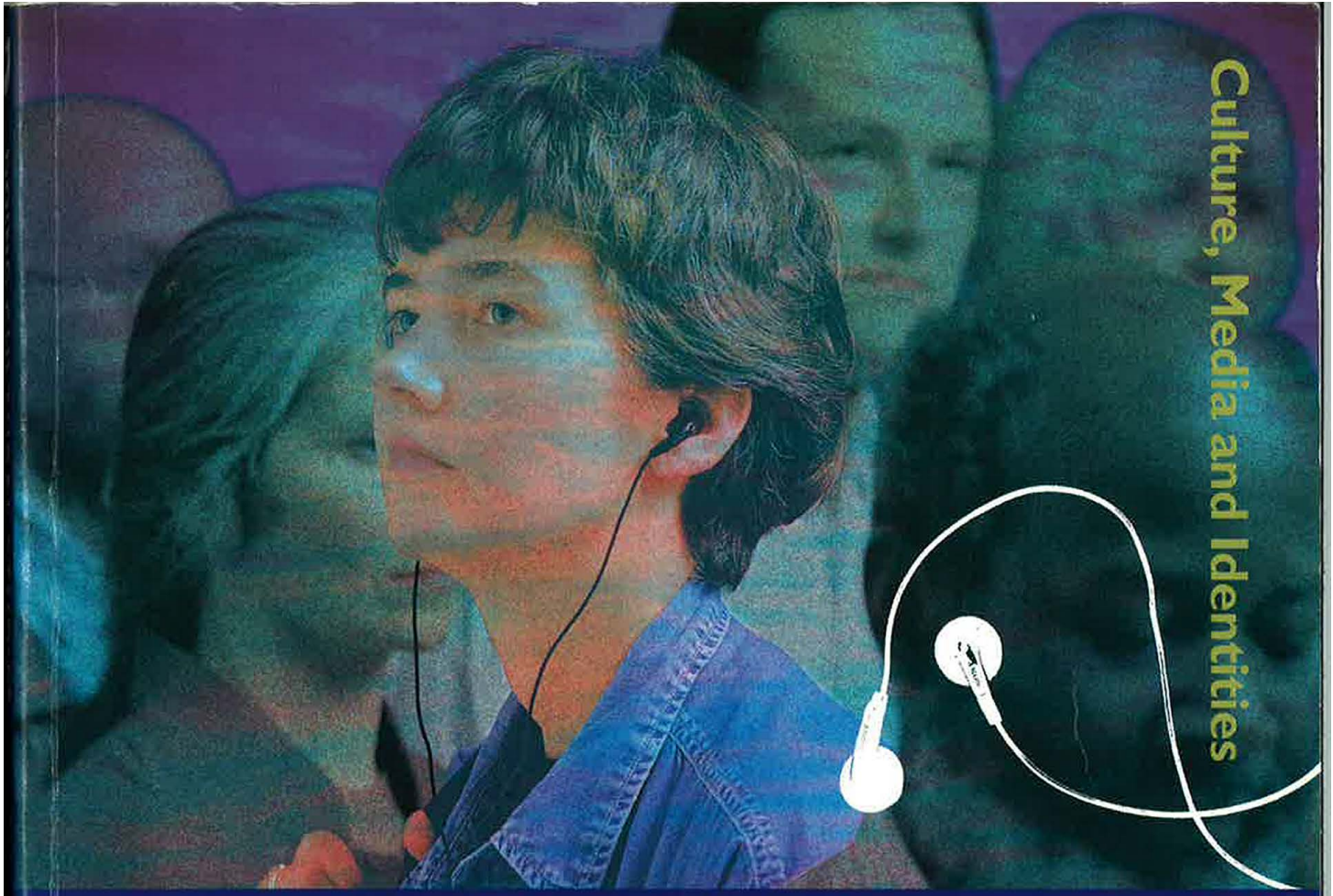

Culture, Media and Identities

DOING CULTURAL STUDIES

The Story of the Sony Walkman

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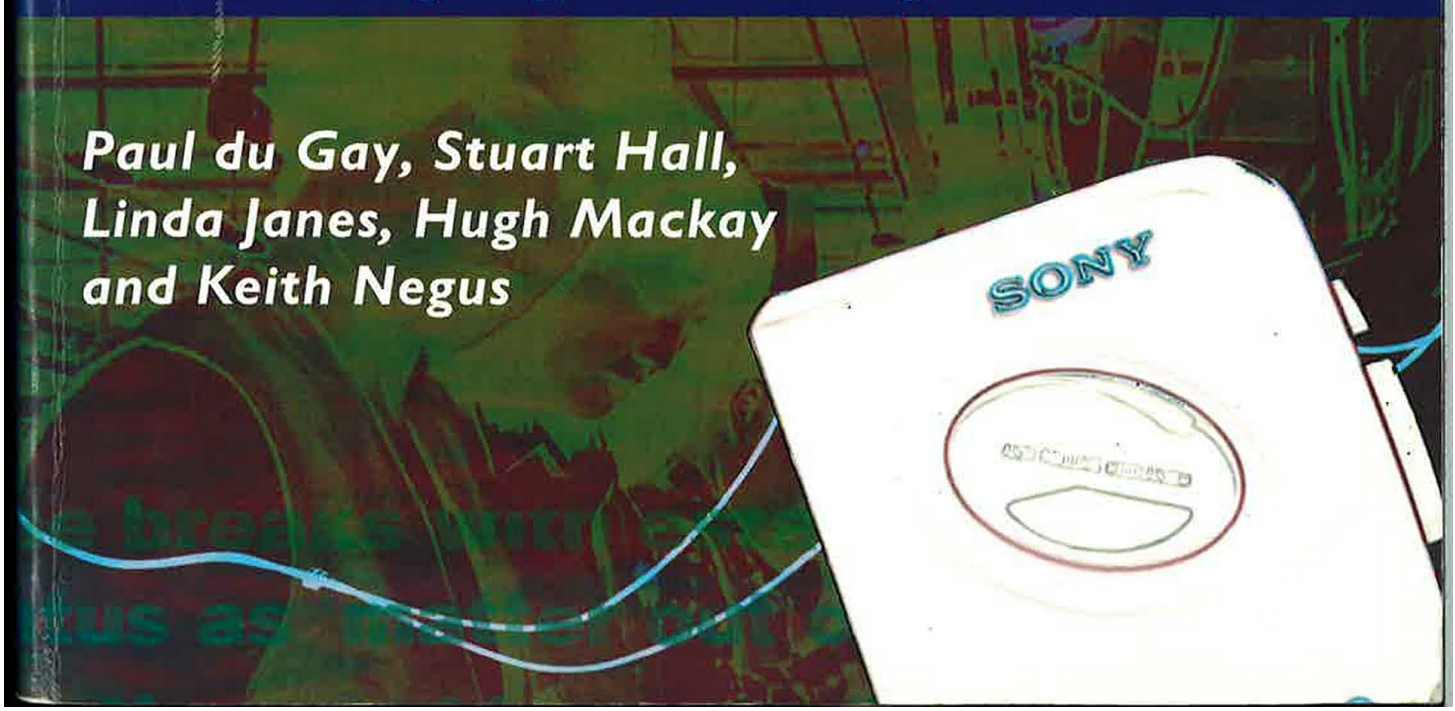
Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay
and Keith Negus



