

TRACING THE LOST FILMS OF THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION IN ALASKA

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ABSTRACT

During the Fifth Thule Expedition, Knud Rasmussen obtained the services of Danish filmmaker Leo Hansen to document both his journey and the Indigenous peoples of the Canadian and Alaskan Arctic. According to a contemporaneous account, 25,000 meters of nitrate film were shipped back to Copenhagen, amounting to approximately 22 to 23 hours of exposed footage. The Alaskan material included sequences filmed in Utqiagvik (Barrow) and in Nome. This article focuses on two of the surviving films, *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* (*With Dogsled through Alaska*), which was restored by the EYE Museum in Amsterdam in 1994, and *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition* (*Footage from the Fifth Thule Expedition*), recently restored by the Danish Film Institute in Copenhagen. While we are interested in how these works function as Arctic visual anthropology and intersect with questions about salvage ethnography, we also frame them in the context of the emergence of documentary filmmaking in North America and in relation to Leo Hansen's published account of filming the expedition.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of film footage was shot on Knud Rasmussen's Fifth Thule Expedition (FTE) by the Danish director Leo Hansen (1888–1962) for an anticipated feature film covering the long sled journey in 1923–1924. The principal finished work to emerge from this effort was *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* (*With Dogsled through Alaska*, Denmark, 1927).¹ Despite its title, only the last third of the film was shot in Alaska; most of the footage came from the Northwest Territories and present-day Nunavut in Canada. Much of the original footage is now lost or languishing uncatalogued in archives.

The prospects for including film coverage of the expedition were at first uncertain, and few (if any) subsequent accounts of the FTE have addressed its significance. Rasmussen's writings on the film project were uncharacteristically sparse in comparison to the scientific treatises and popular narratives that were generated following

completion of the FTE. Yet the results were impressive; according to a contemporaneous account, "Rasmussen returned to Copenhagen in December 1924 loaded with an abundant harvest of ethnographic documents: 25,000 meters of [nitrate] films, 4,000 photos, 15,000 tools and everyday objects, [and] a collection of linguistic data and legends" (Arnaud 1925:383). From an estimate of the number of frames per second exposed (+/- 16 frames per second of 35 mm stock), the footage returned to Denmark amounted to about 22 to 23 hours. Hansen was working with Kodak stock purchased in Rochester, New York, that had to be sealed in lead containers to avoid condensation from changing temperatures (Hansen 1953:9). We take the exposed footage count to be accurate, as the other material listed above lines up with what we know of the holdings in Copenhagen at the Nationalmuseet (National Museum of Denmark, NMD), at the Arktisk Institut

(Danish Arctic Institute), and other archives, museums, and universities in Denmark and beyond. This article focuses on sequences of known surviving footage shot in Utqiagvik (Barrow) and Nome, Alaska. Along with *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska*, other extant material includes the generically titled *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition* (*Footage from the 5th Thule Expedition*) presently held at the Danish Film Institute.²

Rasmussen was canny in how he conceptualized ways that various forms of filmmaking could generate public interest in and funding for the FTE. He first pitched a project to his backers for a live action film with professional actors, tentatively called *High Seas in the Atlantic*, to help finance the “scientific footage” from the expedition (Jørgensen 2003:188). It is no surprise that Rasmussen faced difficulty in financing what was labeled a “*naturfilm*” about the dogsled journey; financiers in Copenhagen were wary of the cost, given the dismal return on investment from prior films about the polar expeditions of Scott, Shackleton, and Amundsen (Jørgensen 2003:188–191). While the live action film did not come to fruition, Rasmussen continued to argue for the significance of moving images: “I was certain that a professional photographer, by taking living pictures, would be able to make an unusual supplement to the material which it was our object to collect” (Rasmussen 1932a:11).

For Rasmussen, it appears that using a camera was a form of collecting, akin to accumulating material objects or ethnographic testimony, which would allow him to bring the results of the expedition to both domestic and international audiences. For Leo Hansen, an experienced cinematographer, the notion of “collecting” visual evidence or ethnographic types was perhaps less appealing. Indeed, Hansen wrote in the preface to a popular account of his experiences during the FTE that his aim in accompanying Rasmussen was to “shed light on events in ways that his [Rasmussen’s] great modesty would not have allowed” (Hansen 1953:5). The backstory, Hansen argued, was that the speed with which they had to undertake the journey from the Kent Peninsula (Kiillinnguyaq, Nunavut, Canada) to Nome prevented Rasmussen from collecting enough quality ethnographic material through interviews and observation, and that Rasmussen’s scientific aspirations precluded him from publishing some of the results from

the sled journey because they were, in Hansen’s term, “deficient” (*mangelfuld*) (Hansen 1953:5). To that end, the film footage must be seen as its own text or body of evidence, an alternative to documentation provided by the written material and still photography.

