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**Department of Sociology**

**MA COURSEWORK COVERSHEET**

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| **Name**  **Siriporn Arunsangsuree** | **MA Degree Scheme**  **MA Gender and Women’s Studies** | |
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| *Except for ideas and passages properly acknowledged in the text, this writing is all my own work. It has not been submitted in this form in part or whole for any other course and, where similar ideas are used, they have been duly acknowledged. In the case of electronically submitted work, I also consent to this work being stored electronically and copied for assessment purposes and the department's use of plagiarism detection systems in order to check the integrity of assessed work.*  Signed:……… Siriporn Arunsangsuree ……………………  Date:………………… 22 May 2014 …………………………  **One hard copy** of coursework should be submitted to Cathlin Prill, B139, Sociology Department, Bowland North, together with the appropriate coversheet. A copy of the coversheet can be downloaded from the MA resources page on the Sociology webpage (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/current/ma/>) and **one electronic copy** of the coursework should also be submitted via MOODLE. All coursework should include an accurate word count of the main text (not including bibliography and appendices). | | |

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.

**Introduction**

Cultural studies has remained in academic area for long time, however, there has been an effort to define what the cultural studies truly is and to find what the cultural studies genuinely involves. Moreover, there are a lot of questions about the cultural studies’ direction in the future. For example, the issues of pedagogy: what to teach or study in cultural studies. In order to define what cultural studies really means, there has been some assumption demonstrating the effort in describing the cultural studies. Couldry (2000, p.1) mentions that:

Raymond Williams (1961: 10) wrote that there was no academic subject which allowed him to ask the questions in which he was interested: questions concerning how culture and society, democracy and the individual voice, interrelate. It is cultural studies, we normally assume, that has filled this gap.

Furthermore, cultural studies appears to be interpreted according to various areas of its application such as in the textual, visual, observational and participatory methods. This application implies that cultural studies tends to involve in various academic areas, as well as it implies that cultural studies is likely to be used in practical ways.

This essay will critically analyse the meaning of cultural studies. Next, this essay will discuss the meaning of cultural studies in various, textual, visual, observational and participatory methods. Finally, the essay will describe how the selfies on the Internet have addressed the challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture.

**Meaning of cultural studies**

In order to study the meaning of the cultural studies, Couldry (2000, p.1) describes that ‘cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture’. In order to analyse the meaning of this quotation, Couldry (2000, p.2) suggests that the ideas of culture need to expand by instead of ‘thinking about culture as particular valued texts’; Couldry (2000, p.2) suggests that culture should be thought ‘as a broader process in which each person has an equal right to be heard, and each person’s voice and reflections about culture are valuable’. From this quotation, individuals seem to be considered as a significant factor of the process of the cultural studies as an approach.

Individuals’ perspectives play the important roles in cultural studies in terms that the individuals’ perspectives help demonstrate the types of relationship in society, which the individuals are formed. The forms of relationship are expressed through the individuals’ life story or individuals’ life history. However, there are some critiques stating that the individuals’ perspectives focus on self so that individuals’ perspectives are not able to explain culture which occupies the more massive perspectives. Couldry (2000, p.7) argues that ‘thinking about the individual’s relation to culture means thinking about the process of individuation (how we each became individuals).’ This explains the relation between individual and culture. There is an explicit example demonstrating the connection between the individual story and culture. Ang (1994, p.4 as cited in Couldry, 2000, p.7) describes that ‘her relationship to Chineseness as someone of Chinese origin who does not speak Chinese’. The discussion of Ang’s story ‘has expressed stories’ function in terms of a reflexive positioning of oneself in history and culture’ (Couldry, 2000, p.7).

In addition, the individuals are associated with the cultural studies in terms of how individuals communicate cultural studies in academic area. Individual experiences are brought to discuss in classroom. Williams (1989a, as cited in Couldry, 2000) describes that individuals need to discuss the academic context which is able to be brought to their own situation or their own experiences. Moreover, in the United States, in the context of multicultural classroom, culture studies classroom generally discusses individual’s life experiences.

