

ONWARD: The Flaherty, Fifty Years in the Cause of Independent Cinema
by Patricia R. Zimmermann (2005)

"I remembered that he had always said that the motion picture was still an unknown continent, that no one had yet scratched the surface of its potentialities," recalled Frances Flaherty. She was referring to her husband and collaborator, documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty. To continue his filmmaking vision of exploration and to create an incubation area for new filmmakers and new ideas about cinema as an independent art, Frances inaugurated the Robert Flaherty Seminars in 1955.

For over half a century, the 100-person, week-long seminars screening various media with the makers in attendance have continued each summer. The Flaherty, as it is often nicknamed, is among the oldest organizations in the world to continuously support independent media work that displays heart, guts, and vision. The Flaherty/International Film Seminars remains unique in the media arts world. For some it is a life-changing, exhilarating experience. For others, it is painful and exasperating. For some, it is too theoretical. For others, not theoretical enough.

The Flaherty eschews the market sensibility of commercially-oriented film festivals, the formal academism of a university film school, the instrumentality of hands-on production training, the anonymity of a public screening, and the lack of discussion in a typical art cinema. At its best, it is a convergence of ideas, people, works, film movements, and differences that ignites new thinking and new ways of seeing. At its worst, it showcases only new work and devastates filmmakers. Many filmmakers consider an invitation to screen among the greatest honors of their careers. Some dread going. Some won't go at all.

Programmers consider it one of the most challenging venues to curate: it requires not simply premiering hot new films, but conceptualizing a meta-critical synthesis of films, audiences, experiences, insights, interrogations, provocations, and discussions. A good Flaherty Seminar requires over a year of intensive work to conceptualize, research, and then edit together an intellectual and artistic experience that jolts spectators out of their old intellectual habits into new insights. Programmers excavate significant but previously overlooked work, dig up new pieces, figure out what is percolating in media culture, survey a range of genres and media interfaces, study new theoretical and historical models, figure out makers who have not only something to show but something to say, and mix up emerging, mid-career, and established artists. Good programmers end up donning many hats: wizard of oz, shaman, exorcist, intellectual masseuse, remix club DJ, professor, scholar, special secret operative, and agent provocateur.

"It was retreat, think-tank, pit-stop, lucid interval, revival tent, i.e. a seminar," wrote Erik Barnouw, the eminent media historian and a central figure in the

history of the seminar. Barnouw once observed that at a good Flaherty, ideas and arguments should constantly erupt; it should, claimed Barnouw, take what is "boiling up in film culture" and give it space for meaningful discussion and lively debate. Sometimes, when films or filmmakers detonated pitched arguments, attendees called for trained facilitators. Barnouw and George Stoney balked at this idea; they argued that "without conflict, there can be no change," and advocated a more democratic position of letting ideas work themselves out, more of a Quaker meeting style than a strategic planning session. Commercial culture, they maintained, silences debate; The Flaherty liberates it and invigorates ideas. And that is a difficult, messy, uncomfortable, and disquieting experience that should never be sanitized. Each participant should, according to Barnouw, find their way out of philosophical and artistic knots their own way-but always in consort with other like-minded seminarians. If the media art world thrives on romantic individualism, The Flaherty is just the opposite; it is a sort of collective intellectual and artistic sauna that cleanses the body and the soul.

Robert Flaherty is often credited as "the father of documentary," a moniker endlessly criticized by revisionist film historians, feminists, and post-colonialists. His legacy is just about as contentious and contradictory as a good Flaherty. His landmark film, *Nanook of the North* (1922) changed the contours of cinema with its Inuit-inspired cinematography, collaborative filmmaking process, and independence from the studios. Yet it was a documentary with product tie-ins (*Nanook* ice cream bars) and a commercial release that also was hailed as art cinema in Europe by the experimental cine club movement. Flaherty also directed *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934), and *Louisiana Story* (1948), as well as some works with John Grierson-whom Frances sarcastically dubbed "a teacher and preacher" in England. Flaherty was a legendary, hard-drinking raconteur who loved to share tales of filmmaking triumphs and woes with younger makers. He mentored, for example, a young Ricky Leacock, who shot *Louisiana Story*.

