of art carried an 'aura' that evoked a sense of originality and authenticity. With the development of mechanical reproduction, however, the reproduced object is detached from 'the domain of tradition', which leads to 'a tremendous shattering of tradition' and 'the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage' (1969: 4). A work of art acquires a different meaning in every age, but Benjamin stresses that 'the earliest art works originated in the service of ritual' and this 'ritual function' has been maintained over time, whether it was magical or religious (1969: 6). With the advancement of technical reproduction and the development of film, however, the artwork 'begins to be based on another practice-politics' (1969: 6). Film offers a different means of expression: a reality that is adjusted to the masses instead of the individual, so that 'when the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever' (1969: 8). Therefore, Michelangelo's *David*, for example, conforms to an earlier conception of art,

whereas Flaherty's documentaries are a work of art specific to the age of mechanical reproduction because film as a form requires a new set of definitions. The film as genre may have positive and negative attributes, according to Benjamin; it is a new artistic manifestation that must be acknowledged for its merits.

The documentary emerged in parallel with the development of mechanical reproduction in the 1920s and 30s and 'became consolidated as a film practice' (Pettitt, 2000: 72). Beside Flaherty, John Grierson is worthy of mention; both were involved in the 'seminal documentaries representing Ireland, *Man of Aran* (1934)' (72). For Grierson, the documentary afforded a means of public information and reform, while Flaherty, according to Pettitt, was conservative, romantic and 'held essentially nostalgic attitudes towards the pre-modern cultures' (2000: 72). Grierson suggested to Flaherty the Aran Islands as a possible subject that would adequately suit the 'style of his previous films on Inuit and Polynesian islanders' (Pettitt, 2000: 77). The cottage that features in quite a few scenes of *Man of Aran* was apparently built to accommodate the requirements of the film. This clearly connects with Benjamin's point that 'not only is it impossible for reality to be equipment-free, in some cases the real turns out to be a simulacrum' (Pettitt, 2000: 77). It is difficult to decide whether this effigy that Pettitt mentions corresponds to the 'aura' that Benjamin discusses; as a reconstruction, the cottage seems to belong to an age of mechanical reproduction, yet its purpose is to create a sense of authenticity. Pettitt's observation on the directorial practice of reconstruction is illuminating in this context:

Flaherty's rationale for this reconstructive approach was to creatively document what he viewed as the essential features of a primitive civilization – aspects of a life that had been – but one that had rapidly succumbed to contact with the changing Irish mainland, its modernising ways and values. Ironically, the production and success of the film helped [...] to accelerate the contamination of the culture for which both Irish-Americans professed so much admiration (2000:78–79).

Pettitt's reading of this Irish context also relates to the Inuit in *Nanook*, since, as noted above, his cinematic style had remained essentially the same, even as his technique developed.

Benjamin's perceptions on the development of the film reveal how the cinema offers greater focus and perception, and 'lends itself more readily to analysis' (1969: 15). The film in general magnifies reality as it provides 'multiple fragments' of certain moments or occurrences, such as those we encounter in the lives of both the Inuit and the Aran Islanders in Flaherty's documentaries (14). These instances are meant to create images that are simultaneously comprehensible and enjoyable for an international public.

Nanook becomes a 'happy-go-lucky Eskimo', hunting seal and building igloos; the Aran Islanders battle the waves, collect crabs for bait, and fish from the top of high cliffs. Flaherty's overt aim is to 'dwell on the isolation, austerity and inhospitable aspects of the natural environment' (Pettitt, 2000: 80). Historical relevance is of little importance; Flaherty is a 'self-styled cinematic poet' (Pettitt, 2000: 80). This supports the view that Flaherty was not interested in preserving originality in *Nanook* and *Man of Aran* but placed greater emphasis on expounding the primitivist, romantic Noble Savage cult to an international public that had no prior knowledge of either the 'Eskimo' or the Aran Islanders. The spectacular scenic landscapes combined with traditional modes of living offer an adventure story that is easy for 'the masses' to understand and follow. The featured characters play roles; the gramophone scene is an appropriate example (Nanook pretends not to know what a gramophone record is and tries to take a bite). Here Flaherty makes use of a parody to critique contact between Indigenous culture and white, Western culture. *Man of Aran* is also a romanticized portrayal of the Aran Islanders which pictures them as primitive, through actors carefully chosen to play out standardized roles.