Apart from the individuals’ experiences, there is another one crucial factor that involves the cultural studies. Power relations appear to be another significant factor in cultural studies. Couldry (2000, p.2) mentions that ‘the necessary link between studying culture and theorising *power* is one thing on which most cultural studies writers agree, and it is treated here as fundamental to defining cultural studies as a distinctive area of study’. Power relations in cultural studies can be driven by politics, economics, or other forms of social discriminations. These kinds of power relations affect the perspectives of cultural in relation to issues of power. For example, who is represented and how to represent power relation in culture or discussing who speaks and who is silent in the society is able to be an example of the power relation in cultural studies (Couldry, 2000, p.2). Furthermore, the relation of power in cultural studies results in an expansion of self-critique or self-reflexivity. Thinking of power relation helps individuals to recognise or rethink about their own position in the chain of power in culture. Therefore, it could be suggested that there is interrelation between individual story and power relation in culture in terms that the thinking of relation of oneself as an individual in power inevitably depends on the life experiences or life stories of those individuals themselves.

To put it simply, in relation to the empirical research that consists of the experiences, life stories, experiments and the knowledge from the observations, cultural studies tends to use the individual’s life story or life experience resulted from the self-critique or self-reflexivity to help broaden space into the complexity of power relation in contemporary culture.

**The meaning of cultural studies in various textual, visual, observational and participatory methods**

In order to apply the meaning of cultural studies in various methods, the discussion will begin with the meaning of cultural studies in textual method. Couldry (2000, p.87) suggests that ‘instead of the simple discrete text-reader relationship, we are looking at textual environment comprising complex patterns of flows: flows of meaning, texts and potential readers.’ The quotation demonstrates how the cultural studies helps expand place for the self-reflexive empirical research into power-laden complexity of contemporary culture. The analysis starts from the ‘simple discrete text-reader relationship’. Cultural studies helps create the ideas to change the relationship between text and readers from the separate relationship to be interrelated relationship.

As, nowadays, there are excessive texts created because of the various types of media forms emerged from development and innovation of communication technologies, the relationship between text and readers become different. In the previous days, the amount of the writer is smaller than the amount of the reader, on the other hand; recently, a large number of both writers and readers are found. This change of relationship between text and readers reflect the expansion of power relation between text and readers as well.

Moreover, the development and emergence of new technologies produce the wider textual environment that brings about the different meaning of the text, forms of the text and the potential readers of the text. As for the meaning of the text in different textual environment, the different textuality or intertextuality can deliver different meaning of the same text. For example, the text ‘live young’ and the visual of smiling baby on the natural mineral water bottle and the same texts and same visual but presented on the magazine for elderly, the message from the first intertextuality could have a standardised meaning that easily to communicate and recognise that the natural water is good for health and image, whereas, the latter may implies these the message of living happily and cheerfully like a baby. With respect to forms of text, the high technologies also diverse the different forms of text. For instance, the short message service on the mobile phone and the text written and sent via postal service are able to present the different forms of text. With regard to the potential readers, due to the development and emergence of new high technologies, texts are found to be more accessible. For example, text on the online spaces can be accessed from smartphone which easily and potentially manage to connect to the Internet in most of place and time. In addition, this new high technologies also change the ways of readers’ practices in terms of their accessibility to the text easier.

As for the cultural studies in visual methods, Roses (2012, p.549) suggests that ‘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 routinisation and place-specificity they make certain sorts of things visible in particular ways’. Each individual sees and understands the image or picture in the different ways, at the same time, the image or picture manage to manipulate individuals in particular ways. There are three implications in the word ‘meaning’ in visual culture including viewers, context, and meaning. As for viewers in visual culture, it appears that viewers in visual culture contain the meaning of specific audience or specific group of audience in particular place and time. The context implies the environment when audiences access the visual. For example, in process of watching the series of Sherlock Holmes, the different specific group of audiences such as in England, family watch if together from the television in the living room, whereas, in China, an individual watches it on the Internet. These different viewers watching the series in different contexts result in different meaning from the same series because those specific groups of audience differently elaborate the series. The different environment and social context that form and construct the vision of people in society lead to the different way of perceiving in visual culture.

As for the reflexivity in visual culture, Rose (2012, p.551) describes that ‘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’. This quotation reflects the reflexivity in visual culture as it is in the position of the critic. There is always position of the standing point of the critic. Reflexivity means to attempt to see where standing point is and when the critic starts. Therefore, from the Rose’s quotation, it seems to imply that reflexivity in visual culture are associated with taking a space to examine the method and object of the questioning in order to see where the standing point of visual method is and when the visual method is used.