INTRODUCTION

These days it seems increasingly difficult to get away from 'culture'. Once associated almost exclusively with the 'arts', the term now pops up in the most unlikely of places. In that seemingly most 'material' of domains – the world of business and the economic – for example, 'culture' has come to occupy an increasingly important position. Over the last few years people working in large enterprises are likely to have found themselves exposed to 'culture change' programmes as part of managerial attempts to make organizations more efficient, effective and profitable. Similarly, in the political domain questions of 'culture' have achieved a remarkable centrality in recent times. Throughout the 1980s Margaret Thatcher's radical programme of reform was represented in large part as a cultural crusade, concerned with the attitudes, values and forms of self-understanding embedded in both individual and institutional activities. The Conservative party's political project of reconstruction was simultaneously defined as one of cultural reconstruction, as an attempt to transform Britain into an 'enterprise culture'. During the 1990s questions of culture have continued to dominate political debate but with a rather different inflection: this time the effects on national cultural identity of closer ties with the European Community have topped the political agenda.

In addition to the economy and the polity, the academy has also witnessed a massive upsurge of interest in things cultural. In universities and colleges throughout the land, a subject called 'cultural studies' has emerged as higher education's most upwardly mobile discipline. A brief glance at contemporary higher education curricula reveals its onward march with courses in semiotics appearing in management schools, and seminars on television and popular culture developing in sites stretching from sociology to modern languages and literature.

There are many reasons for this explosion of 'culture', but two in particular stand out. The first we might call *substantive* (i.e. concerned with matters of empirical substance), in that it refers directly to the increased importance of cultural practices and institutions in every area of our social lives. The growth of the mass media, new global information systems and flows, and new visual forms of communication have had – and continue to have – a profound impact on the ways our lives are organized and on the ways in which we comprehend and relate to one another and to ourselves. The second we might term *epistemological*, in that it is primarily concerned with matters of knowledge.

Within the explanatory hierarchy of the social sciences in general and sociology in particular, culture has traditionally been allotted a rather inferior role. In contrast to economic and political processes, for example, which were routinely assumed to alter material conditions in the 'real' world – how people thought and acted – in ways which could be clearly identified and described, and hence to provide 'hard' knowledge of the social world, cultural processes were deemed rather ephemeral and superficial. Because cultural processes dealt with seemingly less tangible things – signs, images,

language, beliefs – they were often assumed, particularly by Marxist theorists, to be 'superstructural', being both dependent upon and reflective of the primary status of the material base and thus unlikely to provide social scientists with valid, 'real' knowledge.

In recent years all this has changed and the cultural has come to occupy a much enhanced position in the social sciences. Rather than being seen as merely reflective of other processes – economic or political – culture is now regarded as being as constitutive of the social world as economic or political processes. Not only this, in recent years 'culture' has been promoted to an altogether more important role as theorists have begun to argue that because all social practices are meaningful practices, they are all fundamentally cultural. In order to conduct a social practice we need to give it a certain meaning, have a conception of it, be able to think meaningfully about it. The production of social meanings is therefore a necessary precondition for the functioning of all social practices and an account of the cultural conditions of social practices must form part of the sociological explanation of how they work. Cultural description and analysis is therefore increasingly crucial to the production of sociological knowledge.

The aim of this book is to introduce you to both these strands of the contemporary turn to culture – the substantive and the epistemological – and to do so through the medium of a particular case-study: that of the Sony Walkman*. Through the Walkman example we hope to show you not only how and why cultural practices and institutions have come to play such a crucial role in our lives in the present, but also to introduce you to some of the central ideas, concepts and methods of analysis involved in doing a 'cultural study'.

We have chosen the Walkman because it is a typical cultural artefact and medium of modern culture, and through studying its 'story' or 'biography' one can learn a great deal about the ways in which culture works in late-modern societies such as our own. In examining the production of cultural artefacts in the contemporary world, for example, sociologists increasingly focus upon the activities of a relatively small band of transnational corporations such as Disney Corporation, News International and Sony. For it is huge business corporations such as Sony which produce many of the products we routinely employ in our everyday cultural lives – whether they be videos, music cassettes and CDs or other forms of cultural software such as computer games, as well as the hardware, such as the Walkman or PlayStation, on which to run them. To explore how culture works in the present day therefore requires us to focus our attention on the structure, strategy and culture of these increasingly global commercial enterprises.