Hansen was engaged by Rasmussen with only a few days’ notice and left Denmark in early March 1923 with a stopover in New York City to buy photographic equipment, since it was impossible to procure in Copenhagen a “camera that could be used under Arctic conditions” in such a short time (Hansen 1953:6). From New York, he traveled to Vancouver, Canada, and then via ship to Kiillinnguyaq, where he joined Rasmussen and the two Greenlandic expert companions, Qaavigarsuaq and Arnarulunnguaq, to begin an overland traverse of approximately 2,500 km, one of the longest and most arduous film expeditions to that time.

We are interested here in how the available footage from the FTE sled journey conveyed historical and ethnographic knowledge in ways that resonated with the emergent disciplines of documentary filmmaking and visual ethnography in the 1920s. Hansen’s film was to be distributed internationally, speaking to the rise of documentary and ethnographic film as distinct forms. We therefore frame Hansen’s works in the context of contemporaneous documentary filmmaking in North America and consider how his approach to visual ethnography sometimes aligned with, and sometimes diverged from, Rasmussen’s. In many ways, Hansen’s film material exemplifies Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe’s argument that:

shortly after the motion picture camera was invented...Indigenous peoples all over the world suddenly found themselves in front of the lens, their lives and cultures subject to the camera’s apparently indexical relationship to “truth”. The “truth” produced by these early cameras and the filmmakers behind them was, by and large, a visual exploration and commemoration of what were assumed, at the start of the twentieth century, to be rapidly vanishing Indigenous lives and cultures. (Pearson and Knabe 2014:3; see also Bazin [1954] 1967)

Yet Rasmussen’s distinctive approach to ethnographic documentation and the footage shot by Hansen present Alaskan inhabitants and their lives in complementary and quite unique ways.

LEO HANSEN: A EUROPEAN FILM DIRECTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF ARCTIC EXPEDITION CINEMA

Upon earning the commission, Hansen became like “fire and flame,” full of excitement at seeing “a dream come true, to be the first film photographer north of the Arctic Circle” (Hansen 1953:6). Though his assessment of the project’s singularity is misguided—many films had in fact been shot in the far north by 1923—the sense of significance and purpose with which Hansen approached the task was palpable. Photographic evidence from the expedition shows that the equipment Hansen procured in New York City was professional grade. He shot 35 mm on a Debie Le Parvo, which was state-of-the-art in Europe in the mid-1920s, the same camera that F.W. Murnau used for *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, Germany, 1922) and Sergei Eisenstein for *Bronenosets Potyomkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*, USSR, 1925). The use of this equipment, rather than the more portable but less advanced cameras often employed during Arctic expeditions, indicates that Hansen should be understood as a professional European filmmaker who intended to release a profit-oriented film of professional quality. Based on his experience during the FTE, Hansen was later invited by Hollywood producer Jesse L. Lasky of Famous Players-Lasky to make a live action film in Alaska about “Eskimos” featuring some of Paramount’s “biggest stars in leading roles” (Anonymous 1925b). The American big-budget film came to naught—later MGM made a similar film, *Eskimo* (W.S. Van Dyke, U.S., 1933), based on Peter Freuchen’s writings—but Hansen went on to make a number of expedition and ethnographic films in the Arctic.³

Hansen’s experience on the FTE indeed taught him about both the challenges and the opportunities of filming in the Arctic in all seasons. In 1928, as he prepared for a film that eventually became *A Journey in East Greenland*, he said that he would need at least two years on site for the project because “one cannot achieve a full picture of Greenland, unless one includes the winter” (Anonymous 1928:5). The broader import of this remark is that Hansen thought of himself and the medium of film as a distinct authorial project with strong storytelling and a realist impetus, rather than as a compilation of disassociated ethnographic renditions or as a single-minded expedition and exploration film (see also Larsson and Stenport 2019).

