5.1 Introduction

It may be tempting to think that, once the Walkman leaves the factories and offices in which it is produced and enters shops and stores for purchase, there is little left to say concerning its meaning. After all, given that we have already seen how particular cultural meanings are ascribed to the artefact throughout its production process – whether this be in the form of those design practices examined in section 3 or those representational 'imaging' practices that were discussed at the beginning of the book – surely there can be nothing more to say about the Walkman as a material artefact?

If this is your initial reaction then you will not find yourself alone. For the longest time social scientists in general and sociologists in particular have assumed that processes of production of goods and services hold the key to understanding their social and cultural meaning. In this view 'production' dominates social life to such an extent that the constitution of all other domains of existence – the family and domestic relations, education and so forth – is in the final analysis determined by the productive 'base'.

This excessive focus on production and the economic has the effect of shutting down the analysis of culture, for it assumes that any meanings pertaining to artefacts or activities outside the sphere of production are by their very nature of a lower order and hence are unworthy of serious academic consideration. This seems a rather patronizing position to adopt, not least because one of the objectives of social science is to learn something of value from the practices of the people one is studying. One is most unlikely to learn anything from people's everyday practices if one approaches them with the view that they are unworthy of serious study because they are superficial and inauthentic substitutes for a denied alternative existence.

Such a strongly 'objectivized' view, with its antipathy towards any notion of human agency, seems unlikely to be able to tell us very much about what people make or do with material cultural artefacts, such as the Walkman, once they leave the factories and offices in which they are produced and imbued with particular meanings. Do those meanings change through the use people make of the Walkman ? If so, how and why and with what consequences?

These are the sorts of questions we will be exploring in this section which examines the role of practices of **consumption** in the production of meaning. This focus on consumption has two main purposes.

consumption

First, it serves to introduce you to another crucial element in our cultural circuit (see the Introduction to this volume). As was suggested above, it is not possible simply to 'read off' the meanings that material cultural artefacts come to have from their processes of production, no matter how crucial those may be. To do so is to impose an artificial closure on the biography of that artefact. For one thing, it fails to tell us how that artefact is used in social relations and what significance it obtains as a consequence of this usage.

As our notion of the cultural circuit suggests, meaning-making is an ongoing *process*. It does not end at a pre-ordained place. No doubt, the producers of material cultural goods and services wish it did and that they could establish its boundaries! However, that they cannot is evidenced by their dependence upon the techniques of cultural mediation outlined earlier – namely, design, marketing and advertising. After all, if consumption was simply a reflex of production, what need would there be for design, advertising or marketing expertise? There would be no need for the persuading role that these occupations provide if consumers were passive dupes who followed to the letter a script written for them by producers. As the social theorist Michel Foucault (1982) has argued, 'power' can only be exercised where there is freedom and hence a degree of uncertainty in any relationship. The fact that producers do not completely dominate or 'control' consumers but must ceaselessly attempt to exercise power over them, is attested to by the use they make of design, marketing and advertising in trying to create meanings for products with which consumers will identify.

To focus on practices of consumption, then, is to explore a crucial element in the process of meaning-making that lies at the heart of conducting a cultural study. No serious cultural study of the Walkman could afford to ignore exploring the ways in which that material cultural artefact has been used to make meaning by people in the practice of their everyday lives. A focus on practices of consumption therefore helps us to understand that meanings are not simply sent by producers and received by consumers but are always *made in usage*.

However, a focus on consumption not only extends the explanatory reach of our cultural study of the Walkman, taking us to another point on our circuit. It also introduces us to some of the most important theoretical debates currently being conducted within sociology and cultural studies. The second purpose of this section is therefore to give you a taste of some of the conceptions and theorizations of consumption currently circulating within sociology and cultural studies and to indicate to you some of the ways in which they challenge existing understandings of contemporary culture and society. As the term 'taste' suggests, these discussions are not intended to provide you with a comprehensive introduction to theories of consumption. Rather, they are designed to highlight briefly an important area of theorizing and research and to outline some of the concepts and issues associated with it that you will explore both more extensively and more intensively later on in the series. We begin by taking a closer look at the term 'consumption' and some of the meanings that have traditionally been attached to it.

5.2 Perspectives on consumption

Whilst taking a brief look at some of the dominant meanings carried by the term 'consumption', it seems difficult to understand how it has become such an important explanatory device for sociologists analysing contemporary culture and society.