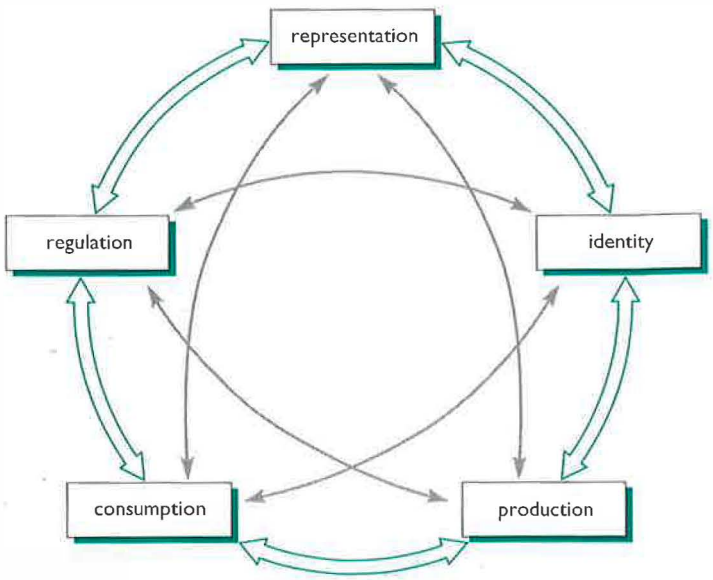
* Sony and Walkman are registered trademarks of the Sony Corporation.

In the past it was not unusual for sociological analyses of cultural products to begin and end with these processes of production. The mode of production of a cultural artefact was assumed to be the prime determinant of the meaning which that product would or could come to possess. This book breaks with this logic in that it analyses the biography of a cultural artefact in terms of a theoretical model based on the **articulation** of a number of distinct processes whose interaction can and does lead to variable and contingent outcomes. By the term 'articulation' we are referring to the process of connecting disparate elements together to form a temporary unity. An 'articulation' is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two or more different or distinct elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, or absolute and essential for all time; rather it is a linkage whose conditions of existence or emergence need to be located in the contingencies of circumstance (see Hall, 1996). Thus, rather than privileging one single phenomenon – such as the process of production – in explaining the meaning that an artefact comes to possess, it is argued in this book that it is in a combination of processes – in their articulation – that the beginnings of an explanation can be found.

articulation

The five major cultural processes which the book identifies are: *Representation, Identity, Production, Consumption* and *Regulation*. These five processes form the basis of the sections of this book. Taken together, they complete a sort of circuit – what we term the **circuit of culture** – through which any analysis of a cultural text or artefact must pass if it is to be adequately studied (a similar approach has been developed by the cultural theorist Richard Johnson, 1986). As we argue in this book, to study the Walkman culturally one should at least explore how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use.

circuit of culture



The circuit of culture

Remember that this is a circuit. It does not much matter where on the circuit you start, as you have to go the whole way round before your study is complete. What is more, each part of the circuit is taken up and reappears in the next part. So, having started with *Representation*, representations become an element in the next part, that is, of how *Identities* are constructed. And so on. We have separated these parts of the circuit into distinct sections but in the real world they continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways. However, they are the elements which taken together are what we mean by doing a 'cultural study' of a particular object.

Doing Cultural Studies: the story of the Sony Walkman is divided into six sections that directly mirror, in miniature, the structure or sequence of the series – *Culture, Media and Identities* – as a whole. Thus in section 1 we begin with questions of meaning, and indicate that meaning does not arise directly from an object, 'the thing in itself', but from the way in which an object – in this case the Walkman – is *represented* in language, both oral and visual. Here we are starting with the first of the key processes in our cultural circuit – with the establishment of cultural meaning through the practice of *representation*. Subsequently, in section 1.8, where the advertising 'discourse' surrounding the Walkman is analysed, we take this idea forward into the analysis of particular *representations* – the advertising texts which played such a crucial role in fixing the meaning and image of the Walkman. Section 1 is not solely concerned with representations, however. It also raises the question of how various groups and types of people came to be associated with the Walkman. In short, to questions of representation we add a second moment in our circuit – that of *Identities*.

Sections 2, 3 and 4 focus on the *Production* of the Walkman as a cultural artefact. Through the example of the Walkman it is shown how analysing the production of a cultural artefact in the present day involves not only understanding how that object is produced technically, but how that object is produced culturally; how it is made meaningful – what we term 'encoded' with particular meanings – during the production process. In thinking about the *production of culture,* then, we are also simultaneously thinking about the *culture of production* – the ways in which practices of production are inscribed with particular cultural meanings. This concern with the culture of production takes us back once again to questions of *representation* and *identity,* but also forward to questions of *consumption*.

Section 2 considers how the production of the Walkman was *represented* in distinct ways: as the activity of inspired individuals, as the result of the unique organizational culture of Sony and as a happy accident at work. We examine the ways in which the *identity* of Sony as a company was continually created and recreated through these different representations, extending the earlier discussion of individual and group identities to that of corporate identities.

Section 3 highlights the ways in which the Walkman was 'encoded' with certain meanings during its production process and how these were aimed at

establishing an *identification* between object and particular groups of *consumers*. In particular, we focus upon the role of design in this process, exploring the ways in which designers attempt to bring together or 'articulate' two key moments in the cultural circuit – *production* and *consumption*.

