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.

Laura Clancy

SOCL 923: Critical Methods in Media and Cultural Studies

3145 words

INTRODUCTION

*“[C]ultural 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)

Cultural studies is a broad, interdisciplinary field encompassing a range of Social Science, English, History and Media-based matters within academia (Johnson, 1986). Often concerned with issues around power and affect (hence Couldry’s “power-laden”), it became popular in the 1950s, with Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall as founding figures. It aims to teach us that “you don’t know the meaning of a mass-cultural artifact until you find out what those masses of people actually do with it” (Bérubé, 2009). Culture itself is variously defined, from “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement” (linked to debates about high and low culture) to “ideas, customs and social behavior of particular people” (Oxford Dictionary, 2014), hence the wide-reaching nature of cultural *studies,* and the mass of associated material*.* The discipline encompasses analysis of popular culture artifacts, such as magazines, advertisements and film, and so it is consistently entwined with contemporary culture and the media.

“Sustained and rigorous… research” (Couldry, 2000:1) proposes a depth of analysis occurring over time, evidenced in the discipline’s long history from the 1950s. It is a constantly shifting scholarship, changing as those masses alter ‘what they do’ with an artifact, therefore research must be persistent. As Couldry states, self-reflexivity for cultural studies researchers is vital. Culture is all encompassing, and the researcher is bound to be influenced by it and have opinions about it. Being self-reflexive means accounting for this, and being aware of the power of the researcher (*see* Adkins, 2002*)*. I will discuss this in more detail later in this piece.

This essay aims to consider Couldry’s quote, and the above definitions, in relation to the group research project undertaken for the module *Critical Methods in Media and Cultural Studies*. I will draw on the various methods used in the project, and critique these using key quotes, focusing on the challenges of empirical research and how my research evidences cultural studies. Firstly, I will provide a brief summary of our research and the methods used to provide context.

RESEARCH PROJECT

Our research project was entitled ‘*Sherlock Holmes* Worldwide: Mediations in the UK and China’. The popular BBC show *Sherlock* (2010-), starring Benedict Cumberbatch, has become popular in China, airing on Chinese streaming website Youku.com. Our proposed research investigates this, and asks the research questions:

* 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?

We proposed looking at various representations of the show - on social media, on forums, in the media, and so on – and comparing the differences and similarities between the two countries, linking this with cultural context. Considering there is no culture without media, our research fits perfectly with Couldry’s quotation. *Sherlock* is “power-laden” (Couldry, 2000:1) in that it is pervasively commodified in ‘expanding’ spheres of globalization, leading to increased influence and domination. The globalization of the show widens possible research areas, broadening material and, also, making findings more fascinating. Our project aims to be ‘sustained and rigorous’: conducted over a long period of time to gather timely data, with thorough analysis of each material.

Our research plan suggests the utilization of textual analysis (websites, social networks, reviews, news items, academic papers), visual analysis (clips of the show, fan-made videos, images), interviews (two focus group interviews with British and Chinese students), and ethnographic participant observation (of a *Sherlock* forum). The range of methodologies used is reactive to the mass of data we have discovered. The internet, in particular, is saturated with material for analysis, and therefore we need an assortment of methods to appropriately analyse each mediation.

I will now present a number of quotations from various theorists to consider various aspects of the research project.

*“The massive accumulation of digital data in the hands of corporations to generate (largely market driven) predictions is not approached as a threat which displaces the methodological edge of the sociologist, who faces an ‘empirical crisis’ (Savage and Burrows, 2007) and is left behind in the wake of digitally accelerated forms of observation and construction. Rather, these contemporary developments are a provocation to the sociologist to collaboratively invent devices which adapt, re-purpose and ‘take advantage of the analytic and empirical capacities that are embedded in online media’*.”  (Back & Puwar, 2013:9)