Frances, the more intellectual and well-read of the duo, transformed Flaherty's legacy of exploration, conviviality, argument, and careful filmmaking into the Robert Flaherty Foundation, and, later, the Robert Flaherty Seminar after he died in 1951. Contrary to popular misconceptions, Flaherty himself never attended a seminar, nor did he start it. In the years following Robert's death, many international film festivals and universities invited Frances to screen Flaherty's films and to illuminate his ideas about filmmaking. Frances often elaborated that the "Flaherty Way" consisted of allowing one's open perception of the world to shape a film, rather than a preconceived script imposed on the material like in the Hollywood studio system's production-line model. She wrote, "the camera and material impose themselves on you...you will find yourself little by little gaining vision."

At the Sixth International Edinburgh Festival in 1952, she listened to Sir Compton MacKenzie expound that one was either "born with a visual sense or not."

Frances reacted extremely negatively to this claim; she believed "seeing" could be learned, the way Robert learned to compose from collecting Inuit art and watching the Arctic landscape through different eyes. In response, she formed the Robert Flaherty Foundation in 1952 "whose prime purpose is to help new talent to explore further and further into the possibilities of a medium so immense and unknown." It also served to perpetuate Robert's name and filmmaking spirit. Foundation members included documentary filmmaking legends like John Grierson, Paul Rotha, Basil Wright, and Henri Storck, as well as organizations like the Cinémathèque Française, Comité du Film Ethnographie, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In August 1955, at Black Mountain Farm, the Flaherty home in Dummerston, Vermont where Robert is buried, the first Flaherty Seminar commenced. Museum of Modern Art Film Library director Richard Griffith opened the seminar by identifying the gathering of eight students as "one of inquiry and discussion and controversy." It was designed for immersion and complete study of Flaherty films, ideas, and techniques. Ricky Leacock discussed his cinematography on *Louisiana Story*. Helen Van Dongen explained her editing process on *The Land*. Robert's brother David Flaherty and Frances described the shooting and editing process of *Nanook*, *Moana*, and *Man of Aran*. Robert Fine described Virgil Thomson's scoring and the history of sound recording. Jack Churchill showed his scientific film, *Seifriz on Protoplasm*, Arnold Eagle showed *The Pirogue Maker*, and George Stoney *All My Babies*. Rudolf Serkin provided a classical piano concert one evening, and another evening included ballads and guitar by Richard Dyer Bennet. According to Erik Barnouw, the term "filmmaker" was first tossed around at the seminars in the 1950s as a way to denote work that was produced without the hierarchies and bureaucracies of commercial productions.

During the 1950s, few film schools existed beyond UCLA, USC, and NYU. Film theory, the province of European intellectuals, and film practice, the mysterious domain of industry professionals, were separated. In the context of cold war isolationism, the critical intellectualism and internationalism of the seminar created an oasis for serious thinking about cinema. In the context of the rise of art cinemas, film societies, and 16mm film after World War II, The Flaherty served as a vital meeting ground. The early seminars brought together an eclectic mix of people involved in cinema, ranging from filmmakers, humanist scholars (like sociologist David Reisman), television producers, librarians, museum curators, science and educational filmmakers, writers, and regional film society programmers.

This unruly, volatile mix of professions and different professional attitudes convened for the purpose of meaningful discussion distinguishes the seminar. The seminars were designed to immerse young filmmakers in an intensive environment in order to explore cinema in all of its dimensions-art, theory, politics, philosophy, technique. Films were screened and then dissected with the filmmaker present. These early tactics to curate the audience as well as the films

has continually galvanized intense, boundary-crossing discussions. Although it seems focused on films, the seminar has always been equally about the participants' ideas and responses to the films. The multi-generational structure of the seminar, with its dedication to passing the torch to a committed, exploratory, brave, and independent cinema community, has continued for five decades.

