

Cultural Studies in practice- an empirical research of Sherlock mediation phenomenon

Introduction

Initially belong to a democratic critique in elite academic study, the research objects of cultural studies has extended to somewhere outside the elite circles, namely 'popular culture'. However, in *Re-imagining the Method of Cultural Studies*, Couldry has suggested it as a discipline that shall focus on complexity of contemporary culture and "being 'inside' culture". Besides, for the definition of cultural studies, Nick Couldry wrote: '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)

To properly understand the connotation of this definition, I extracted the skeleton of the sentence into 'cultural studies is an expanding space for empirical research into the complexity of contemporary culture.' In this sense, on one hand, the characteristics of the empirical research are sustained in updating fresh cultural content, simultaneously rigorous in utilizing the relevant theories or methodologies, in conjunction with being self-reflexive in the researching process. On the other hand, the complexity of contemporary culture is massive since the vast individually and generally cultural experience, additionally, is power-laden, which 'driven by economics, politics or other forms of social discrimination'. All these happened not only on a space simultaneously filled with 'multiple voices and forces', but also a 'space of questioning'. (Couldry 2000:2)

In investing power relations within cultural studies context, to avoid 'isolated theoretical positions', empirical research seems to be the indispensable choice regardless of the limitation it possess. (Couldry 2000:61) Besides, when talking about the research object of contemporary culture, popular culture still plays a role in significance. We are standing in global village and the cultural globalization phenomenon has dramatically generated locally-set cultural consumption and

interpretation, simultaneously resulted in mediation of cultural experience.(During 1997) Following this line, I argue that the empirical research on popular culture shall focus on the mediation and consumption phenomenon, and examine the cultural situation not only in global perspective, but also emphasize the locally-setting context.

To articulate this, I have referred to the empirical research group project: Sherlock Holmes Worldwide: Mediations in the UK and China, for further comprehension of the intension of ‘cultural studies’. The project chose ‘mediation’ of popular TV series Sherlock Holmes produced by BBC Company, somehow reflected our interpretation on ‘complexity of contemporary culture’. In this case, the cultural experience of audiences who have watched Sherlock Holmes series is mediated in ‘situated culture’(Tolson 1996), where the cohesion of culture and mediation provides vast forms of communications ‘transmitted instantaneously around the world’. In this process of communication, the entanglement of visually and textually cultural flows and individual cultural experience has dominantly influenced by various power relations, for instance the discourse power affected by the State Administration of Radio Film and Television in China, eventually indicates the complexity lying within contemporary culture. We located two cultural communities in both China and UK since our group members are from these two nations, following this line, the situated culture here are Chinese culture and British culture, to analyze the mediation detective series in sociocultural context.

The research questions of the project are: How is the show Sherlock mediated differently in China and Britain? How do processes of global consumption and materialism intersect with processes of cultural change, such as sexuality, in China? Rigorously utilized methods incorporates textual analysis, visual analysis, ethnographic method, we have continuously update the researched content in blog, and by the end of the project, we concluded the process in a self-reflexive way , by considering ‘interpretive practice’ in this research as ‘both method and object of questioning.’ (Rose, Gillian 2012) In this sense, the empirical research we undertook

was ‘sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive’ (Couldry 2000)

Basically we used three methodologies in elaborating the mediation of Sherlock Holmes series in both China and UK, namely the textual, visual and ethnographically observational methods. Besides, the whole empirical started with a kick-off reflexivity thoughts while ends with a self-reflexivity conclusion, to ensure the impartiality and fairness within the cultural studies procedure. Hence, the structure of this essay began with the challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture in terms of utilizing these three methodologies. Respectively followed with the example of our empirical research blog and approaches that addressed the challenges of researching on contemporary culture in different ways. Afterwards was the conclusion that summarizes key arguments of the essay while providing further observational questions.

Different challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture

As Couldry argued that as the study object of cultural studies, contemporary culture is in a ‘massive, power-laden’ complexity, in this light, vast number of varying forms of cultural experience encountered with the intertwined power relations, might complicates the empirical research process. In sociocultural perspective, the requirement of a qualified empirical research into contemporary culture shall not only impartially analyze the cultural object but also sociologically based. In this case, the challenges may tease out to the following questions regarding to varying usage of methods:

Firstly, in terms of textual analysis, the challenge of excessive texts made the way to find potentially valuable texts complicated. According to Couldry, the ‘vast universe of potentially readable texts’ incorporates not only traditional media anymore; ‘video and computer games and World Wide Web’ also contribute to the complexity of excessive texts environment. These kinds of challenges when putting into the textual analysis on mediation of Sherlock series around the world, might encounter the

possibility of overlapping reports and news around the spoilers of latest plots on social media in both China and UK, while additionally the challenge of screening out the valuable text and intertextualities from large amounts of potentially useful materials.