One of the most ubiquitous meanings of the term is found within classical economics. Within this discourse, consumption usually refers to the purchase of a product and its exchange-value, or 'price'. This is consumption as the purchase of an object in the expectation that it might be exchanged for something else at a later date. Individuals consume in this way when they buy a piece of property or an object – such as an antique – whose value is likely to increase over time. At the same time, economists also talk about consumption in terms of 'use-value'. Use-values are normally attributed to what is termed 'final consumption', as a good is used up (a meal is eaten) or as a service is delivered (a plane flight is taken). In this sense of the term, consumption is associated with the satisfaction of needs and wants.

However, as the cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1976) suggested, historically the term consumption has carried a number of other connotations. As he indicated, consumption has been associated with waste, with dissipation, with decay. Consumptive bodies, for example, are those wasting away through illness. In religious imagery we have the fires of hell consuming the bodies of the damned. Consumption here has a series of distinctly pejorative connotations.

So how do we get from these economistic and medico-moralistic conceptions of consumption to contemporary sociological conceptions of consumption as the production of meaning through usage? The short answer to this question is that the distinctively cultural meaning of consumption has emerged both *through* and *against* these traditional definitions of the term. What we mean by this is that these particular conceptions have provided a *reference point* in relation to which contemporary meanings of the term consumption in sociology and cultural studies have been constituted.

This is best exemplified by turning to one of the first and foremost bodies of theoretical work on consumption and consumer culture to have emerged within the social sciences – what we will term 'the production of consumption' perspective.

5.2.1 The production of consumption

Proponents of this perspective – most commonly associated with the work of members of the Institute for Social Research and their disciples, known as the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1991; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1979/1947; Marcuse, 1964) – argue that the expansion of commodity production throughout the twentieth century has given rise to a vast accumulation of

material culture in the form of consumer goods, as well as to the proliferation of sites for purchase and consumption. This is deemed to have resulted in the growing importance of leisure and consumption activities in modern western societies and this in turn is regarded as increasing the capacity for ideological control, domination and manipulation of the population and thus their separation from an alternative and indeed more 'authentic' social existence.

According to the German social theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1979/1947), for example, the same commodity logic and instrumental rationality manifest in the productive apparatus now saturates all other realms of existence. Leisure pursuits, the arts, and culture more generally, become part of an increasingly ubiquitous 'culture industry' (see section 4 above). In their discourse, the latter term is far from purely descriptive. For Horkheimer and Adorno the terms 'culture' and 'industry' had very different meanings, the former possessing connotations of refinement, learning and aesthetic contemplation, the latter tainted by the evils of capitalism. Their linkage, Horkheimer and Adorno argued, leads inexorably to the pollution of the 'higher' values of the world of culture by the debasing logics of production, the market and exchange and to the emergence of a standardized, homogenized 'mass culture' in which the market consumes everything of value in its path. In this process, citizens are turned into a passive mass of consumers, while culture ceases to stand in a critical relation to everyday life and becomes reduced to banal mass entertainment and amusement aimed at the lowest common denominator. In this world of mass culture, all is false and inauthentic because it is tainted by the hand of production, commodification and exchange.

As we can see, this perspective on consumption views it as thoroughly saturated and determined by the logic of capitalist production. On the positive side this at least has the effect of concentrating the mind on the increasingly commodified nature of material cultural artefacts, on the growth of large industrial organizations devoted to the production and distribution of commodified cultural goods and services, and the increasingly important role of consumption in people's everyday lives. However, these basic insights are accompanied by a number of problems. First, because production is represented as determining consumption, there is no space for human agency within this perspective. Consumer desires and needs, it is argued, are created by producers, with the assistance of their 'servants of power' and 'hidden persuaders'– the advertisers – and then satisfied by those same producers. Consumers, it would appear, are literally created by producers and then simply do their beckoning as if on automatic pilot.

Secondly, all mass-produced cultural forms are represented as superficial and inauthentic. In contrast to the mass 'popular' cultural forms produced by the 'culture industry' which are deemed to debase their users, the 'higher' arts of 'literature', opera and classical music are represented as ennobling 'true' culture. Because mass cultural artefacts are also commodities, their meaning is taken as given and immutable. The object has an 'essential' meaning

determined by its commodified form. That meaning is necessarily 'negative' because of the nature of the production of that object – its association with capitalism. Produced by 'alienated' wage labour, commodities must always be sources of further misery, standing outside and against the citizen, offering lower-order pleasures for a denied existence. Underlying this critique is the idea that the desire to consume is a 'false' need created by producers and advertisers simply to sell more commodities, and is able to offer only delusory satisfactions.