Despite the persistent mythologies that The Flaherty proselytized exclusively for realist or poetic documentary, the historical record evidences a mix of genres and forms right back to the beginning. For example, Richard Griffith showed Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico* footage. Hans Richter screened his experimental films. Fred Zinneman, a Hollywood director, showed documentary work. Satyajit Ray's first US-screening of *Pather Panchali* and rough cut of *Aparajito* was at a Flaherty Seminar. The Puerto Rican community education film unit showed work. Shirley Clarke screened *A Moment in Love*. Jean Roach brought his early ethnographic films shot in Africa. Early seminars-and nearly every subsequent one to follow-disregarded genres and institutional borders, mixing together documentaries, experimental work, science, educational, and training films, Canadian animation, British Free cinema, French cinema verité, and features. Scholars like Barnouw and Reisman delivered lectures on issues facing independent cinema. Seminars were held in Missouri, California, Minnesota, and Puerto Rico. As an article in a 1957 *St. Louis Post Dispatch* observed, "none of the films screened at the seminar could be described as close imitations of Flaherty."

By 1960, in the hopes of securing non-profit status to help raise funds to support younger filmmakers to attend the seminar, International Film Seminars was created as an administrative organization. Erik Barnouw, head of the Center for Mass Communication at Columbia University, served as President until 1968. Board members in this second era read like an all-star line up of the major heroes in the history of independent cinema in the 1960s: Willard Van Dyke, Shirley Clark, George Stoney, Amos Vogel, Cecile Starr, Ricky Leacock, Albert Maysles, Colin Young, Madeline Anderson, Sol Worth, and Fred Zinneman.

Two central principles developed by Frances Flaherty form the epistemological foundation of the seminar: exploration and non-preconception. Robert Flaherty once wrote that "all art is a kind of exploring. To discover and reveal is the way every artist sets about his business." Frances translated Robert's adventurous life exploring and living among the Inuit, Samoans, Irish, British workers, and Cajuns (and often, depending on intellectual fashion and era, viewed as excessively romanticized, colonialist, imperialist, racist, sexist, collaborative, or artistic) into an intellectual quest to discover, with a group, how cinema produced meaning, changed perception, and entered the world.

Frances organized the seminar's screenings to maximize engagement with cinematic form and construction. Her shot-by-shot analysis of *Nanook*, for example, operated as what film theorists consider a close textual reading.

Instead of looking at content (who and what) like many American film critics in the 50s and 60s, Frances focused on the how and why of cinema to stimulate acquisition of visual perception. The seminar fleshed out ideas Frances had developed in her lectures and her 1952 Saturday Review of Literature article called "The Flaherty Way." She wrote, "I wish I could convey the deep excitement of making pictures this way. The seemingly endless bafflement. And then, the breaking of the light. One could never tell when or how or even why. The intuitive way, taking quite a lot of faith to follow considerable inner conviction. The necessary faculty can be deliberately sought and acquired, acquired like anything else, through practice."

Frances also aggressively advocated for what she termed "non-preconception," a concept Robert himself never fully articulated or theorized. Contrary to the credits and most film histories, Frances had collaborated as an equal with Robert on nearly every film. A trained classical musician, she believed seeing could be learned and was not innate. It was a deeply democratic notion of artistic production. She watched Robert abandon scripts and ideas and instead open himself-and his camera-to people, terrains, and cultures around him.

Preparing for a lecture on his method for Yale University, Bryn Mawr-educated Frances read Zen, Teilhard de Chardin, haiku, and philosophy to develop her observations into a model. Frances' concept of non-preconception combined ideas from the East and the West. It merged the Zen Buddhist notion of emptying the mind to be open to seeing and experience with Teilhard de Chardin's ideas about the "participation mystique," losing oneself in the process of interaction with materials, people and spirit to learn how to think and see in new ways. In her 1960 book, *Odyssey of a Filmmaker: Robert Flaherty's Story*, she explained, "If you preconceive you are lost. Off to a false start before you begin. What you have to do is to let go. Let go every thought of your own. Wipe your mind clean. Fresh. Innocent. Newborn. Sensitive as unexposed film. To take up the impressions around you. And let what will, come in. This is the pregnant void. The fertile state of no mind. This is Non-Preconception. The beginning of discovery." She argued filmmakers-and audiences-needed to "surrender to the material" and "let go" to keep themselves open to new ideas.