Secondly, when concerning about visual analysis, the challenge of visual studies was its 'dangerous supplement' role when standing ambiguously between art history and aesthetics. (Mitchell, W.J.T., 2002) As Mitchell described through Jacques Derrida's meaning about it, visual studies was located in a dilemma within trans-boundaries area between art history and aesthetics, and even more disciplines. Besides, according to Rose, the dominant implicit methodology of visual culture studies just emphasize the 'the meaning of visual things' while viewer's subjectivities and the circumstance context has been neglected. (Rose, G 2012) As for our project, in doing visual analysis, the challenge we have concerned about was the bias and limitation in describing a visual image, such as a picture showcase the delicate sentiment between Sherlock and Watson, without appropriately considered the view's interpretation and the place where image being seen, in conjunction with the critic who has own understanding of specific 'articulation of visual culture'.

Lastly, in terms of ethnographically observational analysis, institutional pressure such as 'government agencies' utilized the empirical methods in national level market research which indicates a power-laden phenomenon in empirically researching into contemporary culture. For example, in a digital research, researcher might found the challenges from 'corporate and state digital data sets.' (Back, Les 2012) Turning to our group project, the challenges we have considered in terms of ethnographic analysis was the capacity to collect materials and data that were not influenced or published by dominant powers, such as the data provided by TV Production Company for stimulating audience rating.

Different ways to address the challenges

After the discussion of various challenges in doing empirically researching into contemporary culture, appropriate methods have been used to address the questions and challenges mentioned above.

To recap the research project, this detective TV series has successfully mediated the cultural experience among audience in both China and The UK, in China even generated the consumption in sexuality issue, which led to gay ‘fanfiction’ culture among young female women audience, who urged British Prime Minister David Cameron for the updating of latest series of Sherlock during his visit to China. Within this blooming fancy-Sherlock economic and cultural environment, our research project tried to analyzing the different ways of mediation and consumption of Sherlock, regardless of the actors, roles, plots or TV series, in UK and China.

To appropriately understand the meaning of mediation, we have referred to *Global culture industry: the mediation of things*. According to Lash and Lury, we are in a globalizationized media era, almost everyone and every corner of the world are under the influence of ‘thingified media’, and national cultures are becoming international cultures. Sherlock, primarily as a fiction character which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created has always been a representative of British detective culture in the world, namely the representational culture entity in superstructure, eventually descended in the infrastructure. And in this process, it’s about mediation of things and we don’t ‘read’ them but ‘do with them’, for instance, audiences recreate images of Sherlock and Watson or go to cinema to watch the movie about Sherlock Holmes. (Lash 2007)

In examining the relevant materials of mediation and consumption of the TV series, as an empirical research project, we basically leveraged three methodologies in addressing the challenges stem from researching into contemporary culture.

Textual Method

The challenge of excessive texts made the way to find potentially valuable texts complicated, which somehow reflects the process of selection and innovation. We have located the textual analysis in a wide textual environment, and the description of the environment has been discussed in Couldry's argument as follows:

'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'

(Couldry, 2000, 87)

By means of thinking about three movements of the flow patterns, for example, in one of our blog contents, I mentioned the process of decision on selecting a review about framing sceneries of Sherlock TV series from www.163.com (Northern Web 2014), which is the main stream media (portal website) in China. According to the textual method, the texts to be chosen are likely to be kinds of 'reading formation' which revealed the media industry strategy, while simultaneously associated with the TV series. The introductions of British sceneries which were showed in the TV series within Chinese media environment have come to my mind as consequence. In this sense, I screened out the relatively valuable text for the purpose of our project, about the mediation and consumption of the TV series.

The texts should be able to maximum the engagements of more people (potential readers), and on the other hand, to create a 'textual event' that can function multi-textually and allowed to be broadcasted in various forms of media. In this procedure, texts were mediated, so that as our potential readers are people from China and UK, the texts shall cater for intertwining the association between British and Chinese texts environment. (Couldry, 2000)

Additionally, this decision has considered the inter-textual patterns in which it teases out the main framing sceneries of Sherlock TV show and it did make a short introduction of the TV series which intertextuality more immanently understood by the potential readers within the text.