Section 4 highlights Sony's ongoing attempts to become a 'global' entertainment corporation. In particular, it focuses upon the company's strategy of combining the production of cultural hardware – the Walkman and so on – with cultural software – the music that people play on their machines – to offer consumers a total 'cultural' package. Once again, we highlight the *articulation of production and consumption* that this strategy of 'media synergy' is designed to effect. We also point to the difficulties inherent in Sony's attempt to achieve such a close fit between production and consumption.

Section 5 explores processes and practices of cultural *Consumption*. As our notion of the 'cultural circuit' suggests, meaning-making is an ongoing process. It does not just end at a pre-ordained point. While producers attempt to encode products with particular meanings and associations, this is not the end of the story or 'biography' of a product, because this tells us nothing about what those products may come to mean for those using them. In other words, meanings are not just 'sent' by producers and 'received', passively, by consumers; rather meanings are actively made in consumption, through the use to which people put these products in their everyday lives.

Finally, section 6 explores some of the effects that Walkman use has had upon the *Regulation* of cultural life in modern societies. In this section, we locate the Walkman as one of the latest in a long line of technological innovations which has challenged traditional distinctions between public and private space. We examine the ways in which Walkman use breaks with established representations of public and private space and how its status as 'matter out of place' – being both public and private at the same time and hence *neither simply public nor simply private* – leads to attempts by institutions to regulate its usage. We also indicate some of the ways in which these problems of *cultural regulation* have come to the attention of Sony and how they have impacted on the *design and production* of the Walkman.

Paul du Gay

1.1 Introduction

Do you own a 'personal stereo'? Do you know anyone who does? Even if you do not, I am sure you know what a Sony Walkman is and what it is used for. You have probably seen someone listening to one or pictures of people using one, in magazines, advertisements or on television. You may not know how the Sony Walkman actually works – to produce one requires a considerable degree of technological 'know-how'. Even putting the tapes in and turning the machine on may give you trouble to start with if you are not very technically minded. In fact, although it was first shown to the international press as recently as the summer of 1979, most people in Britain will know something about the Walkman, in a general sort of way. It has entered into, and made a considerable impact on, our culture. It has become part of our cultural universe.

ACTIVITY 1

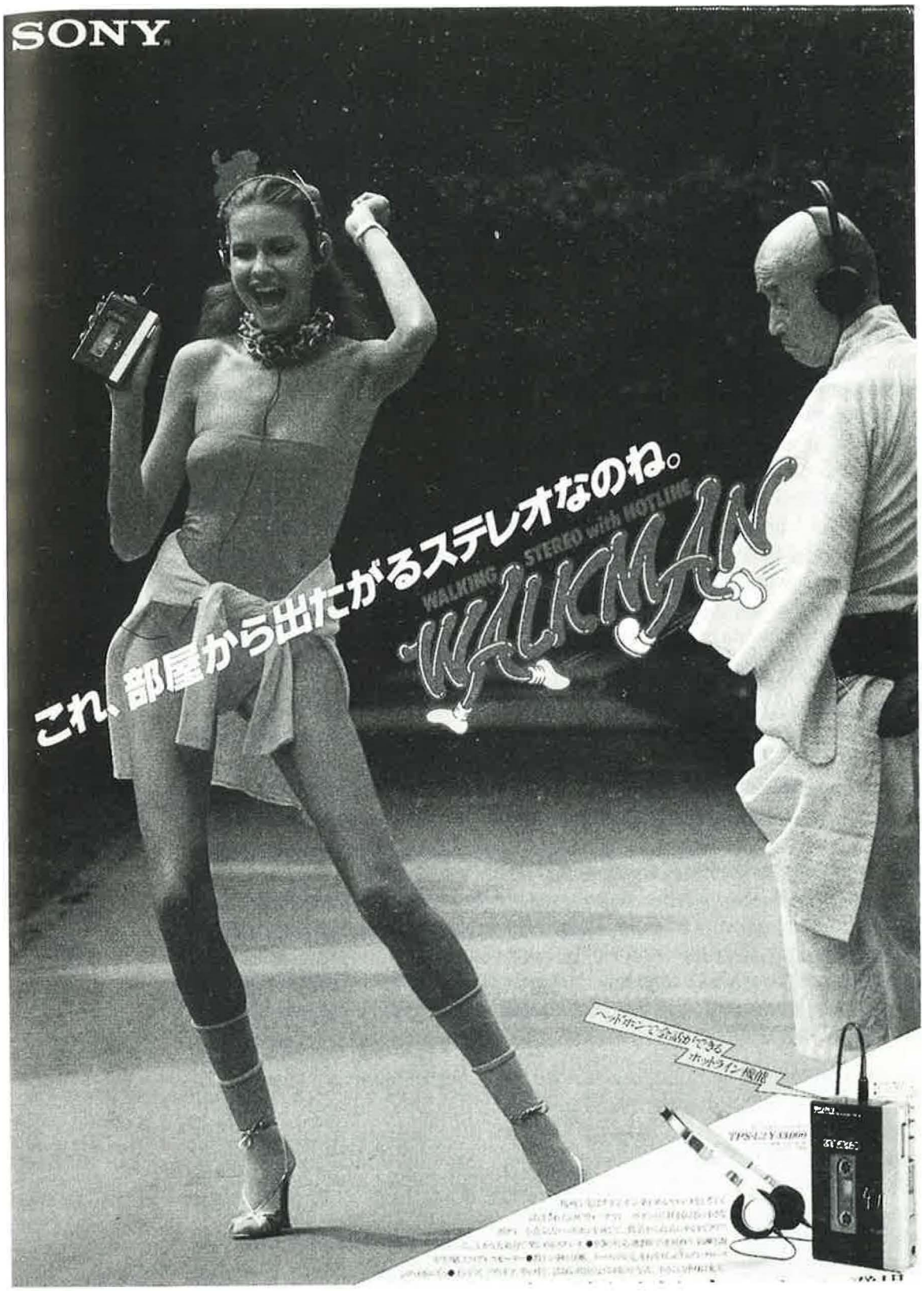
One way of knowing whether something has become 'part of our cultural universe' is to see whether you can interpret or 'read' it – whether you understand what it means, what it is 'saying'. Before reading further, try the following simple experiment.

