DOING CULTURAL STUDIES
The Story of the Sony Walkman

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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.

articulation

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.

circuit of culture

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.
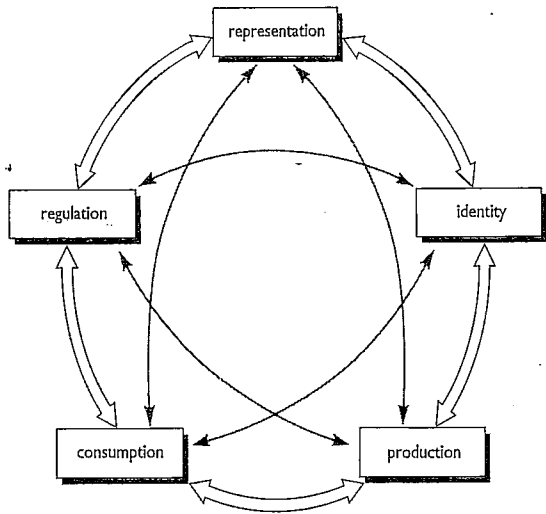
The circuit of culture

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.

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