For his part, Rasmussen considered the footage from the FTE sled journey as Hansen’s work. In an account syndicated in U.S. newspapers in 1925, he wrote: “Although Leo Hansen joined the Expedition as a tenderfoot, he quickly adapted himself and never found his tasks too arduous; he was always prepared to carry out his work and no matter how bad the weather might be” (Rasmussen 1925:5). In a letter sent to Hansen in Utqiagvik while Rasmussen was traveling south along the Alaska coast, he wrote that he had encountered an American photographer who had offered to shoot some sequences for him, and that he had declined. According to Hansen (1953:140), Rasmussen “declared that I should be the only man to film the 5th Thule Expedition.” In Rasmussen’s eyes at the time, *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* was conceived as a work with one “director” and as a cohesive whole.

While Arctic expedition films can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century as a minor subset of ethnographic film, these works often had the primary intent of documenting the arduous expedition itself and were motivated by profit and propaganda (see MacKenzie and Stenport 2015:1–28). While it was not an expedition film per se, these considerations pertain to the most famous Arctic documentary, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (U.S., 1922), which, while an ethno-fiction, led to John Grierson ([1932] 2014:452–459) coining the term “documentary” as the “creative treatment of reality.” Yet this positivist account of documentary progression elides the diversity of work that was undertaken in the 1920s.

HANSEN, RASMUSSEN, AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMMAKING

Hansen’s description of his experiences during the journey from Kiillinnguyaq (the Kent Peninsula) to the “Musk-ox people” (Umingmaktuarmiut, a subgroup of the Inuinait) on the Bathurst Peninsula (Northwest Territories, Canada) in November 1923 recounts the difficulties he faced while filming (see Fiala 1907 for an earlier polar account). Conditions were extremely challenging, with temperatures regularly as low as minus 40–50°C and limited daylight. Hansen could only shoot for a minute or two before the camera needed to be warmed up inside a snow house. Condensation would then form on the lens so that it had to be dried off, and he had to adjust the depth of field before going back outside because the mechanism would immediately freeze. Care for the film stock

was equally difficult; the containers were welded shut with lead and needed to be cut open and welded back together again, which Hansen did outside on a work bench built of snow and protected from the wind. A primitive film studio was also built, lit with a Primus stove, and with a hole in the wall through which Hansen could film exterior scenes while the camera inside stayed relatively warm. By this method he could shoot for three to four minutes at a time (Hansen 1953:63). Given these extraordinary difficulties, we may surmise that Hansen only shot high-priority material that was likely to be used.

The near coincidence of Hansen's summons to film the FTE and the release of *Nanook of the North* in Copenhagen on March 25, 1923 as *Kuldens Søn* (Son of the Cold) prompts reflection. It is unlikely that Hansen viewed the film in Copenhagen before departing on March 11, although he could have seen it earlier in Paris, Berlin, London, or Stockholm after it was first released to critical acclaim and great public interest in 1922 (Jacobs 1979:9; see also Skare 2016). Press coverage and the worldwide circulation and success of the film make it likely that Hansen knew of the interest *Nanook* had spawned, especially in terms of Flaherty's melodramatic narrative.

Rasmussen's concept of ethnographic film, however, was at odds with Flaherty's. He did not believe in fictionalization, although he and Hansen did engage in forms of staging and compensated participants with tobacco, cash, or other goods (Hansen 1953:61, 113, 143–144). Jørgensen (2003:190) argues that Rasmussen would have considered “unprofessional... what Flaherty built his model upon” if he had known about the *Nanook* project in 1921 when he called for a film to be made about the FTE. Flaherty's emphasis on acting, staging, and narrative imaginaries modeled upon the nascent Hollywood studio system were, however, much closer to Hansen's understanding of the power of documentary and the kind of film it would take to reach audiences. In a statement from his journal, half-way through the sled journey, Hansen articulated that the footage must become more cinematic:

Today Knud and I had an argument about filming. He prefers still documentation of Eskimo types, with close-ups on faces, as this is of most interest for scientific research. He may be right in that, but this is meaningless when the committee paid for a film photographer to travel up here. Knud is bringing his own photographic equipment and does not need an expert to take still photographs, since that is only a matter of adjusting focus and aperture.

I do not understand his perspective and my only chance is to continue pestering him about this. For me, this is also a matter of professional prestige. I do not care much for being laughed at when presenting a film that principally consists of Eskimo heads in close-up. Both for audiences and sales, that kind of film would be worthless. It bothers me that I cannot convince Knud otherwise. (Hansen 1953:94)

While Hansen's discursive stance is almost always deeply appreciative and conciliatory toward Rasmussen, his concern about documentary as distinct from ethnographic still photography was clear (Fig. 1).