Back and Puwar’s article ‘A manifesto for live methods: provocations and capacities’, considers the difficulties of new forms of digital culture for the sociologist. They support this claim by referencing Savage and Burrow’s article ‘The coming crisis of empirical sociology’, which claims the innumerable (often live) disseminations of data in the digital age makes sociologists’ place unclear (2007). Culture shifts so quickly, and it is increasingly difficult to create timely, relevant analysis when the sheer amount of data is overwhelming. Back and Puwar (2013) suggest overcoming the challenges of ‘live’ sociology by embracing it’s opportunities for new, inventive methods - ‘live methods’ – and suggest eleven ways sociology can achieve this, including “curating sociology within new public platforms” (10) and “avoid the ‘trap of the now’ and be attentive to the larger scale and longer historical time frame” (8). They say now, during times of change, is the crucial moment for considering the relevance of sociology and sociological methodology.

The above quotation comes from their fourth suggestion for improvement, “make sociological craft more artful and crafty” (9), in which they encourage researchers to avoid inhibition and embrace methodological creativity. They summarize one challenge of empirical research: the consolidation of media in the hands of capitalist corporations. I found this a pertinent issue in our research, where public service broadcaster BBC has gained international power by transmitting abroad. This was, indeed, a “largely market driven” (ibid) tactic. Even though *Sherlock* is aired freely on the internet in China, products attached to the show are commodities, such as reproductions of costumes. Culture thus becomes a business. We have not shied from this, rather, we embraced this phenomenon and referenced it in the second research question (above), as Back and Puwar (2013) recommend. Rather than limiting research possibilities, we believed commodity culture enhances them, providing more material and data to consider.

I used the term ‘power’ to discuss the BBC’s influence because information *is* power. The BBC are promoting their own discourses, thus they are influencing the audience. This has often been discussed in terms of ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1991), where power is inferred rather than enforced, and the public are controlled passively through unquestioning cooperation. This is especially interesting when we consider it in terms of Chinese culture, where there have been many issues of free speech. Indeed, China is one of only a few countries in the world which has banned the use of social media sites Facebook and Twitter, as well as video streaming site YouTube. Instead, they promote the use of Chinese-made website WeiBo, which is national rather than international. The state is, here, controlling the content society have access to, and they also prohibit communicating with groups abroad and signing online petitions, amongst much more. Such active dominance over society is central to our research project, when Sherlock is inherently British. Are there debates in China about banning the show?

A conscious effort was made throughout our project to utilize “digitally accelerated” (Back and Puwar, 2013:9) forms of data. We regularly used material from social media (such as tweets[[1]](#footnote-1) or Weibo[[2]](#footnote-2) posts) or memes[[3]](#footnote-3) to consider fan reactions and opinions, and found new studies as examples of how best to analyse such material (such as Robertshaw, 2014). By doing this, we “re-imagine[d] observation” (Back and Puwar, 2013:7), using live methods on live data, and we could do the same for Chinese and British media sources. We also planned to use participant observation: using a traditional, empirical method in a modern forum environment to consider these new forms of data.

I agree with the position of Back and Puwar (2013), as opposed to Savage and Burrows (2007), on sociological crises. Empirical research is continually challenging and, although contemporary culture may make it even more so, sociology is even more vital to appropriately consider the influence of these changes on society and culture. Our research actively refutes claims of sociological crisis, rather, we prove shifting and re-appropriating traditional methods, and inventing new methods, allows digitally accelerated cultures to enhance research. It might be challenging, but contemporary culture is also hugely helpful, and fascinating, to research.

*“I propose what I hope is a more nuanced and balanced approach located in the equivocation between the visual image as instrument and agency, the image as a tool for manipulation, on the one hand, and as an apparently autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings on the other. This approach would 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”* (Mitchell, 2002:175)

Mitchell’s article offers a critique of visual culture and its uses, referencing ten ‘myths’ of visual studies, such as “visual culture entails the liquidation of art as we have known it” (169), and proposing eight counter-theses to refute them. He states visual images are not passive, rather “a system of codes that interposes an ideological veil between us and the real world” (170-1). An image is symbolic, portraying meaning through a series of codes and conventions, which can be analysed using Saussurean semiotics[[4]](#footnote-4) (Saussure, 1966; *see also* Barthes, 1974). His quote above surmises this point, and he posits the visual image as simultaneously purposefully manipulative and independently formed. I wish to critique this approach using examples from our own research.