Flaherty's intention in both films is to present a slice of hitherto undiscovered life; this form of 'authentic', traditional life is in fact a shocking contrast to the modern way of living already existent in the first half of the 20th century. The camera and the sound recording open new dimensions in which the masses are confronted with themselves, whether they like it or not. Photography and technical reproduction are now a means of capturing demonstrations, gatherings, even war and forgotten cultures. Certainly, the aim of the documentary is to inform the outside world and offer authentic coverage of global happenings.

In his exploration of his Irish heritage, George Stoney made a documentary film entitled *How the Myth was Made* (1979), a work that examines the after-effects of Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. In the documentary, Flaherty's 1930s film is confronted by the present time of the late 1970s. Stoney's film revisits the scenes of Flaherty's documentary and speaks to some of the actual participants, including Maggie Dirrane who played the 'wife'. Stoney's work captures the divided opinions of the islanders' regarding Flaherty's cinematic portrayal. Some feel that Flaherty ignored the poverty and grim realities present on the Aran Islands during the 1930s: the film 'made very little of the poor' and failed to recognize that 'even the poor have their pride'. One local participant also adds that there are 'lots of things in the film that never really happened' (Stoney, 1979). This accusation may allude to the shark hunt in which the inhabitants extract oil; as Pettitt notes, 'inhabitants obtained their paraffin oil from the mainland' (2000: 78). The jibe of the Aran Islander in Stoney's film was also, most likely, directed against what Pettitt observes as the 'dangers to which curragh crews were exposed in

the storm sequences' for the sake of the film and the fact that 'experts had to be hired to teach the native people how to hunt traditionally' (78). This illustrates that Flaherty appeared not to be particularly concerned with local and cultural authenticity. Of *Man of Aran*, Stoney states that it 'was Flaherty's personal and romantic vision of how life should be lived on the island, ignoring the harsher realities that might question the validity of such romanticism' (Stoney, 1979). According to Stoney, *Man of Aran* was not so much a documentary as a 'visual poem' that had drama, suspense, humour, and adventure (Stoney, 1979). The public craved this type of material in the 1930s; it was what the culture industry demanded from its producers. From this perspective, *Man of Aran* is a film that would seem to validate Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that 'the culture industry cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises' (2002: 53). *Man of Aran* may have been a success but, according to Pettitt, critics 'compared the film unfavourably to mainstream Hollywood's images of Ireland, arguing Flaherty's 'lie is the greater, for he can make the romance seem real'' (2000: 80). It is evident that *Nanook* and *Man of Aran* offer universal images of the 'Eskimo' and the Aran Islander. But the films are deeply problematic because of their 'selective ahistorical treatment', and the 'limitations of [their] documentary method' (Pettitt, 2000: 80).

### **Myth of the Canadian North**

Myths are subject to change and have impact on the 'local cultural, political and social before reaching their present fixed form' (Gordon, 1994: viii). The notion of 'the Canadian North' is complex and characterized by myths, legends and theories that have accumulated over the centuries. A dominant myth, that had explorers from the 16th to the early 20th century navigating the treacherous waters of the Arctic regions, was a belief in the existence of the Northwest Passage. This passage supposedly flowed between the Bering Land Bridge and America, through which one could theoretically reach North-Eastern Asia and its riches, thereby saving seafarers time and expense. The discovery of the Arctic was the goal of the white man; the fact that it was already inhabited was of secondary concern. Therefore, the 'North is at once a geographical fact, and a fluid ungraspable metaphor' (Kodó, 2018: 178). The North, according to Daniel Francis, 'occupies the imagination, filling it with dreams of high adventure and fabulous wealth. To a Canadian, North is an idea, not a location; a myth, a promise, a destiny' (1986: 152).

