

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.

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**. 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.

culture

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 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, 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,

signification

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.

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.

I.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'.

semantic networks

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

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

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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 Walkman 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.

We think of contemporary, late-modern culture as dominated by the *image*. Ours is pre-eminently a visual culture. We are assailed from every quarter by visual images – television, film, photography, images in newspapers, magazines, on hoardings and public buildings, posters, instructions, directional signs, flickering computer screens, traffic cameras and so on. Most of the examples of representation analysed in Hall (ed., 1997), for example, are visual. The impact of the visual is so overwhelming that we sometimes forget that it has been accompanied by a cultural revolution almost as ubiquitous. This is the revolution in *sound*. There have been extraordinary advances throughout the twentieth century in electronic recording and replay technology, leading to the widespread availability today of record-players and tape-recorders and a range of technically sophisticated stereo and CD equipment (see Negus, 1997).

Culturally, the rise of 'pop music' in the 1950s was a defining moment. It led to an enormous expansion of the popular music industry, with its turnover of millions, its key role in the production since then of the distinctive 'world' of rock music, and its dominating presence in radio and television. There is radio itself – more and more, in its local proliferation and its transistorized forms, a channel for music rather than speech. There is the whole ambience of youth culture, with its supporting industries in entertainment, fashion, sport and leisure activities, magazines and the image-creation, publishing, celebrity and public relations industries – much of it organized around or pervaded by popular music and its performers.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is the astonishing improvement in sound quality achieved for classical music and the recent spread in the popularity of opera. More and more activities of every kind and every sort of public space have been 'enhanced' by the addition of soothing piped or 'canned' music; there is the continuing vigour of local music-making as a cultural pursuit. If we can conjure up a picture of what 'modernity' is like as a distinctive way of life, with an image of, say, the Manhattan skyline or some other similar urban landscape – as many television programmes and films do – we could do the same by tuning in to the typical sounds of the late-modern city. They would include not only snatches of recorded music but other familiar sounds, like the wailing siren of ambulance, fire-engine or police car, the endless murmur of traffic, the exhalations from sooty exhausts, wheezing engines and chugging juggernauts – the modern soundscape.

soundscape

The concept of the **soundscape** is taken from Murray Schafer's book, *The Tuning of the World*, and the idea is elaborated by Iain Chambers, in his essay on the Walkman which is discussed at length below, in section 5 of this book. The all-pervasive character of music in contemporary urban culture is wittily captured by Nicolas Spice in his review in *The London Review of Books* of two books on recording and *muzak*:

Around eleven o'clock on Monday morning, I phone Dell Computers to query an invoice, but the accounts department is engaged, so I get put through instead to the development section of the first movement of the

New World Symphony. The music I intrude on is intense and self-absorbed. I am like a child in a children's book who has stumbled through a gap in reality and fallen headlong into another world. I pick myself up and follow Dvorak's gangly, adolescent theme as it strides from instrument to instrument and key to key on its way home to the tonic. I think of it as healthy, wide-eyed and affirmative, trumpeting an ingenuous faith in energies which will lead to a new world far braver than any Dvorak might have imagined, the world of Dell Computers in Bracknell, of fax-modems, of the Internet, of telephones capable of pouring Dvorak's impassioned certainties into the ears of office workers on humdrum Monday mornings.

Into my mind drifts the image of Dvorak's head, moustachioed and visionary, gazing, a bit like the MGM lion, out of a locket-shaped gold-embossed medallion in the centre of the box which housed my LP of the *New World Symphony* when I was 12, a record whose brash appearance made me uneasy and slightly embarrassed. Reception interrupts my nostalgia to ask me if I want to go on holding (ah, if only I *could* let go!). When I mumble assent, I am returned to the symphony, where the mood has changed. It is the second movement now, and a cor anglais is singing above muted strings. This tender melody reminds me of a mawkish novel by Josef Skvorecky. The details elude me, but I fancy *Dvorak in Love* to have been a soft-focus, rural idyll, and I fall to imagining a red sun rising behind a field of gently rippling Bohemian corn, and, beyond it, a girl in a dirndl beckoning seductively. 'Good morning, Sales Ledger, this is Martine, how may I help you?' I have been put through.

Phone-hold music is a late, trivial but characteristic effect of the technical revolution which over the past century has transformed the way we encounter music. Until the development of the radio and the gramophone, people only heard music when they played it themselves or when they heard other people playing it. Music was bound by time and space. Now, music is everywhere, streaming through the interstices between the lumpy materials of life, filling the gaps in the continuum of human activity and contact, silting up in vast unchartable archives.

