



by Jo-Anne Birnie-Danzker  
and Taqralik Partridge

Robert J. Flaherty's influential 1922 film *Nanook of the North* has been the subject of critique for its staged representations and disempowerment of the Inuit who worked on it. Two earlier Flaherty films and series of photographs shot in Nunavut also raise questions about Flaherty's relationships with and representations of local Inuit—though much of the footage was damaged. In this experimental text, Inuk writer and curator Taqralik Partridge and historian and curator Jo-Anne Birnie-Danzker collaborate to reflect on photographs from the creation of Flaherty's first film. In the process they tell the stories of the Qikiqtaalungmiut who brought the project to life, bridging historical documentation and living memory.



Robert J. Flaherty's first narrative film on the life of an Inuit family and their community, *Qikiqtaaluk ᓄᐅᑦᕗᑦ Baffin Island*, was shot between October 1, 1913, and August 23, 1914, during a prospecting expedition to the Amadjuak region of the Qikiqtaaluk in Nunavut.<sup>1</sup> More than 14,000 feet of silent film and numerous photographs were produced on location by Flaherty and Inuit cultural and technical teams.

Local Inuit actors played lead and supporting roles in the film but were often identified by Flaherty under a different name, sometimes the name of the character they portrayed. As such, names and oral histories provided by Inuit Elders and Knowledge Keepers have been adopted throughout this text, replacing inconsistent and incorrect identifications provided by Flaherty in his *Qikiqtaaluk* diary and subsequent publications.

Flaherty returned to the North in 1915 to take footage for his second film on the islands of Sanikiluaq, NU. Unfortunately the footage from both that film and the Qikiqtaaluk project were damaged in a fire while Flaherty was editing them in the South. In 1920 Flaherty secured funding from the French fur trading company Revillon Frères to produce his third film, *Nanook of the North* (1922), in Inukjuak, Nunavik, QC. Their contract stipulated that footage from both of his previous films would remain in the possession

of Revillon Frères until Flaherty left for Nunavik, and could not be used in the future without their written permission.<sup>2</sup>

The film footage subsequently disappeared and few of the vintage photographs taken by Flaherty in Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut survived. Flaherty's fragile glass plates and unstable nitrate negatives remained in the care of his estate and the Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center until 1979<sup>3</sup> when the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) commissioned an exhibition of vintage and modern photographs from the original plates and negatives, as well as a companion exhibition celebrating Inuit filmmaking and satellite broadcasting. Both exhibitions, *Robert Flaherty. Photographer / Filmmaker. The Inuit: 1910-1922* and *INUIT/T.V.*, were curated by Birnie-Danzker and spanned from 1979 to 1981.<sup>4</sup>

The complex task of identifying the Inuit who were the subjects of Flaherty's photographs began in the 1970s with renowned Inuk photographer and historian Peter Pitseolak (1902–1973) who met Flaherty as a child, oral historian Dorothy Harley Eber, CM and curator and historian Birnie-Danzker.

This visual essay is dedicated to the Inuit of Qikiqtaaluk who shared Inuit Ilitqusia, the Inuit Way of Knowing, with Flaherty.

**TAQRALIK PARTRIDGE:**

<sup>1</sup> The film was entitled *Baffin Island* or *Baffin-Landers* in 1915. In this visual essay, the title has been changed to *Qikiqtaaluk ᑭᐱᓕᓂᓄᓇᓂᓄᓇ Baffin Island* in recognition of the original and reclaimed name of the land where the film was made and to acknowledge the Qikiqtaalungmiut who co-produced and realized the film.

<sup>2</sup> Jo-Anne Birnie-Danzker, *Robert Flaherty. Photographer / Filmmaker. The Inuit: 1910-1922*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1979), 56. A digital copy can be found at Internet Archive.

<sup>3</sup> At the request of the Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center, Robert J. Flaherty's glass plates and nitrate negatives been loaned to Library and Archives Canada for safe storage since 1979.

<sup>4</sup> A 1980–81 repatriation exhibition, also entitled *Robert Flaherty: Photographer / Filmmaker. The Inuit: 1910-1922*, toured in Nunavik and Newfoundland and Labrador. It included the same photographs from the original exhibition and displayed Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* alongside them.

*INUIT.TV.* was organized in collaboration with Tagak Curley, CM, ONu, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), Nunatsiakmiut Film Society, Pond Inlet Community T.V. Society, and the Inukshuk Project of ITK. It consisted of six television programs in Inuktitut produced by Inuit filmmakers, such as those from Nunatsiakmiut Film Society produced by Mosesie Kiponik, David Poisey and Joanasi Salomonie (1938–1998).