Rasmussen agreed with Hansen in principle, recognizing the value of moving images, their specificity, and their global reach: “When I consider my 8,000 readers, I imagine that film is the road to popularity in the future” (cited in Jørgensen 2003:191). Yet the difference in opinion about aesthetics, and the tension between Hansen and Rasmussen in terms of the distinctiveness of the cinematic medium for ethnographic documentation and visual anthropology, foreshadows the subsequent “critical turn” in anthropology when subjectivity came to the forefront



Figure 1: Umingmaktuurmiut typology, an example of the visual aesthetics Hansen challenged. Frame grab. Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska (With Dogsled through Alaska, Leo Hansen, Denmark, 1927) (12:28). Danish Film Institute, Danmark på film.

(Marcus and Fischer 1986:74–78). It may also be the case that Hansen and Rasmussen’s contrasting approaches correlated with their differences in lived experience; unlike the Danish Hansen, Rasmussen had partly Inuit heritage and was thus an early example of a culturally embedded ethnographer (Thisted 2010; see also Michelsen, Griebel et al., *this issue*).

Rasmussen’s intuitive constellation of ethnographic practices placed *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* and *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition* outside the realm of “salvage ethnography” as epitomized by *Nanook of the North* (for analyses of the origins, values, and critiques of “salvage ethnography,” see Clifford 1986, Gruber 1970, and Lévi-Strauss 1966; on “salvage ethnography” and Flaherty, see MacKenzie 2015). James Clifford critiqued the goals of salvage ethnography in the following manner:

Ethnography’s disappearing object is, then, in a significant degree, a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice: “salvage” ethnography in its widest sense. The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text. . . . It is assumed that the other society is weak and “needs” to be represented by an outsider (and that what matters in its life is its past, not present or future). (Clifford 1986:112–113)

Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska is not set in an imagined past, and the subjects often acknowledge the camera by staring directly at it and laughing, foregrounding the subjective and constructed nature of the image. While some aspects of Hansen and Rasmussen’s films could be construed as reconstructive, with parallels to the Arctic ethnography of Franz Boas ([1888] 1974) (see also Mead 1959 and Krupnik 2016; on the ethics of restaging in ethnographic film see Heider 2006:93–94), they were guided by an intent that was far different from Flaherty’s in making *Nanook of the North*. Unlike Flaherty, Rasmussen held cultural knowledge and linguistic competency, and his goals were that of a realism embedded within the present; Flaherty’s work, in contrast, was ethno-fiction, with Nanook (played by Inuit hunter Allakariallak) functioning as the “star.” And while some scenes were restaged by Indigenous subjects in the filming of *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* and *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition*, Flaherty’s methods were far more clearly aligned with salvage ethnography, as he stated quite explicitly: “I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples. . . . What I want to show is the

former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well” (cited in Ruby 1980:450). Here, the difference becomes clear, as Hansen and Rasmussen’s work was firmly directed toward representing the present, rather than trying to exclude or elide it.

THE CIRCULATION OF HANSEN AND RASMUSSEN’S FILMS IN THE 1920S

Rasmussen returned to North America on March 31, 1925, and according to one source he showed clips of FTE film in New York City (Bown 2015:273). However, in a contemporaneous *New York Times* article, his manager stated, “The films will be shown in America” (Anonymous 1925a:25), suggesting that they were not, in fact, screened at that time. Indeed, Hansen’s footage from the dogsled expedition was developed and edited by Rasmussen and Hansen in Berlin, after Rasmussen secured funding from German film producer Lothar Stark—whose business often bought rights to Scandinavian films for German distribution—in exchange for world distribution rights outside the U.S. (Astrup 2020:14; Lund 1996:251).

An account in the German film trade paper *Der Kinematograph* in February 1926 stated that the film was expected to be about 2,000 meters long and to contain only the highlights of the expedition, while remarking that the footage had not been developed for two years because of the absence of processing equipment during the expedition. Nevertheless, the resulting images were confirmed to be of a professional quality, with the scenes shot in moonlight during the polar winter being especially noteworthy. The same source also proclaimed that, “Rasmussen himself led the filming, with the experienced cameraman Hansen operating” (Anonymous 1926a:22). The role of Hansen as director vs. cameraman was thus contested.