(Spice, 1995, pp. 3-6)

This twentieth-century soundscape is composed of actual sounds. But there is also a 'soundscape of the mind' in which music plays a key role. Music, like reading (another private pleasure which can be done in public, on trains or buses), has often offered a sort of inner landscape of feelings, emotions and associations to which we can retreat from the bustle and hassle of the 'real world', a sort of 'second world', adjacent to but separate from the everyday one. We can tune in, through music, to the imagination, or escape into ourselves, whether listening to recorded music in private or to live concerts or public performances. Gradually, this situation has been transformed by the revolution in recording and play-back technology. A succession of developments, from the portable transistor radio to the car stereo, has made it possible to transport this inner landscape of sound with one wherever one goes, simultaneously taking the pleasures of private listening into the very

heart of the public world and the qualities of public performance into the privacy of the inner ear. The Walkman stands at the outer limit of this revolution in 'the culture of listening'. In section 5, in the context of a discussion of consumption patterns around the Walkman, we will look in some depth at the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private spheres which this quiet revolution has brought about.

Here, however, we want to highlight another, related, aspect. These new technologies of listening, as Iain Chambers and other writers point out, are highly responsive to personal choice. Of course, they are ultimately dependent on what does – and what does not – get recorded by the record companies. But the Walkman has taken its place alongside the range of new home-based sound recording and replay technologies, whose overall effect has been to maximize personal choice in listening. You can not only put together a selection from many musical genres and thus construct a medley of different moods and impressions, emotions and fantasies, a personal ensemble to suit your own tastes, but, with the help of the Walkman, you can 'sample' it right there in the most public of places, through the medium of the ear. As with the other technologies, you can fast-forward from track to track, selecting or rejecting, repeating, or varying the combinations and the volume according to personal inclination. With these new means of cultural production, then, the role of the producer and the so-called consumer of culture are becoming much more interchangeable. Consumption is becoming more of a personal act of 'production' in its own right.

1.7 Culture in the age of electronic reproduction

In earlier times, it was the uniqueness of the painting or work of art, or the enduring quality of a particular performance of a piece of music, which was unrepeatable, that gave it its claim to status as an authentic work of art. In the world of the Walkman, the CD and the cassette-recorder, it is infinite repeatability together with its variability that is most striking. The German critic, Walter Benjamin, in a classic early essay entitled 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1970), fastened onto this shift as a critical turning-point in the impact of the new technologies of cultural production on modern culture – the growth of what Benjamin called 'mechanical' (and we would now call 'electronic') reproduction. Their infinite repeatability, Benjamin argued, is one of the essential characteristics of the modern means of cultural production, like the movie camera, and (by analogy, though Benjamin did not talk about them) the tape-recorder, the vinyl record and the audio-cassette. The practice of electronic repeatability has been raised to the level of a new art form in contemporary popular music such as 'house' and 'rap' music; for example by 'sampling' (the practice of copying fragments of other people's tracks, quoting them and combining them with new riffs and verses to create a new composition).

READING A

You should now read the extract from 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' by Walter Benjamin, which is a foundation text for modern cultural studies. First read the notes on this reading below, then turn to the Selected Readings at the end of the book and study Reading A. When you have done so, return to the text below.

Benjamin's essay is one of the earliest to identify the revolutionary impact of the new technologies of mechanical reproduction in the twentieth century on the status of the 'work of art'. It is considered a classic in terms of beginning to define some of the key characteristics of modern artistic culture. Note that, in this essay, 'work of art' means visual work – painting, lithography, photography, film.

Benjamin is discussing the new techniques of mechanical reproduction which began to appear from about the 1870s onwards. What are the effects, he asks, on culture of this capacity to reproduce copies of works of art in large numbers and to circulate them far and wide throughout society?

He begins by setting the new technologies of reproduction in the historical context of earlier techniques. Then he notes the following consequences of the new capacity to 'mechanically reproduce' (try to follow these points through as you read):

- 1 Mechanical reproduction affects the uniqueness and 'authenticity' of the work of art.
- 2 It destroys its 'aura'. (What does Benjamin mean by this term?)
- 3 It shatters the tradition in which works of art were hitherto embedded.
- 4 It changes our sense-perception.
- 5 It replaces 'uniqueness and permanence' by 'transitoriness and reproducibility'.
- 6 It removes the work of art from the realm of ritual to that of politics.

Do you think that the effects of 'electronic reproduction' are similar?

