

# WHAT'S UP, DOCS?

Over the five days of the annual Flaherty Seminar, a meeting to discuss realism in the documentary, things can get rough

By Matthew Barrington

When I was getting ready to leave London for the Flaherty Seminar, the one thing I was told more than any other was: 'Prepare for a fight.' The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar was established by Frances Hubbard Flaherty in 1955, in memory of her late husband, the director of seminal documentaries such as *Man of Aran* (1934) and *Louisiana Story* (1948). Its purpose is to provide an isolated space to discuss, reinterpret and rethink concepts of realism emerging from the documentary. But in recent years, the Flaherty Seminar has become synonymous with conflict among attendees.

Attending the Flaherty Seminar for the first time, I was forced to adjust quickly to the intense schedule, which squeezes into just five and a half days 17 screenings – three a day – each followed by a 90-minute group discussion with the filmmaker and a moderator. The seminar has come to be defined by a series of traditions – most importantly, Frances Flaherty's preference for an absence of preconceptions means that no one is told what will be screened; the audience only finds out what they will watch as they walk into the cinema, the lights fade and the film starts.

The post-screening discussions are intended to be democratic spaces for conversation to develop between practitioners, researchers and critics, but as the sessions went on I felt much of the interaction was fractured and stilted, with cyclical dialogue laced with misunderstanding and suspicion.

This atmosphere of distrust arises partly from the seminar's reputation, partly from the divisive nature of some of the issues being debated. As other first-timers arrived and began to socialise, in the air was the fall-out from the 2017 edition, when Dominic Gagnon's *Of the North* (2015) – a compilation of YouTube clips posted by or featuring Inuit people – screened to an audience angry at the filmmaker for misrepresenting Inuit communities. This debate had a sharp relevance for the seminar, which remains locked into a complex struggle over the legacy of Robert Flaherty and his most famous work, *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film from which the seminar takes its logo. Underlying all of this is the history of the land in upstate New York now occupied by Colgate University, where the seminar takes place – land originally inhabited by Native American tribes.

For this year's 64th edition, which ran from 16-22 June, the artist-filmmaker Kevin Jerome Everson and the curator Greg de Cuir Jr had chosen a bold and varied programme, including lots of experimental works, under the title 'The Necessary Image'. Ten artists were featured: Ephraim Asili, John Torres, Christopher Harris, Karimah Ashadu, Kitso Lynn Lelliott, Zelimir Zilnik, Sky Hopinka, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Cauleen Smith and Beatriz Santiago Muñoz. Instead of feature-length films, each session




Image conscious: Frances and Robert Flaherty in 1948, with Richard Leacock, centre

comprised several shorts, allowing works to be placed in dialogue with one another. The downside of this formally diverse selection was that pieces originally designed as looped and/or multi-screen installations were shown just once in a single-screen cinema, preventing the mobile spectatorship some of them seemed to demand.

For a first-time attendee at the Flaherty, it is easy to come to the conclusion that certain debates must crop up almost every year. Many saw the idea of the 'necessary image' in ethical terms, leading to a series of recurring debates about how filmmakers should approach marginal subjects. These questions, though important, seem more relevant to ethnographic and anthropological debate, while the Flaherty Seminar is essentially concerned with cinema. Too often discussion focused on content over form, ignoring the ways that filmmakers and artists engaged with the language of cinema.

One particular debate emerged from a screening of films by the British-Nigerian artist

Karimah Ashadu, whose work focuses on labour in Nigeria. Some attendees questioned her relationship to her subjects, particularly when she said she had no interest in showing her work to the Nigerian workers who feature in it, and that they had no interest in her work. In *Makoko Sawmill* (2015), for example, the camera observes Nigerian workers processing wood, seemingly unaware or uninterested that they are being filmed. The gaze of the camera is obstructed by two blue sticks that invade the frame, creating an extra barrier between the audience and the subject and drawing attention to the camera movement. Other works by Ashadu also critique the act of looking through the use of mirrors and reflective surfaces which reveal the filmmaker's presence. Despite her work's clear critical engagement with the politics of looking, the way the artist spoke about her subjects provoked angry reactions amongst attendees.

This type of disagreement, based on this year's Flaherty having one foot in discourses of documentary and one in more experimental aesthetics, is surely bound to recur. As the Flaherty seems to be moving in more experimental directions, it will need to develop more flexible spaces for discussion, in order to reflect and accommodate the diverse backgrounds and interests of the attendees. 

*The seminar remains locked into a complex struggle over the legacy of Robert Flaherty and 'Nanook of the North'*