Look at the photograph in Figure 1.1 which shows something happening. What can you tell us, in your own words, about this picture? What sort of person is the woman on the left and what is she doing? What do you make of the person on the right? Who might he be and why does he look so puzzled? They seem very different – how is that 'difference' established in the picture? What are these two people doing in the same picture – what do they have in common? What sort of lifestyles are depicted in the picture? What sort of mood or feeling does it conjure up? Compose a little story that sets the picture in context: what happened before and what do you think happens after the photograph?

This is the first-ever advertising image for the Sony Walkman, taken from a poster for the Tokyo launch in 1979. It seems to be carrying a rather complex 'message' – what do you think it is? Since the text is in Japanese, which I am sure very few of you can understand, how come you are able to 'de-code' the 'message'?

Now we can explore a little further the observation in the previous paragraph – that the Walkman is now 'part of our cultural universe'. It means that the Sony Walkman has become inscribed in our informal social knowledge – the 'what-everybody-knows' about the world – without consciously knowing where or when they first learned it. This kind of shared, taken-for-granted knowledge is an essential element in what we call 'culture'. Our heads are full of knowledge, ideas and images about society, how it works and what it means. Belonging to a culture provides us with access to such shared frameworks or 'maps' of meaning which we use to place and understand things, to 'make sense' of the world, to formulate ideas and to communicate

FIGURE 1.1 Bridging the difference: launching the Walkman, 1979.



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Walkman, 1979.

or exchange ideas and meanings about it. The Walkman is now firmly located on those 'maps of meaning' which make up our cultural 'know-how'.

The Sony Walkman is not only part of our culture. It has a distinct 'culture' of its own. Around the Walkman there has developed a distinctive set of *meanings* and *practices*. The very word 'WALK-MAN' conjures up an image, or an idea – a concept – of the device. We can then use the concept to think about it, or use the word (or image or drawing or sculpture or whatever) as a sign or symbol which we can communicate about to other people in a variety of different contexts, even though we may never have owned or operated one. It belongs to our culture because we have constructed for it a little world of meaning; and this bringing of the object *into* meaning is what constitutes it as a *cultural artefact*. Meaning is thus intrinsic to our definition of **culture**. culture
Meanings help us to interpret the world, to classify it in meaningful ways, to 'make sense' of things and events, including those which we have never seen or experienced in real life but which occur in films and novels, dreams and fantasies, as well as objects in the real world. You can play the actual Walkman but you cannot *think* with it, or *speak* or *write* with it. Meanings bridge the gap between the material world and the 'world' in which language, thinking and communication take place – the 'symbolic' world. They dissolve any fixed distinction between the so-called 'real world' and, for example, the world of the imagination with its 'small objects of desire' – like the Walkman or other consumer goods which we often fantasize about. We are perfectly capable of understanding such dreams, of interpreting their meaning, even if they only exist in the imagination.

It does not follow, of course, that all meanings are equally valid. But the distinction between a 'true' and a 'false' meaning is nowhere nearly so clear-cut as we suppose. It is easier to speak of those meanings which are widely shared and agreed upon within a culture, which carry a high degree of consensus at a particular time, compared with those which are held by only a few people. But even this is not a hard-and-fast distinction. Since our frameworks of meaning are constantly shifting, we can never be certain that what appears to be a marginal meaning at one time, will not become the dominant and preferred meaning at some later stage. And many readings, though perfectly plausible, may not be correct: how do you know, for example, that your way of reading the photograph is the one, true meaning? (We discuss this question of the 'multi-accentuality' of meaning and language at greater length below.)

So, the Walkman is 'cultural' because we have constituted it as a meaningful object. We can talk, think about and imagine it. It is also 'cultural' because it connects with a distinct set of *social practices* (like listening to music while travelling on the train or the underground, for example) which are specific to our culture or way of life. It is cultural because it is associated with certain *kinds of people* (young people, for example, or music-lovers); with certain *places* (the city, the open air, walking around a museum) – because it has been given or acquired a social profile or *identity*. It is also cultural because it

frequently appears in and is represented within our visual languages and media of communication. Indeed, the *image* of the Sony Walkman – sleek, high-tech, functional in design, miniaturized – has become a sort of metaphor which stands for or represents a distinctively late-modern, technological culture or way of life. These meanings, practices, images and identities allow us to place, to situate, to decipher and to study the Walkman as a cultural artefact.

To study the Sony Walkman 'culturally' is therefore, in part, to use it as a clue to the study of modern culture in general. The Walkman gives us insights into the shared meanings and social practices – the distinctive ways of making sense and doings things – which are the basis of our culture. That is indeed the main purpose of this book – to set up an approach to the study of 'culture', using the Walkman as a case-study. Subsequently the analytic approach outlined in this case-study of the Walkman can be refined, expanded theoretically and applied to new objects of cultural study.

1.2 What is 'culture'?

It is time to offer a more developed definition of 'culture'. It is worth starting by acknowledging that this is a difficult concept, and we shall be continually refining this definition. Here we can only make a start on the process.