So far, we have been discussing the Walkman in terms of the first concept in *Culture, Media and Identities*. However, Benjamin's essay and the discussion of new technologies of cultural production remind us that another reason why the Walkman has become so symbolic of developments in our wider culture is because it belongs to that long list of new media – the new technologies of producing, storing and circulating images and sound – which have transformed culture and communication over the last century. They include the telephone, wireless, radio, still and film cameras, television, the record-player and, more recently, the tape-recorder, transistor radio, audio- and video-cassette, the CD, the personal computer, photocopier, fax machine and mobile phone, to name only a few. Most of these are, most of the time, deployed for routine, everyday uses. Nevertheless, since they are both the

sources and the channels for the circulation of meanings within the culture and since they both originate and reproduce sounds and/or images, it is correct to think of them as new sources of meanings and thus new means (i.e. *media*) for the cultural production/consumption of meaning. Objects of cultural meaning in themselves, they are also channels for *mediating* musical and visual meanings to a global public. Where, formerly, we depended on drawing, painting, the written and spoken word, letters and documents transported from one place to another, and books as the principal ways in which meanings were circulated throughout our culture and between cultures, now the scope, volume and variety of meanings, messages and images which can be transmitted (i.e. *media-ted*) have been vastly expanded by the harnessing of culture to the new electronic technologies. This has opened up a new frontier in modern cultural life and completely transformed the process of 'meaning-making' which, we have argued, is at the heart of culture. Meaning-making lies at the interface between culture and technology. (This story is taken up again in more detail in **du Gay**, ed., 1997.)

Throughout, you will find a close connection being drawn between *culture* and the *media*, between the meanings and practices which form the basis of all modern culture and the technological means – the media – by which much (though not all) of that culture is now produced, circulated, used or appropriated. No study of late-modern culture could afford to neglect – as an essential part of the study of the culture as a whole – the rapid development of new media. We include in this term the actual technologies, the corporate institutions (like Sony) which manufacture, sell and distribute – now on a global scale – both the 'means' and the 'meanings' which sustain the cultural process as well as their economic role and function. Today, the production and consumption on a global scale of 'cultural goods' represents one of the most important economic activities. In addition, each of these new **media technologies** has a particular set of practices associated with it – a way of using them, a set of knowledges, or 'know-how', what is sometimes called a *social technology*. Each new technology, in other words, both sustains culture and produces or reproduces cultures. Each spawns, in turn, a little 'culture' of its own.

There are other connections between the Walkman and the culture of late-modernity. The best quality recorded sound once required a lot of heavy, rather cumbersome equipment. The Walkman, however, is eminently portable – convenient, lightweight, pocket-sized. (These issues of design are elaborated in section 3 below.) Like many consumer goods, the Walkman is designed to be worn, like one's clothes, as part of one's self-image or self-styling. Like the Lycra suit of the modern urban cyclist, it is virtually an extension of the skin. It is fitted, moulded, like so much else in modern consumer culture, to the body itself. Even the ear-pieces are now grooved to the shape of the ear, so that you have to look carefully to be sure a person is wearing them. It is designed for movement – for mobility, for people who are always out and about, for travelling light. It is part of the required equipment of the modern 'nomad' – the self-sufficient urban voyager, ready for all weathers and all circumstances and

moving through the city within a self-enclosed, self-imposed bubble of sound. The Walkman is not only an essential part of this young person's survival kit; it is a testimony to the high value which the culture of late-modernity places on mobility. This mobility is both real and symbolic. The Walkman fits a world in which people are literally moving about more. But it is also designed for a world in which the social mobility of the individual with respect to his or her social group has also increased. The Walkman maximizes individual choice and flexibility. But there is some question as to whether it connects the individual to any wider social collectivity. Some critics argue that it insulates the person from the public, in his or her own radical individuality, and in this sense is typical of the more individualistic climate of the 1980s in which it established its popularity. Others – Chambers (1994), for example – argue that it is not as radically individualistic as it sometimes appears. This is a major debate, which is touched on again in section 5, alongside a more developed discussion about how the Walkman is shifting the boundaries between the public and the private spheres. However, before we leave this question of the Walkman's relation to the wider culture of its times, let us pause to set this aspect in a broader social context.

READING B

In his book, *Towards 2000*, Raymond Williams connects the rapid changes introduced by late-modern capitalist consumerism with the condition he calls 'mobile privatization'. Turn now to the Selected Readings at the end of the book and read the short extract from Williams' section on 'The culture of nations' from his book; it will help you to begin to reflect on the popularity and widespread use of the Walkman in the context of these broader cultural developments. When you have read it, return to the text below.

1.8 Walk-men and Walk-women: subjects and identities

So far, we have been exploring the relationship between culture and meaning. An object or concept like the Walkman takes on a range of cultural meanings, partly as a result of how it has been *represented* in visual and verbal forms. So one clue to the meaning of the Walkman lies in the study of how, throughout its short life, it has been represented. We turn next to this issue of **representation** as the practice of constructing meaning through the use of signs and language. (Representation is a major aspect of the different cultural processes which we are exploring; it is analysed at greater length in Hall, ed., 1997.) To refresh your memory, you will recall that, in discussing how meaning is produced in previous sections, we emphasized a number of representational strategies:

representation

- 1 The way in which existing meanings are extended from something we already know to something new, along what we called 'the chain of meaning'.