Later lecture tours by Rasmussen in North America featured moving images, in Ottawa under the title *Three Years of Eskimo Life in Arctic Canada* in 1926 (Anonymous 1926b:19) and in Montréal under the title *The Spiritual Life of the Eskimo* (McGill University 1926:10). Film material about Arctic North America thus reached a variety of audiences before *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* was released in Denmark, where it first screened at the Geografisk Selskab (Royal Danish Geographical Society) before going on general

release at the Kinografen in Copenhagen on January 10, 1927. *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* played in cities including Aalborg and Aarhus and in other Danish regions. Hansen also traveled with the film, conducting lecture tours with illuminated slides in Denmark on his own in early January 1927 in conjunction with the release of the feature film (Anonymous 1927b).

While we can find no documented accounts of the feature film being released in the United States (footage from the expedition was never mentioned in the *New York Times* after Rasmussen's trip to New York in March 1926), its production was discussed in the Danish American newspaper *Den Danske Pioneer*, with Hansen in particular celebrated as a famous Danish ethnographic filmmaker (see, in particular, Anonymous 1927a:1). One can speculate that Hansen and Rasmussen faced their own moment of being surpassed by modernity—the industrial revolution that took place in the film world on October 6, 1927, when Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*. It was the first feature-length film with fully synchronous dialog and almost immediately killed the market for silent works, let alone ethnographic films from abroad.

HANSEN AND RASMUSSEN'S ALASKA FILMS

The extant footage from the Alaska component of the FTE now exists in two forms: the surviving copy of *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* and in *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition*, which appears to be four separate sections spliced together, without intertitles. The four parts of *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition* are: (1) the Wolf Dance sequence; (2) a demonstration of kayak rolls; (3) the *nalukataq* “sky-splash” using a trampoline made out of walrus skins; and (4) two men leg wrestling. All four of these sequences were shot in Alaska, most likely in Nome.

Rasmussen's assumption about Alaska being thoroughly westernized were challenged on his arrival as he “considered that Alaska lay so close to civilization that there could hardly be any new field for him to explore. He had not had many talks with people at Point Barrow, however, before he realized that this was far from being the case” (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:11). Hansen was asked to remain on his own in Utqiagvik and “get a film of these rare folk-life scenes” (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:22) while Rasmussen, Qaavigarsuaq, and Arnarulunnguaq traveled to the communities around Icy Cape and farther south. Hansen commented positively on

the modernizing effects of settler culture and befriended local society, including the mayor and clinic doctor (Hansen 1953:138; see also Rasmussen [1927] 1999:308–309). Rasmussen (1934:2895) also saw U.S. involvement in Alaska as a benevolent intervention and welcomed the modernizing impact of film itself. In a *New York Times* interview, he said, “Among some of the things experienced was the thrill obtained from studying the faces of Eskimos at Point Barrow, Alaska, as they viewed some colored motion pictures I flashed on a makeshift screen for them” (Anonymous 1924:20).

Hansen's footage of Utqiagvik (starting at 39:18 in *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska*) reflects these considerations. Rather than undertaking salvage ethnography to document “original” Inuit practices, Hansen portrayed a community in transition under colonial governance. Most scenes in this sequence show local inhabitants dressed in cotton clothing rather than animal skins (49:23), offset against small clapboard houses, while they go about daily life. In so doing, Hansen avoided the tropes of “Eskimo Orientalism,” which Ann Fienup-Riordan (1995:xi–xii) demonstrated to be the dominant mode in which Yup'ik and Iñupiaq peoples were represented in early nonfiction film in Alaska.

The most striking scene from Utqiagvik features a blanket toss (starting at 45:03) called *nalukataq* (also the name of the whaling celebration in which this activity is featured; see Crowell, *this issue*). A similar scene is included in the Nome footage from *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition*, but the same practice was shot differently in the two locations. In the Utqiagvik sequence, it is clear that Hansen was known by the participants. He moved freely in and out of the crowd and took close-ups of “distinguished types” (Hansen 1953:144), including men, women, and children, presumably to show both “traditional” and “modern” individuals. In other scenes an engaged, reciprocal relationship is evident between director and subject, with the person who is featured onscreen acknowledging the photographer's presence and often gazing directly into the camera, while at other times making eye contact outside the frame or pulling faces (44:30). Filmmaking had been taking place in Utqiagvik for at least a decade, and there is a certain amount of self-aware performance. In one shot (46:03), an Iñupiaq child is “smoking” a “pipe” made from a piece of wood and engages in mimetic play by striking an imagined match on his hand and blowing imaginary smoke. The boy, who is dressed

in Western clothes, fully engages with the camera. Other “cinematic” aspects of this sequence include a woman and a boy both smiling and nodding toward the camera, and a child practicing with bow and arrow who looks back to the camera to make sure he is being filmed (49:02) (Fig. 2).