The northern areas of the Canadian Arctic have been constructed as predominantly barren, desolate, cold, hostile and without any form of human habitation. This image is strengthened by photographs, paintings, travelogues, diaries, novels, short stories, poems, and films of the region that date back to the late 19th and early 20th

centuries. None of the authors of these works lived or stayed in the Canadian North for an extended period, if at all.<sup>8</sup> Renée Hulan identifies the process of erasure within representations of the North: 'The north is represented as a blank page from which the presence of all people has been erased, presenting the viewer with a territory to be occupied and possessed (hence the term 'Terra Incognita') and a symbolic space, a topos being named' (Hulan, 2002: 141). Visual portrayals of the North generally emphasize the emptiness of the land and the overpowering strength of the natural elements that white man needs to conquer. The concept of conquering and colonizing the North, whether we speak of nature or the land, features in all these works. Carl Berger draws our attention to Canada's official contemporary views regarding its racist inclinations on the strong and sturdy races of Europe that were attracted to Canada during and after Confederation in 1867. According to Berger, some of the most common attributes ascribed to Canada were: 'the Britain of the North', 'this northern kingdom', or 'the true North' (Berger, 1997: 84).

Contrary to the image of a desolate and empty terrain, Canada's North has been populated for thousands of years by the Inuit, the Dene Indians, and the Cree of Northern Quebec. Native contact with European civilization was a slow and gradual process, which had a lasting, negative effect on the lives of the Indigenous Peoples. In the 1920s, when Flaherty first arrived and started work on *Nanook*, Inuit traditional culture was still largely untouched by colonising influence. The families lived in larger groups and led a nomadic existence. The geographer Mark Nuttal states that 'northern hunting peoples are inextricably linked with the natural environment both socially and psychologically' (1992: 38). The Indigenous Peoples of North America view themselves as part of a great cycle of life in which human beings live in harmony with animals, land, and waters. Furthermore, 'in the Inuit world an appropriation of the land is impossible insofar as it is open to the use of all those who need it, mainly to hunt and find shelter' (Collin-Omhovère, 2006: 13).

Myth and reality diverged, however, with the Canadian government's disruption of the ancient hunting culture of the Inuit from the 1950s, when they forced the Inuit into communities. The centralized relocation policy of the government continued throughout the 1960s, traumatizing the Inuit. The policies were 'inflicted on the Inuit of Hebron and Nutak in Labrador, the Sayisi Dene in Manitoba, and several Yukon bands'

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<sup>8</sup> Glenn Gould, the Canadian virtuoso pianist, visited the North only once in 1965. He travelled by train from Winnipeg to Churchill, Alberta, which is not far north, and he did not stay long. This journey resulted in a bold and daring experimental radio piece titled *The Idea of North* (Gould, 1967) first aired on CBC Radio on December 28, 1967. The piece is an hour-long meditation on the vast, cold expanse that constitutes the top third of the country, a piece that completely and indicatively ignores the existence of the Inuit.

(King, 2013: 94). From the 1970s, the Inuit began negotiated land claims, culminating in the creation of Nunavut, 'Our Land' in Inuktitut, on 1 April 1999. The 1990s saw the Inuit engaging in the politics of influence and ultimately seeking ways of shifting from imposed dependency to recovering their independent way of life. This involved the strengthening of cultural values, identity, ancestry, and reconnecting with nature. A noteworthy Inuit activist is Sheila Watt-Cloutier, a political representative for Inuit at the regional, national, and international levels. She is also the scriptwriter and producer of *Capturing Spirit; An Inuit Journey* (2018), a film dedicated to the Inuit youth.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Inuit voices are being heard and these activists have achieved recognition in the highest political ranks: Her Excellency the Right Honourable Mary May Simon was sworn in on July 26, 2021, as Canada's first Indigenous governor general.<sup>10</sup>