These two concepts-exploration and non-preconception-eventually concretized as programming traditions and tactics that endured through five decades with distinctly different inflections. As Barbara Van Dyke, executive director of the seminars from 1964-1982, observed, films for the seminar were selected "like a bouquet" with a mix of genres, styles, forms, countries, moods, textures, and paces, as well as emerging and established filmmakers to generate new ideas. Influenced by Eisensteinian dialectical montage where collisions between materials create new ideas, the juxtaposition of works was-and is-as important as the films themselves. Richard Herskowitz, who has programmed three seminars, contends that programmers meticulously sequence the films as "one big movie," an argument that opens up other arguments as a metacommunication on the

ontology and epistemology of cinema. According to long-time attendee and former trustee Jack Churchill, other programmers function more like DJs, changing films to respond to issues unfolding-or raging-in discussions.

The tenet of "non-preconception" manifested itself as both a teaching tool and a program design. On the level of programming, it propelled one of the most controversial and unusual strategies of the seminar: programs and films are not announced in advance. Each screening is a surprise. This strategy has endured across half a century. It distinguishes The Flaherty Seminar from the rigid syllabi of university film studies courses or the heavily-marketed advance program of a film festival. Moderators and filmmakers open up discussions without a topic or a stated agenda, inviting audience questions and responses, drawing connections with other discussions or films. While infuriating to some attendees, this tactic creates space to see a film in an intensive way without a prepackaged interpretation or expectation.

The history of The Flaherty Seminar is impossible to distill or even codify because it is so multiple, vast, meandering, and mutable. It's an organization that adheres to traditions and legacies yet also embraces virtually every new development in independent media arts. In this way, The Flaherty Seminar is perhaps less of a place to discover new talent-although it does indeed launch careers-as it is a place where emerging movements and sea changes in the media arts field are scrutinized, debated, theorized, and worked out. It's an experience that places equal emphasis on the films screened and the participants' discussions. The Flaherty is distinguished more by its heteroglossia, heterogeneity, and volatility than by any strategic plan or mission. If anything, it's the ultimate open text of Roland Barthes, mixed with the collaborative compound knowledge of David MacDougall, and the contrapuntal thinking of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak.

Film society programmers and educational film distributors met there in the 1950s as the non-theatrical market was developing. Jean Rouch (France), Robert Drew (US), and Michel Brault (Canada) met there in the late 1950s and realized that an international movement that used lightweight film technology to capture life-cinema verité and direct cinema-was erupting. In 1971, feminist filmmakers, recovering from attacks from Willard Van Dyke, organized New Day Films, a feminist film distribution collective. In the 1970s, the seminar was among the first organizations to show work from filmmaking collectives like Newsreel outside of activist political organizations. Much in advance of many arts organizations, the seminar also screened video art and reel-to-reel community work in the 1970s, along with live performances by Shirley Clarke.

From 1971 to 1981, The Flaherty organized the Arden House Seminars where independent producers met to screen work and argue with public TV program managers and executives, a response to President Nixon's veto for appropriations for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the perceived

conservative programming of public television. In 1982, Erik Barnouw, the programmer, infiltrated video into this much-heralded film event. In 1975, Barbara Van Dyke, Madeline Anderson, and Pearl Bowser programmed one of the first third world cinema seminars in the United States, and later, in 1989, Bowser programmed a breakthrough seminar on African diaspora cinema. In 1990, The Flaherty sponsored a summit in Riga Latvia with Glasnost documentary filmmakers. In 1991, it featured Middle Eastern and Mahgreb filmmakers. In 1992, with Margarita De la Vega-Hurtado as programmer, it was Latin American feminist cinema. Later in the decade, it organized a summit in Israel with Middle Eastern makers. And in 1998 and 2001, at Ithaca College and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, it ran Flaherty mini-seminars exploring digital media.