Hansen intercut images of elders as spectators of the *nalukataq* celebration, creating a modern cinematic experience. By using reverse shots, Hansen captured both the spectators and the main event. This segment of the film builds a sense of Iñupiaq community at Utqiagvik, with no shots of any of the white settlers who also populated the town. In contrast, the Nome scenes in *Optagelser fra 5. Thulekspedition* feature only the trampoline toss, with Hansen’s camera capturing a wall of spectators with their backs to the camera (Fig. 3). Everyone featured in the Nome scenes wears fur and animal skin clothing, and the shot gives the impression that the event was staged entirely

for Hansen’s camera to make it “seem authentic”: that is, by not recognizing the camera or performing for it.

The Utqiagvik sequences are fully Hansen’s and reflect his greater immersion in the community than at Nome. Having declined an invitation to shoot a walrus colony and other wildlife on the ice edge, he instead filmed the post-whaling festivities. In addition to the trampoline toss, he filmed a short drum dance sequence in front of an *umiag* turned on its side, providing a dark backdrop (49:22), the shooting of which is documented in Hansen’s (1953:144) account. The main dancer looks directly into the camera as he starts to dance, and his performance is intercut with shots of spectators. This scene was singled out in Hansen’s writing about his stay in Barrow, where he wrote in detail about having to pay to secure the footage:



Figure 2: Performing for the camera, Utqiagvik. Frame grab. *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* (*With Dogsled through Alaska*, Leo Hansen, Denmark, 1927) (49:02). Danish Film Institute, Danmark på film.



Figure 3: Nalukataq, Nome. Frame grab. Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition (Footage from the Fifth Thule Expedition, Leo Hansen, Denmark, 1924) (03:52). Danish Film Institute, Danmark på film.

I knew it would be expensive. The Eskimos wanted compensation for everything. Alfred [a local collaborator] went ahead gathering participants for the dance, and their charge was 75 dollars. This was my only way out, when I wanted Eskimos to work in front of the camera.... Not one of the natives wanted to be filmed, unless they received cash compensation. Also at Alaska's northernmost point, the American dollar dominated (Fig. 4). (Hansen 1953:143–144)

These statements signal the relationship between commerce and anthropological observation and documentation in early 1920s Alaska, while also highlighting that paying for expert testimony was common practice. Utqiagvik inhabitants lived in a cash-driven society and expected this kind of quid pro quo; they were part of the fabric of urban modernity that extended to the Arctic.

NOME: DREAM THEATRE AND WOLF DANCE

Upon rejoining Rasmussen, Qaavigarsuaq, and Arnarulunnguaq on September 4, 1924, Hansen noted that Nome was more cosmopolitan and diverse than Utqiagvik. He described a bustling town where “Eskimos had flocked to the city to take advantage of trade with white tourists” (Hansen 1953:166). Shaped by the gold rush, with a summer population of about 2,000, the city had become a central gathering point for many Alaska Native groups. To Rasmussen, this diversity was significant and fortunate:

The streets were full of Eskimos trotting about on business; they rarely, if ever, offered their wares direct for sale in the streets, but sold them to shop-



Figure 4: Preparing to shoot the dance scene in Utqiagvik. The setup demonstrates that the performance was staged for the camera. Still from Leo Hansen (1953), I Knuds slædespor. Eventyrets grønne band [In Knud's Sled Tracks: The Green Ribbon of Adventure].

keepers who retailed them. All were cleanly and decently dressed, kindly and respectful when spoken to, without the least sign of having become demoralized by life in town. (Rasmussen 1999:342)

While Rasmussen portrayed Alaska Natives as coping well with moving off the land and into modern settlements for at least a portion of the year, the long-term and profound effects of this change were a blind spot for him. Challenging to readers a century later, Rasmussen's perspective on Nome should be acknowledged because, unlike the film footage, it offers an explicit recognition of the town's cash market for arts and culture, including artifacts, legends, and performances. The film footage shows several performances of dances and games but does not reveal them as commercial entertainments. Also missing from the known footage are two recent and important additions to life in Nome—automobiles and the cinema. According to his notes, Rasmussen, Qaavigarsuaq, and Arnarulunnguaq

went to the "Dream Theatre" [a 300-seat movie theater in existence from at least 1913 to 1945] in

the afternoons, something quite new and something of an experience to the Greenlandic companions, and it might happen that all three took a Ford car in the evening and drove to the outskirts of the town where the Eskimos held great song feasts to celebrate the meeting with friends and acquaintances from the far away habitations. (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:65–66)

Thus, while the Nome population was accustomed to the cinematic medium and its conventions, Rasmussen and Hansen did not acknowledge this new cultural influence in their own film depiction of the town. This contrasts with Hansen's independent renderings in Utqiagvik, which have a meta-reflective component to them through the subjects' acknowledgment of the camera.