In retrospect, the theme of 'the north' constituted an enduring myth that identified the whole country with a region that had, and continues to have, the fewest inhabitants. The concept of Canada as a northern nation assumed a racist aspect that followed the tradition of a falsified glorious past as a by-product of nationalism, maintaining that the capacity for freedom and progress was dependent on the blood of northern races (Berger, 1997: 99). In the 1920s the focus of nationalist thought shifted and 'one of its dominant preoccupations came to be the definition of Canadian character in terms of North American experience to emphasize the similarities between the USA and Canada' (Berger, 1997: 97). The reimagining of the mythic North meant territorial appropriation through the erasure of the Aboriginal People from the literary landscape. This furthered the development of a northern consciousness from the imaginations of writers and readers. However, wherever readers encounter the Canadian North in literature, there is some form of romanticism involved, which accounts for the North's appeal to national consciousness. This is the sense of the North as mysterious and mystical, inspiring the Group of Seven's romantic nationalist and strictly landscape painting in their portrayal of the Canadian wilderness.

Flaherty's *Nanook* enhances the Romantic northern myth through his portrayal of the hostile, cold, desolate, and empty landscape. To solidify his visual scope, he turned to the original inhabitants, the Indigenous Peoples of the region, with the intention of

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<sup>9</sup> *Capturing Spirit; An Inuit Journey* (2018) is a 70-minute film that follows the lives of two Inuit as they become young adults. The film chronicles the everyday struggles, challenges, and successes they face growing up in a small Arctic town. These characters must grapple with family strife, physical and alcohol abuse, suicide, and clashing cultures. The use of dramatic vignettes highlights events and choices in their lives from birth to adulthood. The allegorical wisdom of the past is presented by a talking Inukshuk and an Arctic Tern, using imaginative special effects and 3D animation; the intricate form of symbolism provides a counterpoint to the live action sequences.

<sup>10</sup> Mary May Simon has gained national and international recognition for her work on Arctic and Indigenous issues, and advocating Inuit rights. Her biography, work and achievements are found on the official website of the Canadian Government (Simon, 2021).

portraying them through the lens of the 'Eskimo'. Flaherty had no knowledge of the Inuit and their history, but the stereotypical image of these people suited his purpose of depicting 'the true North' through the lens of his personal experience, as characteristic of ethnographers. Flaherty thereby takes the myth of the north and replaces one mythology with another, which Hulan describes as an 'exercise in post-colonial liberation', a way of 'removing the dead hand of tradition from the throat of national literature' that had been suffocating it (2002: 142). The north's traditional function as a blank page for the nation's narrative shifted to acknowledging that the blank space of the north is filled, and the silence broken. The North is peopled with Inuit, not 'Eskimo', whose ancient traditional identity is a distinct cultural marker that establishes local and universal authenticity. Flaherty's choice, however, is not convincing because he uses the 'Eskimo' stereotype, underpinned by the myth of exoticism. This confirms Roland Barthes' view of an 'ethnographic expedition' which does not 'bother much with historical or sociological problems' (2009: 109) and denies 'any identification by history' (2009: 111). Therefore, *Nanook of the North* is a 'pure reflection of the West' (2009: 111).

### **A Myth of Universal Irishness**

Flaherty's *Man of Aran* offers a unique portrayal of the Aran Islands and its inhabitants. The Aran Islands as a locality is generally depicted as a timeless world of rock and wave, an alluring legend that has helped to formulate a myth around the concept of Irishness. The Aran Islanders have been celebrated as the most ancient and most authentic members of the Irish people. In that sense, they have been accommodated to an Irish myth of origins. Historically, the Aran Islanders have been separated from mainland Irish civilization through their ancient way of life, living off the water and constantly risking life and limb on the sea. The early 20th-century Irish playwright, John Millington Synge, observed this distance and isolation from modern Ireland in *The Aran Islands*: 'I became indescribably mournful, for I felt this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in it, have a peace and dignity from which we are shut for ever' (1992: 749). Any aspiration to belong to the island communities is, however, problematic for an outsider like Synge. Completed in 1901 and published in 1907, Synge's *The Aran Islands* provides descriptions of the distinctive way of life of the Aran Islanders. It is a four-part account of Synge's personal meeting with the people, culture, tradition, and language of the Aran Islands. Another noteworthy source is Synge's play, *Riders to the Sea* (1904), based on stories told by the islanders during the author's stay on the islands.

