Course: Critical Methods in Media, Film and Cultural Studies

Tutor: Adrian Mackenzie

Author: Siwen Wang

Essay Question:

Nick Couldry wrote in 2000: 'cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture' (Couldry,2000:1). Critically analyse what he means. Drawing on the various interpretative, textual, visual, observational and participatory methods discussed in the course and the set readings of the course, describe some of the different ways your group research project activities have addressed the challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture. You will need to spend some time in your essay describing what your research was about, but this description should mainly serve to highlight your analysis of this definition of cultural studies. You should pay particular attention in your essay to the key quotes drawn from the weekly readings (see the Moodle site for these), and show in your essay that understand them and their implications.

The aims of this essay are to critically analyze Nick Couldry's theory of cultural studies and its implications, to reflect upon the textual, visual, observational and participatory methods used in cultural studies, and to use my own research with my group members as a practical example. This is a try to connect key theories, practical techniques and exemplary cases together in cultural studies. In order to fulfil these aims, the essay will begin with a detailed analysis of Couldry's conceptualization of cultural studies to mainly investigate two questions. What is distinctive of cultural studies? And what are we studying when we are doing cultural studies? In the second part, the essay will mainly illustrate three examples of textual analysis, visual analysis, and ethnography approach used in my group's independent research to support my analysis of Couldry's conceptualization of cultural studies. Thirdly, this paper will address some of the problems that my group has encountered in carrying out our research in practice, which implies the challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture. Finally, there will be a conclusion about the writing of this paper and some reflections of our group's research.

1. Couldry's Definition of Cultural Studies

In the book *Inside Culture: Re-imagining the Method of Cultural Studies*, Nick Couldry claims, 'cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture' (2000:1).Actually, I'd like to see this statement as a try to answer two key questions in contemporary cultural research: What is distinctive of doing research in cultural studies? And what are we studying when we are doing cultural studies? I believe the two questions are interrelated with each other, since the answer to the second question determines that of the first one. So I would like to rearrange the quote and understand it as: 'the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture' requires cultural studies to be 'an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research'.

To answer the second question, the object of cultural studies is 'the massive, power laden complexity of contemporary culture' (Couldry, 2000:1). This sentence tells two

things: cultural studies is the study of 'contemporary culture' and this contemporary culture contains numerous complications and is always in power relationships. Here, it is important to clarify the meaning of 'contemporary culture'. It is time to trace back the discussion of the concept culture by Raymond Williams (2001) who classifies three definitions of culture: the 'ideal', the 'documentary' and the 'social'. Although each has its merits and usefulness, the 'ideal' version separates itself with material needs of human being; the 'documentary' version neglects other aspects of life except written and visual materials; the 'social' version downplays culture as by-product. Thus, Williams suggests we understand culture not in an isolated condition but in its interrelationship with society (Ibid). It is Williams' expansion of the definition of culture that is still meaningful for culture studies because culture now includes much more contents and complexities than before. It includes not only elite culture, popular culture, ethnic culture but all cultural forms and our everyday cultural experience in society. And within every culture form and cultural activity, there are different practices, situations, systems and institutions just as everyone's culture experience may be particular since they are in various geographic locations, at particular time, in special environment and so on. In this sense, contemporary culture is in massive complexities because it is a site for multiple voices and forces. Besides, cultural studies is especially interested in power. This is because if culture should be understood in society and social relations, of which power pervades every aspect, then power is at the center of cultural studies. In contemporary society, power has new features. According to Foucault (1976), power is both repressive and productive. It not only creates inequality, forcing one group subordinate to another, but also produces forms of relationships, knowledge and discourse. Power is not only functioning in a macro level but also in a micro level with which our everyday life is saturated. In short, power rules and controls as well as generates our everyday life. That is why Couldry says contemporary culture is power-laden. It is with full recognition of the importance of power that cultural studies aims to reveal the hidden power discourse in culture and tries to seek resistance and emancipation towards it. Therefore, cultural studies should 'represent the space of equality' (Couldry, 2000:2)

and it values political democracy.