In *Keywords* (1976) the cultural theorist and critic, Raymond Williams, defined *culture* as one of the four or five key concepts in modern social knowledge. He reminded us that the term was originally associated with the idea of the tending or cultivation of crops and animals – as, for example, in *agri-culture* – from which we derive one of its central modern meanings: culture as the process of human development. During the Enlightenment, culture – and its synonym, 'civilization' – were used to describe the general, universal processes of human development and progress which – it was assumed – European civilization had achieved, in contrast with that of more 'rude', less civilized societies. In the nineteenth century, under the influence of the German writer, Herder, as well as the Romantic movement and the rise of nationalism, 'culture' came to be associated with 'the specific and variable cultures of different nations and peoples' – that is, it described the way of life of particular groups, peoples, nations or periods: a meaning which led to the word being more commonly used, as it often is today, in the plural – 'cultures'. It is this meaning which we still find active when the word 'culture' is used to refer to the particular and distinctive 'way of life' of a specific social group or period. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, following Matthew Arnold's famous book, *Culture and Anarchy*, the word 'culture' acquired a more restrictive meaning inEnglish – referring now to a state of intellectual refinement associated with the arts, philosophy and learning. This meaning persists in the present day, when 'culture' is used to refer to the 'high arts', as compared with 'popular' culture (what ordinary

folk, the relatively unsophisticated masses, do) or 'mass' culture (associated with the mass media and mass consumption).

You will find traces of all these meanings still active wherever the concept of 'culture' is used. However, the definition which is probably most relevant to how the concept is used here really emerges at the end of the nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries, and is associated with the rise of the human and social sciences. This definition emphasizes the relation of culture to *meaning*. Williams calls this the *social* definition of culture, 'in which culture is a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of life, a particular "culture"' (Williams, 1961, p. 57). This is very close to those 'collective representations' which, in the sociological tradition, provided the shared understandings which bound individuals together in society. Collective representations, according to Emile Durkheim, one of sociology's founding figures, were social in origin and referred to the shared or common meanings, values and norms of particular peoples as expressed in their behaviour, rituals, institutions, myths, religious beliefs and art. This formed the basis of the anthropological study of so-called 'primitive' peoples.

Williams placed considerable emphasis on the close connection between culture, meaning and communication. 'Our description of our experience', he argued, 'comes to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organization' (1961, p. 55). The process of exchanging meanings was the same as the building up of relationships and 'the long process of comparison and interaction is our vital associative life' (ibid.). For him, therefore, there was little or no distinction between studying 'the culture' and studying 'society'. He assumed that the cultural meanings and values of society would, broadly speaking, reflect, mirror and express its social and institutional relations: 'Since our way of seeing is literally our way of living, the process of *communication* is in fact the process of *community*: the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change' (ibid.; emphasis added).

Subsequent developments in sociology and cultural studies have retained Williams' emphasis on the centrality to culture of the giving and taking of meaning, of communication and language. But they have questioned wh ther there is ever only one 'whole way of life' in complex societies, and stressed more that the process of the production and circulation of meaning needs to be studied *in its own terms*. How *is* meaning actually produced? Which meanings are shared within society, and by which groups? What other, counter meanings are circulating? What meanings are contested? How does the struggle between different sets of meanings reflect the play of power and the resistance to power in society? New developments have also placed more stress on the particular mechanisms by which meaning is produced and circulated – the forms of culture, as opposed to the content. And this, in turn,

has directed attention to the communication process itself and the medium in which meaning is constructed – i.e. *language*. Is language simply a *reflection* of the social relations and institutions of society or is it in some ways *constitutive* of society? Recent theorists in social theory and cultural studies have put much greater stress on the centrality and the relative autonomy of culture. We cannot just 'read off' culture from society. We need to analyse the role of 'the symbolic' sphere in social life in its own terms – an emphasis which is not all that different from what Durkheim and the classical sociologists and anthropologists were arguing. This critique gives the production of meaning through language – what is sometimes called **signification** – a privileged place in the analysis of culture. All social practices, recent critics would argue, are organized through meanings – they are *signifying practices* and must therefore be studied by giving greater weight to their cultural dimension. (Many of these points are more fully developed in **Hall***, ed., 1997.)

signification

You will find these two meanings of the word 'culture' – culture as 'whole way of life' and culture as 'the production and circulation of meaning' – constitute a recurrent theme; and since the tensions and debates between them have not been resolved, we make no attempt to provide a final resolution. This remains one of the central arguments in sociology and cultural studies, about which, as you read further, you may develop your own views. However, one implication of all this is clear. Whether you take the view that culture and society are inextricably interwoven, or you believe that they are separate but related spheres (the connections between which are not automatic but have to be studied concretely in each instance), the result of this 'cultural turn' is to give culture a central place in the human and social sciences today and a significance which is very different from the rather subordinate position it used to have in conventional sociological theorizing.

1.3 Meanings and practices

Culture, then, is inextricably connected with the role of *meanings* in society. It is what enables us to 'make sense' of things. But how does this 'meaning-making' work? Partly, we give things meaning by the way we *represent* them, and the principal means of representation in culture is *language.* By language, we do not only mean language in the strict sense of written or spoken words. We mean *any* system of representation – photography, painting, speech, writing, imaging through technology, drawing – which allows us to use signs and symbols to represent or *re-present* whatever exists in the world in terms of a meaningful concept, image or idea. Language is the use of a set of signs or a signifying system to represent things and exchange meaning about them.

We can see this process of meaning-construction at work if we think of the moment in 1979 before what we now know as the Walkman existed. How

* A reference in bold type indicates another book, or chapter in another book, in the series.

were journalists able to 'make sense' of something they had never seen before? Just looking at the device would not help, for the machine could not speak or explain itself. It did not possess, and could not express, its own intrinsic meaning. Meaning is constructed – given, produced – through cultural practices; it is not simply 'found' in things.

