Mathew (2014) Reality in Ethnographic Film: Documentary Vs. Docudrama

Wesley Mathew’s essay, entitled, “Reality in Ethnographic Film: Documentary vs. Docudrama” explored the validity of a docudrama in ethnographic studies. He emphasized the relationships “between film and reality, and the film and the viewer,” (Mathew 2014: 18) as the most important differences between a documentary and a docudrama.

A documentary is generally considered an unreliable source, because of the subjectivity that surrounds that particular medium. Mathew asserted that a valid docudrama allows for the most accurate representation of reality because the story that it tells has to be rooted in a holistic reality. When talking about the viewer of a documentary or docudrama, Mathew stated, “the viewers engagement with the text is paramount to the interpretation process” (Mathew 2014: 20). In order for a viewer to connect with a documentary, they have to be able to understand the film presented, and it can sometimes be more embedded in fiction, rather than fact.

Mathew supported his thesis by looking at the docudrama, Ghosts, which emphasized the cultural and political issues that surround the Chinese emigration into the UK. He posited that a traditional documentary would not allow the camera to get as close to its subjects, and that a docudrama can present a view that an audience can connect to easily, making it a better medium.

Mathew’s thesis about the docudrama was only supported by one film, making it hard to accept his assertions. Many of our readings have been reinforced by a number of different films, such as Loizos “Admissible evidence? Film in anthropology”, which had a broader thesis and a wider range of film technique discussed (Loizos 1992). Mathew was able to prove his thesis, but it was presented on a much smaller scale than we have been reading. Good point. We watch The Thin Blue Line this week because it uses some of the elements of docudrama.