We found visual images as *ways of structuring* “instrument and agency” (Mitchell, 2002:175), through the creation of fan-made images. By having the opportunity to design images such as memes, fans are asserting their own agency in interpreting the show however they wish with no barriers, and demonstrate this freedom by sharing the images on the internet with other fans. Despite this independence, these customs are structured because memes are designed in particular ways, often humorously, and users are somewhat limited to meme conventions to ‘fit in’ with other web users. Agency is permitted, but only within certain boundaries, and fitting appropriate discourses. This links to images as “tool[s] for manipulation” (Mitchell, 2002:175), where images promoting one discourse, preferred by the individual who created it, are privileged. Thus, others are silenced, and viewers are manipulated. Images created by corporations where power is consolidated are more obviously manipulative, which we evidenced with official images disseminated by the BBC. They promote a specific discourse of Sherlock as intelligent and mysterious, whilst Watson is clearly the sidekick: never the star of the posters, rather, at Sherlock’s side, assisting him. Should we undertake the research project, we can analyse the clothes worn in the images, the expressions on the character’s faces, or the relative position of the camera and the actor, to read what else the corporation is attempting to communicate.

In contrast to the BBC’s creations, online images are particularly liable to being “autonomous[ly] source[d]” (Mitchell, 2002:175). On the internet, everybody is anonymous, and the proliferation of sharing data means the original author is easily lost. Therefore, is agency actually possible? Are the authors stating anything about themselves when they are essentially invisible? In addition, the perception of knowledge must be accounted for, in that an individual interprets every image differently. No two interpretations are identical, so to what extent can we claim their manipulative value? Our visual analysis of fan-created images will explore these issues, comparing and contrasting various cultures. Mitchell’s assertion of images as “go-betweens in social transactions” (2002:175) is helpful here, where meanings are conveyed and circulated globally, but are not the only element of interpretation and understanding. There is another element of elucidation at play, which we will explore using cultural context.

Mitchell coined the phrase “the pictorial turn” to describe the vitality of visual images for conveying meaning (1994). They are important aspects of the realm of language, and should not be ignored by researchers. I find this particularly important for cultural studies, given the media’s proliferation of visual images. Despite debates about autonomy and manipulation, I do believe images convey situated, influential meaning, and “structure our encounters” (Mitchell, 2002:175) both with other people and with the media itself. Thus, their affective value cannot be underestimated, and they are vital to any contemporary cultural project.

*“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)

Couldry’s article explores the problems of textual analysis, given the mass of texts available. He criticizes traditional analysis, which focused on “the canon” (67) and ignored the text’s context, which worked to stabilize and stagnate meanings. To combat this, we must explore the “textual environment” (81) by considering flows of meanings and co-production between texts and readers, intertextuality and wider connections. Textual analysis is complex, and although simple semiotic readings are useful, we must contextualize when and where we use them.

We certainly found this applicable to our project. There is a mass of material attached to our research, and after narrowing it down we had to decide on the most appropriate method of analysis. Semiotic analysis would not necessarily be useful when, for us, cultural context is so central to our analysis. Two separate, differently situated analyses would have to take place (Chinese and British) for this method to be plausible, and even then the crossovers between the two readings would be ignored. We must consider more complex, complete, contextualised readings, which account for cultural dependencies and varying interpretations. Although Couldry criticizes the use of the word ‘text’, stating it is too simple and we should think of the text as a social object (71), I will continue to use the word for the sake of this piece. Note I am always referring to multiple ‘texts’, of various sorts and fields, and my use of the term is purely for ease.

