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Evolution of Documentary Film

Nanook of the North Critique

Robert Flaherty’s classic silent documentary Nanook of the North begins with the preface of the film. In the preface Flaherty explains that he had went north for a year to follow and document the life of an Inuit named Nanook and his family. The film shows the life of Nanook in the arctic circle, and what was once the typical lifestyle of Eskimos. Throughout the action in the film, there would frequently be intertitles. The mood of the music seemed to fit the environment of the arctic. Nanook was shown hunting with spears, harpoons, and even killing one seal with his own teeth. The film released in 1922, and it is clear that the technology did not align to that time period. In the 1920’s, there was already the invention of rifles and other guns. This is most likely what the Eskimos used during the 1920’s. Also, some scenes in the film appeared to be staged, such as the scene of the family getting out of the canoe. It is unlikely that the entire family had fit in the one canoe. The scene of the walrus hunt seemed to be staged as well.

Overall, I thought that the theme of the film was interesting. It showed the struggle to survive in the extreme temperatures and environment of the arctic. This is especially shown at the end of the film, where there is a large storm. Throughout the film there were long takes, extreme long shots, medium shots, and close ups. The camera angle was at eye level throughout the whole documentary, which had created a sense of realism. I think it is interesting Flaherty chose to want to make a documentary on the Inuit people. Although the film did have some inaccuracies, I found the lifestyle of the family to be interesting.