



Lilya Kaganovsky, Scott Mackenzie, Anna Westerstahl Stenport, eds. *Arctic Cinemas and the Documentary Ethos*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 372 pp. \$36.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04030-5.

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Review of Arctic Cinemas and the Documentary Ethos

In contemporary news media and popular culture, images of the Arctic often stand in for the worldwide effects of global warming. Films of hungry polar bears and shrinking glaciers are ubiquitous, acting as “agents provocateurs addressing climate change” (p. 2). Yet films about the Arctic have long served provocative purposes, intended to spur audiences to nationalist pride, support for colonialism, or sympathy for Indigenous peoples. Any scholar wishing to understand this broader history would be well served by reading *Arctic Cinemas and the Documentary Ethos*, a new multiauthor volume edited by Lilya Kaganovsky, Scott MacKenzie, and Anna Westerstahl Stenport. In this book, contributors from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds unpack historic and contemporary Arctic documentary films, discussing how filmmakers from the early twentieth century to the present have contended with representing the Arctic to the wider world. In doing so, they attempt to wrestle with what the editors describe as the “documentary ethos”—motivations filmmakers have to impart knowledge about the world to audiences—in the context of depicting the Far North on screen. A discussion of ethos is critically important to films about the Arctic, which have historically portrayed both the region’s envi-

ronment and its peoples as radical Others, for the purposes of convincing audiences outside the Arctic of the need for exploration, colonization, and resource extraction in the Far North. The nineteen chapters in *Arctic Cinemas* engage in a “purposeful heterogeneity” (p. 2), moving roughly chronologically from the early twentieth century to the present day, and covering a variety of national and international contexts and documentary subgenres.

As the editors note in their introductory chapter, the Arctic is “indebted to, integrated within, and inseparable from” the history of documentary film (p. 1). On the one hand this is because, as Russell Potter has written, the Arctic is largely an “unseen country”—even today it remains an area visited by relatively few outsiders. Thus, for most people globally, any conception they have of the Arctic has been shaped not by direct experience but by their consumption of media about the region, especially documentary films.[1] On the other hand, directors working in the Arctic have been foundational in shaping documentary film. Indeed, American director Robert Flaherty’s 1922 silent movie *Nanook of the North*, filmed on the Ungava Peninsula of northern Quebec, is generally considered to

be one of the first films in what came to be called the “documentary” genre, if not *the* first. *Nanook* is typically credited with cementing many of the conventions of the documentary in addition to profoundly influencing how outsiders perceive the Arctic, its environmental conditions, and its Indigenous inhabitants.

Not surprisingly, there are few chapters in *Arctic Cinemas* that do not reference *Nanook* or Flaherty in some way. For many of the authors in this volume, Flaherty is a starting point to discuss how indigenous Arctic peoples have typically been portrayed in documentaries—primitive, naive, struggling valiantly against a harsh environment yet hopelessly vulnerable to cultural incursions from further south—and how these portrayals have created lasting damage by spurring colonial assimilationist attitudes and government policies. Yet one of the strengths of *Arctic Cinemas* is the amount of space it dedicates to examining recent Indigenous-produced films. Here, Flaherty’s documentary and other similar films serve as foils to the recent work of Indigenous filmmakers, who counter harmful stereotypes about their communities by creating nuanced, contextualized depictions of contemporary native life in the Far North. For example, Faye Ginsburg’s chapter discusses the work of Canadian Inuit directors such as Zacharias Kunuk (best known for the award-winning 2001 feature film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*) and his collaborators. In addition to his filmmaking, Kunuk is part of the team that launched Isuma TV in 2008, a web platform capable of broadcasting videos through local cable or low-power channels, allowing the work of Inuit filmmakers to reach audiences across the Far North where access to high-speed internet connections is patchy at best. Judy Wolfe’s chapter profiles Inuit activist and filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril. Arnaquq-Baril’s lauded 2016 documentary *Angry Inuk*, which examines the catastrophic effects of anti-seal hunting legislation and activism on Indigenous Arctic communities, is described by Wolfe as “the best lobbying tool the Inuit have produced to represent them in

the [seal-hunting] debate” (p. 287). Flaherty’s *Nanook* may have given the world a depiction of Indigenous people hopelessly adrift in the modern world, yet Ginsburg and Wolfe’s chapters show how contemporary Inuit filmmakers not only create work that counters this depiction, but also actively use film to address the challenges of contemporary Indigenous life in the Arctic.

Another strength of this volume is variety of Arctic regions and cultural experiences discussed. The editors note in their introduction that one of their goals has been to challenge “the notion of ‘the Arctic’ as a unified singularity that elides the heterogeneous environmental, political, geographic, historical, and cultural differences that characterize the region” (p. 1). Such an intervention is needed, as a great deal of the English-language scholarship on the Arctic still focuses only on Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Several essays here cover Soviet and post-Soviet films on Siberia, such as the work of Dziga Vertov, Elena Demidova, and Ivan Golovnev (covered in essays by Lilya Kaganovsky and Oksana Sarkisova). Other chapters discuss Nordic filmmakers working in northern Scandinavia, including Swedish documentarian Arne Sucksdorff (discussed by Scott MacKenzie) and Sámi directors such as Ellen-Astri Lundby and Britt Kramvig (described in chapters by Monica Mecsei and Kramvig and Rachel Andersen Gomez). There is also breadth in the variety of documentary sub-genres that are examined in *Arctic Cinemas*, from mid-century American government films that promoted US military intervention in the Arctic (Kevin Hamilton and Ned O’Gorman, in a chapter that will be of particular interest to Cold War historians) to the 2015 “mockumentary” *Kunuk Uncovered*, a comedic short film that pokes fun at Flaherty (the first section of Faye Ginsburg’s chapter). Helpfully, each chapter concludes with both a bibliography and a filmography that explains where the movies mentioned in the chapter can be accessed.

Arctic Cinemas is a thorough exploration of the inexorable links between the circumpolar regions and historic and contemporary documentary filmmaking. It will be valuable to Arctic humanities specialists, particularly as a welcome addition to scholarship on visual depictions of the Arctic by authors such as Ann Fienup-Riordan, Richard Condon, Russell Potter, and Peter Geller, as well as Mackenzie and Westerstahl Steport's earlier co-edited volume, *Films on Ice*. It will also be of use to anyone interested in ways of studying linkages between filmmaking, environments, and local and outsider communities.

Note

[1]. Russell Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818-1875* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 3.

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