One way of trying to fix its meaning was to use a familiar language to describe or 'represent' the device – and thus to bring it into discourse, into the orbit of meaning, to make it intelligible to us. The audio-editor of the magazine *Radio Electronics,* Larry Klein, describing this moment ten years later, uses both words and an image. He says that at the press conference in 1979, the manufacturers first showed journalists a 'smallish stereo-headphone cassette-player' (Klein, 1979, p. 72). Here Klein tries to use language in a plainly descriptive way to represent what the Walkman meant. However, Klein's description only works if you already know what such words as 'stereo', 'headphone' and 'cassette-player' mean. What he was really saying was: 'this object works *like* a small stereo-headphone cassette-player'. He was using words metaphorically.

This gives us an important clue as to how meanings work. We map new things in terms of, or by extension or analogy from, things we already know. Where, for example, did the meaning of a word like 'headphone' originally come from? That takes us back, perhaps, to the practice of people in crowded rooms listening to record players by headphone, and thus, in turn, perhaps to the early days of wireless. Each meaning leads us back to another meaning, in an infinite chain. And since we can always add new meanings or inflect old meanings in new ways, the chain of meaning has no obvious point where meaning began – no fixed point of origin – and no end. Every time you trace a meaning back to what preceded it – from 'headphone' to 'wireless', for example – it refers back to something which went before it. We seem to step from meaning to meaning along a chain of meanings which is without beginning or end. So, we represent the new by 'mapping' it to what we already know. Or we build meanings by giving old meanings new inflections ('a Walkman is rather like a stereo tape-deck – only *very small and more mobile*'). Or we contest meaning, by replacing an old meaning with a new one.

As well as being social animals, men and women are also *cultural* beings. And, as cultural beings, we are all, always, irrevocably, immersed in this 'sea of meanings', in this giving-and-taking of meaning which we call 'culture'. We use language and concepts to make sense of what is happening, even of events which may never have happened to us before, trying to 'figure out the world', to make it mean something. We can never get out of this 'circle' of meanings – and therefore, we can never be free of the culture which makes us interpretative beings. Things and events simply do not or will not or cannot make sense on their own. *We* seem to have to try to make sense of *them*. This is an important point. It suggests that cultural meanings do not arise *in* things but as a result of our social discourses and practices which construct the world meaningfully. There is no point turning to the thing itself, going

straight to the 'real world', to sort out our meanings for us or to judge between 'right' and 'wrong' meanings. The Walkman had no meaning of itself. It is us who, through the process of using words and images to form concepts in our heads which *refer* to objects in the 'real world', construct meaning, who made the Walkman mean something.

1.4 Meaning by association: semantic networks

We need to think of this process of 'making sense' or producing meanings as stretching far beyond the literal meaning of words used, as we showed in the Klein example above. In fact, as we saw, there is nothing simple or obvious about literal meanings. They, too, work metaphorically. The difference is, as we have suggested, that over time some meanings acquire an obvious, descriptive status because they are widely accepted, and so come to be taken as 'literal', while other meanings appear more remote and metaphorical. Everybody would understand if you said, 'This is a portable cassette-player.' But, until it had gained wide acceptance, not everyone would have understood if you said, 'This is a Walkman.' So-called literal meanings are themselves only those metaphors which have acquired a broad consensual basis of agreement in a culture. There is nothing simple, obvious, literal or fixed about the connection between a small, portable tape-machine and the word 'Walkman'.

However, if we want to map the full range of meanings, associations and connotations which the Walkman has acquired over time in our culture, we have to move well beyond the so-called literal or descriptive meanings. Over the last two decades, the Sony Walkman has acquired a much richer set of meanings – what are called 'connotations' – than was captured in Klein's simple description. Its circle of reference and representation has expanded enormously. For example, it has come in our culture to stand for things that are high-tech, modern, typically 'Japanese'; it is associated with youth, entertainment and the world of recorded music and sound. Each of these terms belongs to its own networks of meanings – its **semantic networks**. Each is associated with its own language or discourse, that is, its own 'way of talking' about the subject. There is a discourse of technology, of entertainment, of youth, even of 'Japanese-ness'. To connect the Walkman with these semantic networks or discursive formations is to bring new ranges of meaning to bear on our understanding of what the Walkman represents, culturally. We constantly draw on these wider connotations and discourses to make sense of an object, to expand or specify its meaning.

semantic networks

Let us take at random some of the characteristics listed above. The idea of 'high-tech' belongs to a particular discourse which is widely used nowadays to characterize anything which is the product of recent, cutting-edge technological developments. It conjures up an association for the Walkman

with the world of advanced electronics, information technology and the leisure gadgetry revolution – associations very different from those, like 'low-tech' or 'sustainable technologies', which would have located it at the opposite end of the scale of meaning. Similarly, the idea of the Walkman as 'modern' carries another, related set of semantic associations. It signifies the Walkman as something up-to-date – the latest in leisure consumer goods, meant for fast urban living rather than reflective repose. Its 'private-listening-in-public-places' aspect triggers off many themes associated with late-modernity as a distinctive way of life: the lonely figure in the crowd, using the media to screen out the routines of boring, everyday life; the emphasis on mobility and choice; the self-sufficient individual wandering alone through the city landscape – the classic Walkman person seen so often in its advertisements, the urban nomad.