It is interesting to note how this perspective on consumption relates to the economic and medico-moralistic conceptions we looked at earlier. As we argued above, sociological conceptions of consumption have developed both through and against these two conceptions. In the case of the present perspective it is possible to delineate a debt to both conceptions. On the one hand, the proponents of the 'production of consumption' perspective treat consumption simply as a matter of economic exchange and utility. Consumption in this sense concerns the growing dominance of instrumental rationality in all areas of life (where the value of everything is measured exclusively as a means to a calculated end), to the point where all differences, cultural traditions and qualities become transformed into quantities. On the other hand, there are also distinct traces of the medico-moralistic conception of consumption in this perspective too. This is most apparent in the opposition constructed between 'real' and 'false' needs. The assumption appears to be that, because people are not able to express themselves through their labour, which is represented as the 'real' authentic site of human self-creation, they have to seek compensation in the 'false' pleasures of consumption. Consumption in this sense eats away at their real selves – just like a consumptive illness – turning them progressively into pathologized, dehumanized 'happy robots' (Mills, 1951).

As we mentioned earlier, the 'production of consumption' perspective, with its objectivist, élitist and rather patronizing stance, has had considerable influence in framing the interpretation of consumption within the social sciences. However, its reach has been rather more extensive than that. As the social anthropologist Daniel Miller (1987, pp. 166–7) has argued, the production of consumption perspective, or what he terms the 'mass culture critique', belongs to that branch of conservatism which regards other periods in history, particularly the pre-industrial, as 'authentic' but the present as the final 'inauthentic' state. This strain of conservatism is not the exclusive property of either left or right, emerging as it does in the work of a range of diverse authors.

5.2.2 The Walkman and the production of consumption critique

Given its pervasiveness both within and beyond the academy, it should come as no surprise to learn that 'production of consumption' perspective has played a crucial role in structuring public debate about the social and cultural significance of the Walkman. Dire warnings about its negative socio-cultural effects have accompanied the Walkman ever since it first appeared in the public domain. Two recurring themes are worth noting. The first concerns the question of 'needs'. Many of the popular critical articles that appeared shortly after the Walkman was launched were concerned with highlighting the inherent 'uselessness' of the object and stressing that nobody actually 'needed' this technology. Second, and relatedly, the Walkman was criticized for its anti-social, atomizing effects. This strand of critique centred on the fact that the Walkman allowed individuals to switch off from the world as and when they liked and that this was likely to make them more introverted, self-serving and less tolerant of other people and of 'society' more generally. Let us examine each of these in turn, to see if we can delineate within them the presence of any of the key arguments and assumptions of the production of consumption critique.

As was shown in section 2, corporate managers at Sony were far from certain that the Walkman would be a success when it was launched because they did not believe there was a 'need' amongst consumers for a portable cassette-player without a recording facility. Although we need to be wary about the claim of the former head of Sony, Akio Morita (1987, pp. 79–80), that his 'instincts' told him the product would be a success, it is interesting to note that he considered his colleagues to be focusing too much on the technical details of the product and not enough on the ways in which people, particularly the target market of young people, actually consumed music in their everyday lives. And despite the original corporate legend that Sony did no 'market research' prior to the launch of the product, it is gradually becoming clearer, as was seen earlier, that the company did engage in some quite detailed research with young people to find out what they made of and did with the Walkman when they were given it; this in turn influenced both the design of the product and the advertising campaigns that accompanied its launch (Kuroki, 1987; Ueyama, 1982; Dreyfack, 1981).

This example may help us to gain a handle on some of the debates about consumer 'needs' that broke when the Walkman entered the public domain. As we have mentioned, considerable media attention was devoted to the Walkman as its use became more widespread, and much was made of it as the ultimate 'gimmick' product – a tape-recorder that did not even record. This latter observation often served as a springboard for arguments concerning the 'false needs' of consumer society and the ability of corporations to encourage the spread of selfish hedonism and lack of civility amongst people (Wallin, 1986; Noll, 1987).

Like the senior managers at Sony in the above example, these observers could see no obvious 'need' for the Walkman. However, unlike those managers these commentators were not making a marketing point in a business context; rather, they were offering a moral critique of contemporary culture more generally. For them, the growing sales of the Walkman typified the substitution of 'real' human needs – most often represented in the language of religious spirituality or that of the natural environment – by the 'false' ones of mass consumerism. Through the manipulation of people's behaviour, it was argued, large corporations were encouraging people to go way beyond the 'natural' limits to their needs and to become locked into an ever more vicious cycle of repetitive gratification.

As we have already indicated, these sorts criticisms of mass consumption have a long history. However, it is particularly interesting to note how much in common they have with the criticisms of mass culture made by members of the Frankfurt School. For example, in his influential book entitled *One Dimensional Man* (1964), the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse used the notion of natural human 'needs' in his critique of consumer capitalism. He argued that 'true' needs were based in human biology and in the natural rhythms of human interaction, uninfluenced by the logics of modern consumer capitalism. 'False' needs, on the other hand, were not natural but manipulated or induced by producers, advertisers and marketers; they had no basis in nature.