Visual Method

There were two challenges I mentioned above: first one was challenge of visual studies which being considered as the ‘dangerous supplement’ role when standing ambiguously between art history and aesthetics. Another one was about dominant implicit methodology of visual culture studies, which solely emphasize the ‘the meaning of visual things’ while ignored viewer’s subjectivities and the circumstance context. In addressing these two challenges, our group respectively approached with Showing seeing method, implicit and practice-based methodology. And here I will talk basically about the showing seeing method.

In terms of showing seeing method, as Mitchell pointed out the very idea of the approach (Mitchell 2002), ‘to treat visual culture and visual images as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings’. This method insisted on going back to the initial status without ‘visual culture’ notion in mind, and trying to describe a visual object by pretending an ethnographer came from a society where no visual media existed. By this method we know that rather than a dangerous supplement to visual disciplines, visual studies developed a multi-disciplines intertwining school of its own. And visibility in as sense reconstructed social construction. (Mitchell, W.J.T., 2002)

The group project elaborates this very notion of showing seeing in a direct way- described a visual image of Sherlock Holmes. Ying Su has found it difficult to finish without social constructed words, however, this visual method allows us to consider how representations between Britain and China differ, and to what extent this is due to societal norms. Recap to what I have argued, the empirical research shall examine the

cultural situation not only in global perspective, but also emphasize the locally-setting context. In this case, however, we have went to another paradoxical direction that we escape from the locally-social constructed setting context, we makes it seem universal and original, which generates more thought-provoking conclusion on visual studies.

Following this line, the definition of cultural studies when describing the empirical research as ‘sustained and rigorous’, not only sustained in updated content of research, but also the approaches, in analyzing cultural experience.

Ethnographic Method

Regarding to the ethnographical perspective, the possibility of power-laden data and materials has led to institutionally influenced challenge in researching into contemporary culture. In this situation, an independent space or, in other words, just as Back has suggested that ‘curating sociology within new public platforms’ for more ‘real time’ and ‘live investigation’ (Back, L. and Puwar, N. 2012), seem to be more prospective in addressing this challenge. Back and Puwar argued that:

‘...the tools and devices for research craft are being extended by digital culture in a hyper-connected world, affording new possibilities to re-imaging observation and the generation of alternative forms of research data.’

(Back, L. and Puwar, N 2012:7)

Taking our research of the mediation of Sherlock in China for example, Siwen has concluded the latest popular new media platforms in China for reporting news or reviews about Sherlock. Even though traditional media such as newspaper or radio, magazine still function in broadcasting the relevant news, the phenomenon of mediation of Sherlock in China has led to more dominantly used in new media platforms , such as Weibo(microblog tool) and Wechat (instant message interactive tool). In this sense, researcher could collect the research data from multiple cultural experience-sharing platforms, in a way of ‘re-imaging observation’. As I have mentioned above, what Lash and Lury called the ‘mediated thing’. Things that related

to Sherlock Holmes TV series are no longer being interpreted by audience, they 'do' with these things. (Lash, S 2007) For example, the diversified forms of news of Sherlock that not only texts but also images/pictures and videos made by fans are spread on mass media platforms of China.

Self-reflexivity

In cultural studies, the capacity of 'self-reflexive' enables the impartial analysis on the complexity that stem from individual cultural experience. In another landscape, cultural experience and insights have led us into 'material conditions' in which we ourselves became 'selves'. Just as what Haraway has claimed that our views are all partial and particular as a vision can never come from nowhere or everywhere but somewhere (Haraway, Donna J. 1991). In our project case, as we have mentioned in the very start of the blog, insisting on blending empirical research with cultural background, while simultaneously 'jump out of the box' to examine the situated culture and environment where we absorbing the cultural experience, only in this way, could we avoid the narrow mindset in cultural studies.

Conclusion

This essay focus on the comprehension on Couldry's definition of cultural studies, the relevant theme that centered around the definition is the empirical research project about the mediation of Sherlock Holmes TV series around the world, particularly in both China and UK. Basically we focus on three kinds of methodologies in elaborating this phenomenon, in terms of the various ways of addressing the challenges of researching into contemporary culture. Popular culture served as an important research object in cultural studies, has encountered with power-laden complexity within the research process. So I have argued that the empirical research on popular culture shall focus on the mediation and consumption phenomenon, and examine the cultural situation not only in global perspective, but also emphasize the locally-setting context. In this sense, the sustained and rigorous empirical should able to look beyond the cultural phenomenon and extract the essence of general pattern

which can appropriately applicable to different environment.

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