The geographical landscape of the Aran Islands presents a pure, untouched, primitive scenery. The island group consists of limestone, and this is what meets the eye everywhere, as Tim Robinson notes (1992: 134). Such an inhospitable terrain would

surely keep people away, but this has not proven to be so. Robinson points out that the three islands are rich in history and archaeological findings, contrary to what the image of the barren landscape suggests. There are numerous:

[...] communal tombs like big boxes of limestone slabs from the late Stone Age, stone-lined cist graves from the Bronze Age, huge dry-stone cashels of the Celtic Iron Age, primitive oratories and hermits' cells, foundations of once famous monasteries, and roofless medieval chapels (Robinson, 1992: 170).

These ruins signify that the comings and goings of peoples have been continuous across the centuries, belying the notion that the islanders were completely isolated. Robinson points out that during the period of the Irish Literary Renaissance, at the start of the 20th century, the 'Aran Islanders also found themselves elected to a literary and even a metaphysical status by a romantic nationalism which was transforming Ireland's image of itself' (1992: 234). He notes how the 'living culture of Aran' came to be considered the 'repository of venerable antiquities' (247). W. B. Yeats went to the islands in 1896, looking for a setting for his proposed novel, *The Speckled Bird*. Lady Gregory also visited the islands to collect fairylore, and Patrick Pearse's visit in 1898 led to the foundation of the Aran branch of the Gaelic League (1992: 255). In December 1896, Synge met Yeats in Paris, where Yeats urged him to leave and: '[g]o to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression' (Yeats, quoted in Harrington 2009: 455). In 1898, Synge arrived on the Aran Islands; this journey would be repeated at intervals during the next four years. During his time spent on the islands, Synge took photographs and notes and listened to the speech of the Islanders' 'beautiful English which has grown up in Irish speaking districts' and tried his hand at learning the language (Yeats, quoted in Harrington 2009: 455).

Pettitt points out that Robert Flaherty read Synge's *The Aran Islands*, and indicates, in a footnote reference to him, that the Aran islanders were 'in perfect pose for my camera' (2000: 91). Synge himself notes that 'my photographs of this island had been examined with immense delight, and every person in them had been identified' (Synge, 1992: 61); this clearly shows an interest and openness among the islanders for hitherto unknown curiosities. By the 1930s, when Flaherty arrived with the intention of making a documentary of the Aran islanders, much of the uncorrupted traditional forms of living would have undergone change, some aspects having disappeared altogether. *Man of Aran* documents the life of the poverty-stricken islanders and the spectacular landscape. However, as George Stoney remarks, the film is not so much a documentary as a 'visual poem' (1979). As noted above, Pettitt describes Flaherty as a 'self-styled



cinematic poet' who 'unconsciously deployed a colonial discourse in representing native Irish people, undifferentiated from Inuit and Polynesians' (2000: 80).

Flaherty represents the Aran Islanders by focusing on one family – wife, husband, and son – as emblematic of the local population who live under primeval conditions. The film shows the interior of one specific cottage. The shabbiness accentuates a sense of romantic primitivism; the wife, anxiously looking out at the sea, offers dramatic range. This location introduces the next important element and Flaherty's major preoccupation in all his films: the sea and the natural elements. The work 'explores' the lives of the Aran Islanders in general, thereby targeting a 'general public', as Robert Flaherty's wife indicated in an interview with Robert Gardner (Gardner 1957). The exploration delved into the traditional way of life on the Aran Islands: the roles of women and men, and the extreme bravery and strength of the men who conquer their fear of the sea.