With regard to the observational method, Suchman (2012, p.49) mentions that ‘my own work has been concerned with the question of how humans and machines are figured together – or *con*figured – in contemporary technological discourses and practices, and how they might be *re*configured, or figured together differently’. Due to the emergence of new high technologies, human and machine seem to be inseparable in terms that they have interacted. The figuration is likely to be considered as the metaphor, concept, or image in different context or different culture. While, technologies occupy the implication of the meaning-made device and language as a vehicle to communicate and contain the sense of cultural carrier. In terms of observational culture, the observation of human and machine or technologies configuration plays a significant role. For example, the observation of how people’s practices change when they use technologies or the observation of the different group of people’s practices dealing with the technologies. To put it simply, within this high technology era, society is likely to be material culture, at the same time; the technology seems to be culture as well.

With respect to the participatory culture, Back and Puwar (2013, p.7) suggest that:

‘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.’

The participatory method in cultural studies is frequently related to some forms of observation. Therefore, when the digital culture enters to take part in participatory method, it seems to result in re-imagine observation and generation of alternative forms of research data. As for re-imagine observation, the observation becomes observant participation in the field site research. While the observant participation takes place, the researcher observes something and also doing another thing. For example, while the observation is continuing, the researcher may take note, record the video or film. Moreover, the digital culture results in generation of alternative forms of research data such as data on the Internet. This seems to lead to new process of observation the way in which the observer is able to change the object that be observed. For instance, in social media platform, the researchers participate to create some objects by themselves and do the observation so they can change the objects they are observing whenever they need. In addition, one of explicit alternative forms of research data resulted from digital culture is live method. The observers or researchers happen to participate in live observation such as the observation on twitter. This live research is considered to be advantageous in sentimental analysis of people live feeling. Furthermore, the change of how to observe and the observant participation also bring about the new forms of power relation between human and culture which make this power relation more complex.

**Research project: Selfies**

The research project that is brought to analysed in this essay is the selfies of the Milus Ciley, who is an American female celebrity, on her Instagram account. This case study manages to address the challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture. As the Instagram is a social networking that provides a space for uploading photos and videos and a place for sharing communicating, commenting, and sharing the ideas, the methods presented in this case study that are associated with the meaning of cultural studies are textual, visual, observational and participatory methods.

As for textual method, the Instagram provides a space for users to text to each other. This leads to the analysis of textual culture in terms of the textual environment that creates new flows of meaning of the text, forms of the text, and new group of potential readers. However, the Instagram as an application on the Internet challenges the ways to analyse in textual methods. For example, people who are considered to be writer or text producer can become the readers at the same time when they switch to read or watch the other person’s Instagram account. In addition, this creates the new practice of users in terms that they keep posting, writing and reading the intertexuality of text and visual on their Instagram account regularly. This can lead to the situation of text excess.

With respect to visual method, the selfies of Miley Cyrus on her Instagram account reflect various viewers, various context, and different interpretation of meaning of the selfies. Again as the Instagram is an online application, it brings worldwide users; therefore, the backgrounds of viewers or audiences are various. This variety of viewers or audiences results in the different context while they are watching or perceiving the visuals. Then, it can lead to the different interpretation of the meaning of the selfies. As well as, the selfies as an image or picture that can manipulate audiences or convince them to see in the particular way, the selfies actually can persuade some group of viewers or audiences because of the differences of their backgrounds stem the different perception of message from selfies.

With regard to observational and participatory methods, this research project addresses its challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture in terms of its interrelation between human and technology and its observant participation of researchers and new forms of research data. As for the interrelation between human and technology, the researcher can observe when and how the people use this Intagram application through the device such as smartphone, laptop, or personal computer. The different figures of using these devices appear to lead to the different configuration between them. With respect to the participatory method, researcher can become the observant participants by posting their own selfies while observing the others’. Moreover, this observant participation manages to suggest the live research due to the services of the Instagram application that allows users to have live communication to each other.

**Conclusion**

Cultural studies is likely to be defined as it helps expand the space for self-reflexive empirical research into the power-laden complexity of contemporary culture. This definition demonstrate what, how and when to reflect oneself in cultural studies as well as this definition can show the more complexity of power relation in society in cultural studies. Moreover, this definition of cultural studies happens to be interpreted in several methods, such as textual, visual, observational, and participatory methods. Finally, this definition of cultural studies can be used in practical way.

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