The Flaherty Seminar presents a history of layers, detours, and juxtapositions rather than linear progression. It has always defied borders between genres, genders, races, classes, sexualities, forms, interfaces, institutions, and nations in a ribald refusal of predictability, embracing instead the cacophony which is international independent cinema. It's also a history whose roster of featured master filmmakers, across virtually every genre from all over the globe, provides a dazzling portrait gallery testifying to the international, diverse independent cinema movement: Satyajit Ray (India), Aeajay Kardar (Pakistan), Amilcar Tirado (Puerto Rico), Norman McLaren (Canada), John Marshall (US), Chris Marker (France), Joris Ivens (The Netherlands), Johann Van Der Keuken (The Netherlands), Susumu Hani (Japan), Peter Watkins (England), William Greaves (US) George Kuchar (US) Mani Kaul (India), Ken Jacobs (US), Hollis Frampton (US), St. Clair Bourne (US), Artavazk Peleshyan (Armenia), Agnes Varda (France), Barbara Kopple (US), Victor Nunez (US), Bill Viola (US), Kidlat Tahimik (Phillipines), Victor Maseyesva (US), Philip Mallory Jones (US), Cheick Omar Sissoko (Mali), Marlon Riggs (US), Raphael Montanez Ortiz (US), and Marta Rodriquez (Colombia).

The Flaherty is an extremely unusual media arts event because it values the filmmakers and participants equally. In fact, films and discussions usually receive equal amounts of time and space, suggesting that images and ideas are always in a dialectical relationship within a community. However, like most democratic utopias, it is not without enormous combativeness when all these different constituencies crash together. To outsiders, the seminar is renowned for its notorious "filmmaker bashings." However, examination of the historical record evidences that they are not as frequent, nor as ferocious, as is commonly assumed. These fiery, contentious eruptions often pivot around films, filmmakers, or film movements that push cinematic form and politics into new territories and foreground suppressed or repressed ideas and images. In a Foucauldian historiography, these ruptures are perhaps more important than the reverential discussions, because they chart the sites of cultural conflict from which emanate historical and aesthetic change.

A look at the list of filmmakers thrown into this intellectual/emotional cuisinart also reveals a list of some of the last century's most significant and courageous cinematic visionaries. In the 1960s, Frances Flaherty attacked Bruce Connor's Report on the Kennedy assassination, and walked out of Easy Rider. 1970s feminist film was attacked for its didacticism, Trinh T. Minh Ha a decade later for poor composition. Peter Watkins' *The Journey* (1988) was assaulted for its length. Jon Alpert was assaulted for his "imperialist gaze." Ken Jacobs was stormed for sexism, John Greyson for porn, Lourdes Portillo for her lack of "mexicanness," early 1990s experimental cinema for its whiteness and lack of political consciousness, and Leah Gilliam for working in digital interfaces. And in the 1990s, many Flaherty regulars attacked the entire seminar for adhering too closely to identity politics and multiculturalism.

In the 21st century, others attacked the seminar for not more vigorously embracing activist media, digital media, installation, and multimedia performance. Although its multitudinous films, voices, and eras defy any easy historical explanation, The Flaherty does, in fact, have one enduring feature: argument. Experimental filmmakers argue it shows too much documentary. Documentarians contend an overabundance of artisanal experimental work. Digital proponents consider it is hopelessly analog. Filmmakers complain it is too intellectual. Scholars complain it is not intellectual enough. Programmers demand new cutting edge work. Recent film school graduates want to watch inaccessible classics and share a beer with the giants who made them. Board members worry about "the flow of the week." Newcomers get disoriented by so many films, so many debates, and so little sleep. Everyone seems to disagree about what The Flaherty was, is, or should be.

These debates are never resolved, always opening up ideas and films to a yet to be imagined future. In the end, contentious, pitched arguments with like-minded people about cinema, politics, and art keep The Flaherty convulsing, vibrating, and pulsing with life. Never cemented to its legacies, never inert, The Flaherty can never be defined only by its history because, as Erik Barnouw declared, it has only one goal: ONWARD.

Patricia R. Zimmermann is a professor in the Department of Cinema and Photography and coordinator of the Culture and Communications Program in the Division of Interdisciplinary and International Studies, Ithaca College. She is the author of *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Indiana), *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies* (Minnesota), and *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (California, forthcoming). She attended her first Flaherty as a graduate student in 1980, has programmed several seminars, and served on the Board of Trustees.