'Japanese' is not only drawn from the rich discourse of national cultural stereotypes (alongside 'British', 'American', 'Italian' or 'Chinese' – each of which would have given our image of the Walkman a very different inflection). 'Japanese' is also a discourse which represents the Walkman as the typical product of a particular *kind* of technological and corporate organization, associated with Japan's rapid post-war economic growth. It conjures up Japan's pre-eminence in advanced electronics, its highly effective global marketing of high-quality, precision consumer commodities produced with the latest technologies. It has associations with corporate firms like Sony, which are supposed to be run according to highly efficient, new-style management principles. These may be stereotypes (see the discussion in sections 2 and 3 below), but they help to construct for the Walkman an image very different from, say, British industry or corporate management. The discourse of 'youth', on the other hand, identifies the Walkman with a particular section of the market – with young people and youth culture – and therefore with the youth-led consumer industries, with fashion, street-style, sport and popular music (though we know that the Walkman is actually enjoyed by a much wider range of people). The discourse of 'entertainment' connects the product to the world of leisure and pleasure, and therefore, by association, with the world of popular music and the recording industries, which are at the centre of modern leisure. In all these examples, we can see how the meanings of the Walkman have been steadily built up, each discourse expanding our concept or idea of it by connecting it with another set of semantic networks.

Another way in which the meaning of the Walkman is constructed is by marking its *similarity to* and its *difference from* other things which are rather like it. This consolidates what we may think of as the Walkman's identity. Primarily, the Walkman is a machine for listening to recorded music. But so are a number of other modern electronic replay devices. The Walkman is *like* some of these other pieces of equipment – the tape-recorder, the hi-fi set, the compact disc player. But it is also *different from* them. It is listened to by one person only, is mobile and can be played, at top volume and with very fine technical sound quality in public (almost) without disturbing or being

overheard by anyone else. This combination of *similarities* with other machines and *differences* from them gives the Walkman a definite and specific position. Like coordinates on a map or an A–Z, they enable us to pin-point it, to separate it from the others in our mind's eye, to give it its own, special, cultural meaning.

The Walkman, as such, means nothing in itself. One important way of establishing its meaning within language is by marking these relations of similarity and difference, which allow us to map its position precisely in relation to, as well as to differentiate it from, the other objects in the same field or set. To put the point more generally, we may say that, in language, meaning arises by plotting the relation between what something is and what it is not. It is hard to define 'night' except in relation to its opposite – 'day'. Another way of saying this is that meaning is *relational*. It is in the relation between 'night' and 'day' that meaning arises. If there were no differences between them, it would be hard to distinguish between them. *It is difference which signifies*. (This is a basic point about how meaning is constructed in language and its implications are much more fully explored in **Woodward**, ed., 1997.)

1.5 Signifying practices

What makes the Sony Walkman a part of our culture, we argued earlier, is not only the 'work' which has gone into constructing it meaningfully, but the *social practices* with which it has become associated. We *do* various things with the Walkman. We make use of it in certain ways and thus give it significance, meaning and value in cultural life. There are a whole set of wider practices associated with it which define what is culturally distinctive about the Walkman: like listening while travelling in a crowded train, on a bus or in an underground carriage; listening while waiting for something to happen or someone turn up; listening while doing something else – going for a walk or jogging. Also, more metaphorically, the very 'modern' practice of being in two places at once, or doing two different things at once: being in a typically crowded, noisy, urban space while also being tuned in, through your headphones, to the very different, imaginary space or soundscape in your head which develops in conjunction with the music you are listening to; completing a hum-drum chore whilst keeping track of the latest rock-music 'sounds' or operatic performances; or walking around a reverently silent museum or art gallery whilst, in your ear, an expert art historian is quietly giving you a personal lecture about the artistic history of the exhibits you are looking at. By situating the Wålkman in these different practices, we appropriate it into our culture and expand its cultural meaning or value.

What is important is that, though these practices involve bodily and physical movements, it is not their physical or biological character which makes them culturally significant. Simply moving the hand to press the 'Start' button is not, in itself, culturally distinctive. What matters for *culture* is that these

practices, too, are meaningful. They are organized, guided and framed by meaning. They are meaningful for the participants involved. We call them **signifying practices.** As onlookers, observing them, we are not puzzled by them because, unlike the proverbial visitor from Mars, we know how to interpret them – they are meaningful for us too. We do not say, 'Look at the funny thing that person is doing – using her thumb to press that little knob. What's she up to?' We are able to make sense of what the other person is doing by *de-coding* the meaning behind the action, by locating it within some interpretative framework which we and the person doing it share. It is shared meaning which makes the physical action 'cultural'. It is meaning that translates mere *behaviour* into a cultural – a *signifying* – practice.

signifying practices

This argument has acquired a new significance in recent years with the onset of the 'cultural turn' in the human and social sciences. It connects with certain aspects of the classical tradition in sociological thinking which tended, until recently, to be submerged by more positivistic types of theorizing. We have already noted, for example, the importance which Emile Durkheim gave to the idea of *collective representations.* According to him, these 'collective representations' arose from society itself and provided the shared understandings which created social solidarity, binding individuals into society. In *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, another classical sociologist, Max Weber, distinguished between mere behaviour, like the instinctive jerk of a knee when tapped with a hammer, and social actions which are culturally significant. He called the latter, 'action relevant to meaning'. Sociology, he believed, was the study of those social practices which require interpretative understanding, which we must refer to our cultural understanding in order to make sense of. Even Karl Marx, who is usually thought of as emphasizing the material factors in social life over the symbolic, argued that the worst of architects was cleverer than the best of bees because the actions of bees are genetically programmed, whereas even bad architects must construct a model of a building in their heads before they can construct it in reality – i.e. the physical act of construction is always organized and framed by a conceptual or cultural model.

1.6 Contemporary soundscapes

So far, we have been focusing on the 'culture of the Walkman ' in a rather narrow sense – the complex of meanings and practices which have served to flesh out its meaning, its cultural significance. But the Walkman connects to our culture in a wider sense. It sustains certain meanings and practices which have become emblematic of – which seem to stand for or to represent – a distinctive 'way of life': the culture of late-modern, post-industrial societies like ours. These link it irrevocably with certain key themes of modern culture. These, too, have become part of the 'what the Walkman means', of how we make sense of it, of what it represents. Central to this is its connection to music.