Simeonie Quppapik identified the subject of this portrait as Nungusuituq (1890–1950), who was the son of Tooeemee (Joe) and Lao, and a cousin of Peter Pitseolak.<sup>5</sup> Flaherty stated in his diary that Nungusuituq was married to Luliakame.<sup>6</sup>

Nungusuituq provided invaluable cultural and technical knowledge during the production of *Qikiqtalik* ᑭᐱᓕᔨ<sup>6</sup> *Baffin Island* and possibly portrayed the lead role of Anunglung in the film.<sup>7</sup> Pitseolak recalled that Nungusuituq was “the one [Flaherty] took pictures of. . . [Nungusuituq] was the first one to draw; the picture makers made him draw. . . I remember he told me it was tiring to make drawings.”<sup>8</sup> Decades later Krista Ulujuk Zawadski and Jo Poortenaar described Nungusuituq’s drawings and subsequent prints as “a pivotal and significant, yet often overlooked, mark on the vast landscape of Inuit art history.”<sup>9</sup>

Flaherty described Nungusuituq as “easily first in either sledge driving or hunting amongst the motion picture retainers of the post, and more than that he was the [Inuk] artist par excellence at either drawing or carving in ivory.”<sup>10</sup> One of Nungusuituq’s drawings, *Innuitt Pektockseauk (Esquimaux Playing a Game)* (c. 1913–14), inspired a scene in the film.<sup>11</sup>

The premiere screening of *Qikiqtaaluk ᑭᓱᐅᐅᐅᐅ*<sup>12</sup> *Baffin Island* in March 1915 was accompanied by an exhibition of Flaherty's collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, which included several of Nungusuituq's drawings.<sup>12</sup> In 1930 several of his pencil drawings were displayed at an exhibition of *Eskimo Arts and Crafts* organized by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (now La Guilde) at the McCord National Museum (now the McCord Stewart Museum) in Montreal, QC. When Nungusuituq's drawings were again shown in the 1979 Flaherty exhibition organized by the VAG, the *New York Times* described them as "black-and-white silhouettes in two or three tones—dark figures against a white ground with landscape features . . . indicated only when essential to the idea of the picture . . . they are vivid and intensely realistic portrayals of important events of [Inuit] life . . . they nearly steal the show from [Flaherty's] photographs."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Birnie-Danzker, 1979, 86; Peter Pitseolak and Dorothy Harley Eber, *People from our side: An Inuit record of Seekooseelak – the land of the people of Cape Dorset, Baffin Island*, trans. Ann Hanson (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1975), 56.

<sup>6</sup> "Robert J. Flaherty Diary," March 1, 1914, Robert Joseph Flaherty papers, 1884–1970. Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Harley Eber, "On Koodjuk's Trail," *Natural History*, vol. 88, no. 1, January 1979, 83.

<sup>8</sup> Pitseolak and Eber, 1975, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Krista Ulujuk Zawadski and Jo Poortenaar, "Indelible Ink: The Enduring Images of Nungusuituq," *Inuit Art Quarterly*, September 15, 2019, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Birnie-Danzker, 1979, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Birnie-Danzker, 1979, 54.

12 "Strange Eskimo Tribe Wore Eiderdown Valuable Mementoes of Mr. Flaherty's Expedition Collected in Ontario Museum," *The Globe*; Mar 29, 1915; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Globe and Mail*. Reproduced in Birnie-Danzker 1979, 63, with incorrect, handwritten date.

<sup>13</sup> Gene Thornton, "Flaherty's View of Eskimo Life," *New York Times*, May 4, 1980.



OPPOSITE  
*Camera Study of  
Nungusuituq*  
1913–1914  
Digital photograph  
COURTESY ROBERT J. FLAHERTY  
DIGITAL ARCHIVE FONDS /  
36, N176

**TAQRALIK PARTRIDGE:**

It's a cultural thing, an Inuit learning system, to be ready to take on new technologies. You take to things quickly because you must.













Altogether the people living in [Tujjaat] whom my family tried to come and get were 46. They were that many and they had an ordinary Eskimo sealskin boat. [Then the ship *Active* arrived, which] took us back to our homeland. . . . Altogether with the people from [Tujjaat] and all of us, we were 57 persons. There were that many of us taken to Tikerak [near Kinngait] on

In 2018 Sandra Dyck, Heather Igloliorte and Christine Lalonde curated a retrospective exhibition titled *Alootook Ipellie: Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border*,<sup>35</sup> which included this photograph of Inutsiaq adjacent to an untitled ink drawing (circa 1987) by Ipellie appropriating, transforming and reclaiming Flaherty's image of his grandfather. In contrast to Flaherty's camera study, Ipellie's drawing situates Inutsiaq, a revered Knowledge Keeper and Elder, firmly within his community, surrounded by children.

**TAQRALIK PARTRIDGE:**

Qikiqtaaluk ᑭᓱᐅᔪᕈᒃ Baffin Island 1913-14