Couldry’s suggestion of ‘flows’ is useful for achieving a complex critique. ‘Flows’ supposes movement and shift of meaning, and takes into account processes of interpretation. We can think of ‘flows’ in relation to the international flows of meaning between British and Chinese audiences. They may be getting identical basic information (the same episode content), but their *interpretation* of the events is different, and the readers discuss the show in different ways (for instance, on different social media platforms). Therefore, their “textual environment” (Couldry, 2000:87) – the flows between meanings, texts and readers – is different.

Couldry places great emphasis on the role of both textuality and intertextuality. Textuality defines how something “functions as a text” (71) and the varying ways readers use them, which is relevant in our research with the crossover of media platforms. As demonstrated, we’ve used material from television, newspapers, and the internet, and these mediations are consumed differently (we have used the ‘uses and gratifications’ theory to consider this [*see* Blumler and Katz, 1974]). Intertextuality, meanwhile, refers to the relationships *between* texts, and the ways they feed into one another. We have found this especially prevalent, with Chinese online audience responses suggesting Sherlock to be in a romantic relationship with his assistant Watson (China Blog Staff, 2014): the audience’s subsequent viewing of the show is influenced by this particular reading, which originated on a different platform. Textuality and intertextuality also work well online, where flows of meaning are transferred from viewing the episode to responding on forums and social networks. It is, as Couldry states, impossible to analyse one text in isolation.

Couldry also discusses ‘tactics of reading’ to describe how readers move through texts using selection and filtering to make texts “habitable”: to make them make sense (73). In our research, we can use this to consider how Chinese audiences make sense of a very ‘British’ show. In order to inhabit the text, and make sense of British references, they must negotiate them and filter the content. Hence, perhaps, the introduction of the sexuality discourse, a universal narrative which can be related to any culture.

CONCLUSION

*“Reflexion... means 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”* (Rose, 2012:551)

Rose’s article is, by and large, a critique of popular visual culture studies techniques. She does, however, make some points about reflexivity which are useful to summarise this essay. As outlined earlier, reflexivity means being critical about the position of the researcher. The aim is to enhance subsequent research through decreasing bias and researcher influence. In this piece, I have been reflexive in that I have “paused over” (Rose, 2012:551) methodology used, considering how it can be problematised for cultural studies, and thinking of ways to improve the research. I have demonstrated the mass of data which Couldry referred to in the original quote, and discussed how we have dealt with this and the methodologies we have put in place to appropriately contemplate it all. Although I could not consider all the potential methods, due to space constraints, I have discussed visual and textual analysis in detail, as well as inventive methods on the internet. Back and Puwar’s article (2013) and their mention of the ‘crisis of sociology’ challenged traditional empirical research, and I discussed how our research group overcame these challenges through embracing new methodology to enhance our critique. Cultural studies link to new media means it is an ever-changing discipline, with the prospect for continual methodological updating.

A reflexive process such as this is beneficial in a number of ways. It encourages the use of new techniques through active critique of old, and gives the researcher time to consider the positives of embracing inventive methodology. It also allows deeper, extended consideration of the problems of perceptive knowledge and cultural dependencies. ‘Flows of meaning’ was particularly useful for consideration of this, considering the interpretative devices used by the reader.

This self-reflexive exercise has allowed me to consider the roles of various methodologies, and why they are chosen. Before beginning analysis on any data, suitable methodologies must be weighted and decided upon. And the use of key quotes, as in this piece, means learning from other researcher’s findings and reflections. Culture is notoriously difficult to research, and any advice is beneficial.

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1. ‘Tweets’ are posts on social networking site Twitter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Weibo is a Chinese microblogging site, comparable to a hybrid between Facebook and Twitter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Memes’ on the internet are images or other materials which people copy and alter themselves. They are often humorous. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Semiotics is the study of meaning through signs and symbols. It is closely linked with linguistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)