Spending a month in Nome collecting stories and legends, Rasmussen played up the expediency of the location as providing "an excellent opportunity of studying the various Alaskan types without having to travel in search of them, since they were all assembled here" (Rasmussen 1999:343). The oral material he collected there included the origin legend of the Wolf Dance

and the Messenger (Eagle) Feast as told by Arnasungaq of King Island (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:255–259; Rasmussen 1932b:17–30; see also Fienup-Riordan 1994 and Kingston et al. 2001). Rasmussen also collected detailed information about the Cup'ig Messenger Feast performed on Nunivak Island (Sonne, *this issue*). Masks from these performances are on display at the National Museum of Denmark (Fig. 5).

Hansen's Nome footage includes a depiction of one part of the King Island Wolf Dance, thus connecting FTE textual records and collections to film documentation. In the legend, a hunter meets the Eagle Mother, who instructs him in how to conduct the Messenger Feast; on the way back to his village, he sees swallows flying into their burrows in a riverbank and coming back out as wolves (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:256–257). The film was not known at the National Museum of Denmark until curators saw it posted online at the Danish Film



Figure 5: “Bird Man” mask from Nunivak Island on display in the Rasmussen exhibit at the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen (cf. Sonne 1988: Fig. 20). NMD catalog number P.33:100. Photograph courtesy Scott MacKenzie.

Institute's site *Danmark på Film* and recognized the dancers' enactment of the legend. The fact that this documentary depiction of the Wolf Dance was overlooked for so long speaks both to the tertiary place film has played in the popular and curatorial imagination of Rasmussen and the FTE and to the contrasting views that Rasmussen and Hansen held of its ethnographic and cinematic values. While Ostermann and Holtved (1952:66) proclaimed that “Rasmussen took great pleasure in realizing that these feasts were really old folk-customs which were still called to life without having the character of being demonstrations made for the benefit of curious tourists,” Hansen's footage of the Wolf Dance is obviously a staged public performance, removed from its original cultural context and enhanced by cinematic technique.

The Wolf Dance is the longest sequence in *Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition*. Hansen was clearly aware of the significance of the legend and the Wolf Dance as events “where participants perform both as people and as wolves,” interpreting this as evidence of a time past “when there was not much difference between humans and animals” (Hansen 1953:166). The extant segment, approximately two minutes in length, begins with a wide shot of an *umiak* turned on its side, which functions as a sort of proscenium stage for the performance. In front of the boat are six women holding feathers in each hand, swaying rhythmically; before them, five men sit facing a drummer whose back is to the camera (Fig. 6).

After about 20 seconds, five other men begin pulling back caribou and reindeer skins that cover a long box made of wooden planks, and when the last layer is pulled away we see six wolf heads—masks worn by dancers hidden in the box—poking out through round holes that represent entrances to the legendary swallows' burrows. Wolf pelts hang between the holes. The wolf dancers shake their mittens, which are ornamented with puffin beaks and ivory dangles. The film holds this shot briefly; then, cutting to a medium shot, there is temporal displacement as the wolves again emerge, rubbing their snouts and bobbing rhythmically. In the top of the frame, the arms and hands of the men who pulled up the furs are visible (Fig. 7). This shot, with wolf heads nodding and moving in and out of the holes and the men's hands also moving, continues for almost a minute. Then the wolf dancers extend themselves farther out of the holes, swaying back and forth and shaking their dance mittens, finally turning upward and around to face the men on top of the box (Fig. 8).



Figure 6: Wide shot of the Wolf Dance. Frame grab. Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition (*Footage from the Fifth Thule Expedition*, Leo Hansen, Denmark, 1924) (00:11). Danish Film Institute, Danmark på film.

