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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 doing 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, Johnson 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 in English -- 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 whether 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,

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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.)

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.

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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

semantic networks

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.

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

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