To answer the question of what is distinctive of doing research in cultural studies, Cloudry concludes that cultural studies is 'an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research'. Cultural studies is an expanding space because 'if each person's experience is significant, then surely any limitation on what aspect or 'level' of culture we study…is problematic' (Cloudry, 2000:3) so we should include each person's cultural experience instead of that of particular groups. What's more, previous cultural studies has emphasis more on the marginalized, the subordinates or the abnormal because it seeks to be democratic, it excludes itself from those it is not quite concerned with or downplayed like the elite's culture. In reality, all cultures and cultural activities should be paid equal attention to so cultural studies still has many potential fields to investigate. The research into cultural studies should be 'sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research' means the research is a continuous process, and it has to adhere closely to its policy and researchers have to be self-critical of one's own research. This is because cultural research takes time and energy to deal with the complexities so it has to be a sustained process to dig deep into a research question. Clouldry expresses rigorous as 'revising radically some of our standard assumptions about what 'culture' we study and what researching culture revolves' (2000:2) to help us to produce more comprehensive and accurate research results. We should maintain self-reflexive because the researchers' own positions, use of methodologies and their ways of interpretations can influence the research results. Clouldry's understanding of cultural studies have addressed some of the most crucial aspects and in the following part, our group research in practice can provide supporting evidence to his account.

2. A Research blog as A Practical Example

In January, 2014, three students and I in media and cultural studies formed a group to carry out our empirical research with our research question of 'How is the TV show *Sherlock Homes* mediated differently in China and Britain?' We are interested in this

question not only because the TV show has enjoyed great popularities in both China and Britain but because our group members are Chinese and British so we think a cross-culture studies can be possible. We mainly used textual analysis and visual analysis as our research methods and we have recorded our research processes and results in an online blog to share it to all people. In this essay, I'd like to draw on some of our research as practical examples to reflect upon Clouldry's conceptualization of cultural studies, the methods we use and the problems we meet with during our research.

When our group was conducting textual analysis, we figured out our research object, the texts about the show *Sherlock Homes*, were really full of 'massive, power-laden of complexity'. As Couldry states in referring to textual analysis, 'Instead of the discrete text-reader relationship, we are looking at a textual environment comprising complex patterns of flows: flows of meanings, texts and potential readers' (2000: 87). This is really what our group members have experienced when we were trying to make a decision in seas of texts relating to our research and thinking again and again about how complex the actual situations are.

The first challenge for us is what's the meaning of certain texts we have chosen? As we chose one review from *The Guardian,* the inter-texuality required to understand it is quite high as the review is written in a highly 'professional' way for it requires readers to use their 'ready' knowledge of the show, relate the terms used in the article with the British culture, and even some knowledge of the novel the show bases on. The texts can never be understood fully unless readers make references to broader texts. The second challenge we encountered is relating to the flow of the texts: what texts relating to the show can be included in our research? Texts here are no longer limited as existing on the level of 'value judgment' that uses to establishing meanings but a text should be considered as a social object with 'interrelated meaning'(Couldry, 2000:70). This expands the traditional meaning of texts so our groups is facing huge forms of texts relating to the show: the TV series itself, news reports, TV reviews, viewer's feedbacks to the show, gossips about the actors, ads of the show, to name just

a few. And there are questions like how these texts are circulated? How the author produces it in a certain way rather than others? Is the author deliberately producing certain accounts for business sake? Our third challenge relating to the flow of readers is how to evaluate the readers' reactions to the texts? In addition, if we consider about the readers of the texts, the research is even more complicated: how different readers interpret the texts differently? How they choose certain texts to read rather than others? Have they watched the show or planned to watch it? How their interpretation of the text can reflect their own race, gender, class and so on in society? Do they read the texts of the show for fun, to do business, to do research or for education?

Because we have to consider the complexities and hidden power relationships within the already complicated text environment including meanings, texts and readers of the TV show Sherlock, we are faced with more problems than solutions. This reflects what Couldry (2000) calls the complicity of massiveness and intricate power relations of contemporary culture.

Besides doing textual analysis, our group also did visual analysis on pictures and videos relating to the show *Sherlock Homes*. And this reminds us of how important it is to conduct 'sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research' in media and cultural studies.

In doing visual analysis, the first thing our group has done is quite interesting yet challenging. We carried out an exercise called 'showing seeing'. According to Mitchell (2002:176-77), in this activity a person is supposed to tell the audience what he/she sees and the ways he/she sees a thing. What's most important is that you have to assume the audience know nothing about words relating to visual culture like 'color, line, eye contact, clothing, facial expressions' (ibid) and so on. Our group chose to describe a poster of two main actors in the show *Sherlock Homes* in this showing seeing. We find it is nearly impossible for the describer to carry out the description and even harder for the audience to guess what the thing really is. This exercise is

enlightening in that it shows how 'visuality is not just the social construction of vision but the visual construction of the social' (Mitchell, 2002, 179). This implies that visual images are always constructed by culture and the ability of visuality to see can help us know what exist in the world by purely look at it. Therefore, Mitchell proposes to 'treat visual culture and visual images as go-betweens in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings' (2002, 175). I also attribute this way of thinking as a result of self-reflexivity because it is critical that what we 'see' is actually socially constructed so what will happen if we reject this social construction of the vision and think about the other side of it? The taken-for-granted mode of visual culture is then challenged and expands its research to the study of visuality itself.