In contrast to *Nanook*, Flaherty uses sound technology in *Man of Aran*. However, the characters hardly speak, and when they do the meaning is indiscernible. Anything said in the film is therefore of limited relevance because it conveys its narrative visually. This is one of the flaws that Pettitt notes: 'the overheard speech is poorly synched' (2000: 79). Flaherty did make a short film entirely in the Irish language during the period of the feature film, using some of the characters involved in *Man of Aran*. This film is entitled *Oidhche Sheanchais* and was thought to be lost, but it was later rediscovered at Harvard in 2012.<sup>11</sup> Flaherty intended to reach an international, Western audience with *Man of Aran* and a local Irish-speaking audience with *Oidhche Sheanchais*.

Like *Nanook*, *Man of Aran* ends on a happy note, and the public may rest easy that the husband/father returns safe and sound though the boat is smashed to pieces. Thus, alongside tradition, poverty and the forces of nature, courage, and survival feature as vital elements within the two films. Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno's comment that 'the culture industry cheats its consumers' (2002: 53), also applies to Flaherty's interpretation of his films. This concerns the question of authenticity and the degree to which a subjective approach may be introduced by the director. Flaherty's manner of 'cheating' disregards realistic portrayal because it is simply not interesting enough. The two films strive for realistic representation, but the culture industry simultaneously requires a marketable film which must have a clear storyline to which international audiences can relate. This perception coincides with Barthes' idea of a modern myth; Flaherty also adapts this approach in his work because it 'throws a clear

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<sup>11</sup> *New Hibernia Review* (Ó h-Íde, 2014) and *Folklore* (Hillers, McKenna, Sumner, 2015) offer further information on the particulars of *Oidhche Sheanchais*.

light on the current myth of exoticism', which is also 'euphoric, everything in it is easy, innocent' (Barthes, 2009: 109). The film is a 'visual poem' as Stoney claims, focusing on a romantic visual story of adventure and drama without relevance of history, where the public is presented with a 'romantic essence of the fisherman' and 'exposed to the perils of the sea' (Barthes, 2009: 111).

There is a decisive difference between Flaherty's poetic visions in *Man of Aran* and Synge's perception of the Aran islanders. Synge delves deeper than Flaherty in *The Aran Islands*; his play, *Riders to the Sea*, probes the world of the islanders from the inside, out of which he creates an authentic universal myth of 'the Ireland of the mind' (Robinson, 1992: 239). Synge lays a strong emphasis on features that are absent in Flaherty's film: traditions of storytelling, superstition, fairylore, miracles, mysteries, and the distinctive rhythms of the Irish language. In both works, Synge concentrates on the current time and the people themselves. Their connection with the sea, drowning and death, is one of acceptance, since human beings are helpless in the face of death, coming, as it does, to everyone. In the final moments of *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya, the symbolic mother figure, heaves a sigh of relief with the thought that death brings everything to an end: '[i]t's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain' and '[n]o man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied' (Synge, 1993: 70, 71). There is no defiance, but, rather, resignation. Within this Aran Islands play, Synge accentuates a universal Irish myth using symbolism, combined with complex layers of rhythmical speech that intricately infuse and pervade *Riders to the Sea*. Synge's and Flaherty's interpretations differ because they approach the same theme from a different perspective and background. There is no doubt that they both create important works of art, but their target audiences are very different, and the meaning of their universal ideas of Irishness diverge as a result.

## Conclusion

The relation of locality to universality is a broad theme that the present article endeavours to narrow through its consideration of Flaherty's two films, *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934). I have examined two distinctly ancient localities, the Canadian North – including the Arctic region – and the Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland. Through these distinctive localities that serve as the ancient home and land of the Inuit and the Aran Islanders, Flaherty's films attempt to portray the 'Eskimo' and the Aran Islanders as unique peoples, by offering glimpses of their traditional lives and their means of survival. Both films were an international success at the time of their release, though Flaherty received substantial criticism for being an 'explorer' rather than an 'artist' and for being insufficiently familiar with the cinematography of his time (Barsam, 1988: 2).

