2. Documentarist as. . . EXPLORER

Definition(s):
Ethnography = genre of writing that uses fieldwork to provide a descriptive study of human societies; an investigative technique that involves immersion in a culture not one’s own, letting the analytical tools and methods emerge from the culture itself
Explorer = one who explores, i.e., the act of searching or traveling for the purpose of discovery, e.g. of unknown people, including space, mineral prospecting, or for information
(Is this at odds with the concept of ethnography??)

Key Concepts & Issues:
A friction between the role of the explorer and the goal of preserving indigenous cultures—i.e., the explorer or prospector is after something (e.g., minerals, a trade route, oil), and its discovery will undoubtedly change the people living nearby. . . can documenting the affected culture assuage the explorer’s guilt?

Key Documentarists:
Robert J. Flaherty
An American educated at a mining school, he worked in Canada as a prospector for Sir Wm. MacKenzie, who urged him to take a camera on his third trip
After a three-week cinematography course in Rochester, he shot many hours of Eskimo life, footage that was heavily damaged in a fire
Post WWI, he began again, completing Nanook of the North in 1922
Obsessed with documenting his “discoveries” (the land, and the people before contact with outsiders changed them)
At the same time, he always attempted to make commercially viable films; he and his wife hoped the success of Nanook would lead to a lifelong career documenting disappearing cultures, something that never quite worked out (e.g., Moana (1926) produced while under contract to Paramount, failed at the box office)
His widow Frances Flaherty said he always called himself “an explorer first, and a filmmaker second”