With the inspirations we got from the showing seeing exercise, our group put into practice of analyzing a picture in fully aware of the devise 'visuality' we have and think about the process of the moment we see them. The picture is a comparison of the actor who also played Sherlock in a drama with words 'I am Sherlock Homes' and the actor of the TV show Sherlock underneath with words 'That amuses me'. It is of course a humor with the implication that the actor in the TV show *Sherlock* plays a better role better than that of the drama one. Yet if we do not ask 'what does the picture mean?' but 'what happens when people look and what emerges in the act?' (Bal, 2003:9), then we will notice something else that is easily ignored. Just as Rose states,

> 'Different ways of seeing are bound up into different, more-or-less conscious, more-or-less elaborate, more-or-less consistent practices. Visualities are one practice among many, and in their routinization and place-specificity they make certain sorts of things visible in particular ways' (2012: 549).

From this account we can notice the things ignored can be the place where the seeing happens and the social actors who see it. In our research, this reminds us that the picture is put online, which can link different virtual social groups and also it is practice of bringing televisual media into online mediation. And also this will lead

another question: as researchers, we are one of those viewers or seers, we are not only looking at the picture as others do but also practicing our seeing with specific purposely in a particular place. Therefore, we, as researchers, need self-reflection. Rose emphases the importance of 'thinking of interpretative practices as both "method and object of questioning" ... Aspects of methodology are paused over, examined, rehearsed and revised, as the research process proceeds and things are learnt from the research objects' (2012: 551). In this sense, our research should be a continuous process with rigorously following this policy and be self-reflexive about the limitations and positions of our own, which echoes again with Couldry's requirement of doing 'sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research' in cultural studies.

3. Problems and Challenges

In conducting our group's empirical research, we have faced challenges and problems of all sorts, which provide me the opportunities to be self-reflexive and look back into it. In the following part of this essay, I want to point out some of the most salient and crucial problems in our real practice.

As our group research focused on the mediation of the show *Sherlock Homes* in China and Britain, we did most of our research online and record our research progress in the form of blogs. In the beginning, we thought conducting such a research online would be quite convenient since new digital devices seem to be just at hand. We would be able to get the newest and latest information through the internet and the blogs enabled us to present nearly all the materials we get in a concentrated space. Yet in practice, what we were facing was huge information that accumulated in high speeds and difficult to sort out. For example, the information, pictures, videos and comments about the show that appeared in the social networks were numerous, varied and update very quickly, which increased the difficulties in our processes of gathering data, texts and resources. As Back and Puwar states,

'The tools and devices for research craft are being extended by digital

culture in a hyper-connected world, affording new possibilities to re-imagine observation and the generation of alternative forms of research data. Part of the promise of live methods is the potential for simultaneity in research and the possibility of re-ordering the relationship between data gathering, analysis and circulation' (2013: 7)

It is time to think about how the devices we now have in the digital ago will shape our research methods and how researchers have to learn to use them.

I have looked back to our group research every week and found that most of them are writing about the latest, the newest texts, pictures, videos and so on in that week about the *Sherlock* show. On the one hand, this stressed the importance of temporality, yet on the other hand, we are focusing too much on 'now'. Uprichard et al. (2008) have warned us about the danger of 'become bereft in the imagination of future' if we confined our group research to only contemporary but lose sight of the implications given by the past and forget to use our sociological imaginations about the future, then we are unlikely to relate the study of Sherlock to a boarder social picture. Although in the later part of our research, we related the popularity of wider political and economical influence it has given, we have never predicted the future about the sequel of it.

In our practice, our group also has other problems: we have only spent three months on this research yet we have to write down our perspectives in the blogs. But the researchers should immerse in the research with 'attentiveness', invest more time in doing it and think carefully and vigorously (Back and Puwar, 2012). Also since our group is made up of one British and three Chinese, our own cultural background and the 'situatedness' of our knowledge (Haraway,1988) can influence our cross-cultural research. The above problems are just some we are faced with in our research practice, but it can provide us the opportunities to rethink our research within cultural studies and examine the methods we applied.

4. Conclusion

This essay tires to analyze Couldry's definition of cultural studies in terms of two questions. What is distinctive of cultural studies? And what are we studying when we are doing cultural studies? This explains not only detailed meanings Couldry conveyed but also shows the interrelationships of Couldry's account. In the following part, the essay uses practical examples of my group research to illustrate how to carry textual and visual analysis and this can support Couldry's statement. Finally, this essay points out some problems and challenges in the group research as a way of critically reflection on what has been done and what can be done in the future. Hopefully, this essay has linked cultural theories, methods and practice together to reveal the dynamics and interrelations among them.

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