The documentaries approach their theme from a dual angle of spectacular landscape scenery and the image of ‘the fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo’ (Flaherty, 1922), or the poverty stricken but courageous Aran Islander. Flaherty presents the stereotype with pre-staged settings, undermining the tenability of the films as realistic depictions of ‘how life is’ (Pettitt, 2000: 72). Flaherty’s overt aim is not historical and cultural authenticity. He aspires, instead, to easily understandable, romantic adventure stories that are spiced with drama and humour; characteristics that ensure the marketability of the films to international audiences. Contemporary reflections of the two films – in *How the Myth was Made* (1979), *Nanook Revisited* (1990) and Martin McDonagh’s play, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) – show that members of the Inuit and Aran Islands communities considered Flaherty’s purportedly authentic portrayal of life in the Canadian North and on the Aran Islands comical and absurd.

Flaherty’s two films portray the relationship between humankind and nature as a reflection on a universal human condition. They present humans living under primeval conditions. Berkhofer’s statement highlights that the ‘cult of the Noble Savage’ as a feature of ‘rational man’ points to a satirical usage of the North American Indian (1979: 75). This notion confirms Barsam’s view that Flaherty’s films illustrate how ‘happiness exists when man is free and lives simply and harmoniously with nature’ (Barsam, 1988: 7). This paradisaical existence, however, is not constant but undergoes development with the passing of time. By the late 19th and early 20th century, technical advancement in photography and film opened innovative explorations. These newly established, mechanical merits urge a movement toward universalization which is expanded in Walter Benjamin’s well-known critical essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1935). The article reflects upon the critical changes that the advancement of photography and film have had on the masses and how the perception of art has altered. According to Benjamin, mechanical development has brought about a different appreciation of art. He reflects upon the aura that a work of art inherently contained in the previous centuries and argues that a different means of expression is offered by the film. The changes that occur within the sphere of photography and the film industry is also examined in Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception’ (1944). The work stresses that universalization overrules any form of local authenticity, and consequently ‘the culture industry cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises’ (2002: 53). The ‘cheating’ that Horkheimer and Adorno refer to should not be understood literally; this allows the producer to incorporate his or her own subjective interpretation in the case of the film. This is Flaherty’s approach. He consciously accommodates scenes in his works to suit the requirements of the film. The portrayal of authentic locality, as Pettitt points out expands Benjamin’s view emphasizing that it is ‘not only [...] impossible for reality to

be equipment-free, in some cases the real turns out to be a simulacrum' (2000: 77). Flaherty's purpose is to create a sense of authenticity by focusing 'on the isolation, austerity and inhospitable aspects of the natural environment' (Pettitt, 2000: 80).

In *Nanook*, the myth of the Canadian North is portrayed through the 'Eskimo' stereotype, not the Inuit; *Man of Aran* offers a prefabricated vision of Irishness. Both films are an 'ethnographic expedition' (Barthes, 2009: 109) without 'any identification by history', and hence a 'pure reflection of the West' (2009: 111). The films may be regarded as artistic perceptions from our modern time, which project the poetic visions of their maker. The films are a romantic visual story of adventure and drama, without historical accuracy, highlighting instead the 'romantic essence of the fisherman' and being 'exposed to the perils of the sea' (Barthes, 2009: 111). What is missing in both films are the aspects that J. M. Synge specifically concentrates on in *The Aran Islands* and *Riders to the Sea*: oral traditions of storytelling, superstition, fairylore, miracles, mysteries, pagan beliefs, songs, and the distinctive rhythms of the Irish and the Inuit languages. Nevertheless, the films are works of art, whatever flaws they may contain. They project visions of ancient cultures, regardless of the fact that Flaherty made 'the romance seem real' (Pettitt, 2000: 80).

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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