This film sequence, as opposed to the dance sequence, can be seen as both ethnographic and cinematic, which are not mutually exclusive categories. The move from the wide shot to the medium shot allows for a full ethnographic view of the beginning of the dance, while the medium shot—on the verge of a close-up—contains more cinematic properties as it allows for the segmentation of the performance, offering a visual field that live spectatorship does not allow. It also offers a different kind of ethnographic evidence, concentrating and framing certain aspects deemed most central while excluding others beyond the frame. The performance is explicitly staged with traditionally costumed actors who were almost certainly compensated for their work in front of the camera, and the theatrical setup gives the impression that the dance had been performed many times for an audience.

The Wolf Dance sequence did not make it into the extant version of *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska*. Instead, it

was turned into a Pathé newsreel in 1926, titled “Crossing Arctic America.” Unknown for nearly a century, it was rediscovered improperly catalogued in the UCLA Film Archive by filmmaker Lene Borsch Hansen as she prepared her documentary *Knud Rasmussen: The Great Enchanter* (Denmark, 2017).⁴ Indeed, the existence of the Nome Wolf Dance footage outside of *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* points to the fact that there likely is additional material that did not make it into the final film as released in 1927. Rasmussen, for instance, writes that in Utqiagvik they “film[ed], after three months’ effort, . . . the aurora borealis” (Anonymous 1924:20), and this footage does not appear in any of the films. Moreover, the original Danish press package for the film included still photography and references to sequences of reindeer herding, which are also missing. Yet it seems that this was, upon its Danish release in 1927, an extended scene in the film, as the printed program notes that domesticated reindeer



Figure 7: Medium shot of the Wolf Dance I. Frame grab. Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition (Footage from the Fifth Thule Expedition, Leo Hansen, Denmark, 1924) (01:01). Danish Film Institute, Danmark på film.

were imported from Siberia, and after a poor start “one of the world’s largest industries has emerged” (Kinografen 1927:5). Within the press book, there is a still from this scene, the only one included from the film. There are likely additional sequences that are still to be found in archives. Similarly, there is no way of knowing if the footage shown during Rasmussen’s and Hansen’s motion picture speaking tours in 1925–1926 made it into the final work for cinematic release in 1927, or whether they disbursed some of this material before the film was released, like the footage sold to Pathé.

CONCLUSION

Hansen’s films as they presently exist only partially represent what he and Rasmussen produced following the FTE, which raises questions about how we may judge them as ethnographic documents; certainly much has been left out

of the stories that these films originally told. Moreover, we do not have a full account of the relationship between the thousands of meters of film shot on the expedition and selectively edited in the 1920s, and what we find today languishing in archives and museums, slowly being restored (cf. Groo 2019:255–289). Nevertheless, by focusing on two of the surviving FTE films this article challenges many default assumptions about Arctic ethnographic filmmaking in the 1920s. Along with their ethnographic value, one of their great, and until now little-known, contributions to both visual anthropology and documentary history is that Hansen and Rasmussen’s works offer a strikingly different representational strategy than that of the salvage ethnography of Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*. While still working at times within a Boasian paradigm, Hansen and Rasmussen charted an alternative aesthetic and practice for visual anthropology and documentary filmmaking of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic.



Figure 8: Medium shot of the Wolf Dance II. Frame grab. Optagelser fra 5. Thuleekspedition (Footage from the Fifth Thule Expedition, Leo Hansen, Denmark, 1924) (04:33). Danish Film Institute, Danmark på film.

NOTES

1. *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska* was restored by the EYE Museum in Amsterdam in 1994, and again with Greenlandic voice-over in 2008; deposited in the Danish Royal Library and the Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu/Greenland National Museum and Archives; and is available as an extra on Lene Borch Hansen's film *Knud Rasmussen: The Great Enchanter* DVD (Nordisk Film, 2017). For a full discussion of *Med Hundeslæde gennem Alaska*, see MacKenzie and Stenport 2020. The film is available at <https://filmcentralen.dk/museum/danmark-paa-film/film/med-hundeslaede-gennem-alaska>.
2. The film can be found at <https://filmcentralen.dk/museum/danmark-paa-film/film/optagelser-fra-5-thuleekspedition>.
3. The list includes *Islandsfilm. Sommeren* (Leo Hansen's Film from Iceland, Denmark, 1929), *Færøfilmen* (The

Faroe Islands, Denmark, 1930), *Leo Hansens Islandsferd* (Leo Hansen's Journey to Iceland, Denmark, 1936), and *Med Leo Hansen paa Østgrønland* (A Journey in East Greenland with Leo Hansen, Denmark, 1936).

4. UCLA Film Archive Inventory Number M3428, MP Motion Picture Collection.

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