In a critique of this 'production of consumption' perspective, Jean Baudrillard (1988) opposed the notion that needs are finite, natural or fixed to any particular objects and rejected the tendency to treat consumers as mere ciphers for the will of producers. Like Akio Morita, Baudrillard argued that meaning does not reside in an object but in how that object is used. Certainly, producers attempt to inscribe particular meanings into products, he argued (often, as we have seen, through research with consumers, seeing what they think about and do with those products), but that does not exhaust the meanings those objects may come to have when they are consumed. In this sense production and consumption are linked, but one does not determine the other. Baudrillard writes that the production of consumption perspective

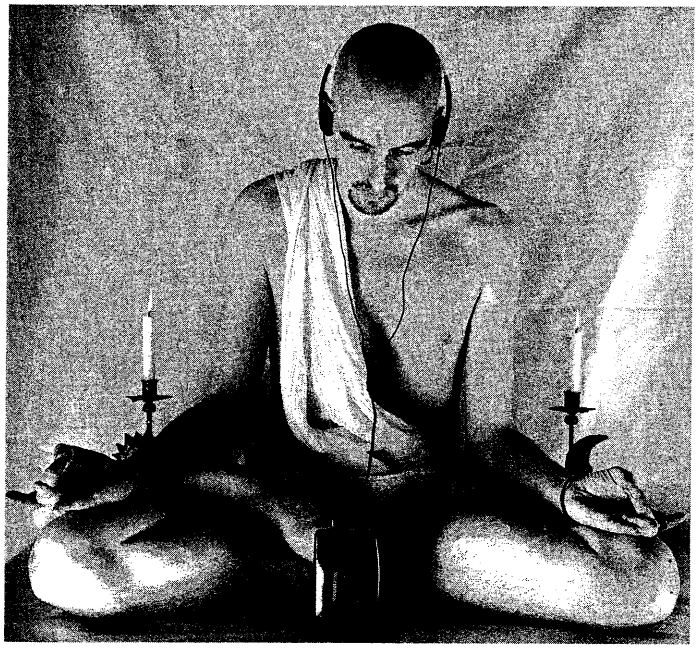
> ... is forced to represent the individual as a completely passive victim of the system ... We are all aware of how consumers resist such a precise injunction, and of how they play with 'needs' on a keyboard of objects. We know that advertising is not omnipotent and at times produces opposite reactions; and we know that in relation to a single 'need', objects can be substituted for one another ... [I]f we acknowledge that a need is not a need for a particular object as much as it is a 'need' for difference (the desire for social meaning), only then will we understand that satisfaction can never be *fulfilled*, and consequently that there can never be a *definition* of needs.
>
> (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 45)

In contrast to the production of consumption perspective, Baudrillard argued that material culture does not simply, nor indeed primarily, have 'use' or 'exchange' value, but that it, more importantly, has 'identity' value. By this he means that the consumption of material culture is important not so much for the intrinsic satisfaction it might generate but for the way it acts as a marker of social and cultural difference and therefore as a communicator. For Baudrillard, consumption functions 'like a language':

> Consumption is a system of meaning like a language ... commodities and objects, like words ... constitute a global, arbitrary and coherent system of signs, a cultural system ... marketing, purchasing, sales, the acquisition of differentiated commodities and object/signs – all of these presently constitute our language, a code with which our entire society communicates and speaks of and to itself.
>
> (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 45)

Rather than being 'natural', needs are therefore 'cultural'. That is to say, needs are both defined and produced by the systems of meaning through which we make sense of the world and thus are open to being re-worked and transformed. In consumption, as in language more generally, usage changes or inflects the meaning of objects in particular ways and, over time, in different periods or contexts, and in relation to new situations, new meanings or inflections will emerge (see section 1). In this sense, the meanings that material cultural artefacts come to have cannot be fixed, since there is no way of insisting that the uses made of them and the meanings that usage produces will not change over time or in different contexts.

If you remember, there was also a second criticism made of the Walkman as its popularity grew. This particular criticism focused upon the Walkman as a technology that could allow individuals to block out the world, literally to 'tune in and turn off'. (This issue will be explored in greater depth in section 6.) This was regarded as potentially dangerous because it could lead to increasing individualization and atomization of the population and to the erosion of public life. In the United States, for example, the conservative thinker Allan Bloom (1989) complained that the unity of national culture was being undermined by a turning away by students from the 'canon' of universally revered great works – Shakespeare, the Bible and so on – in favour of, in his opinion, a second-rate, pluralized curriculum. Bloom

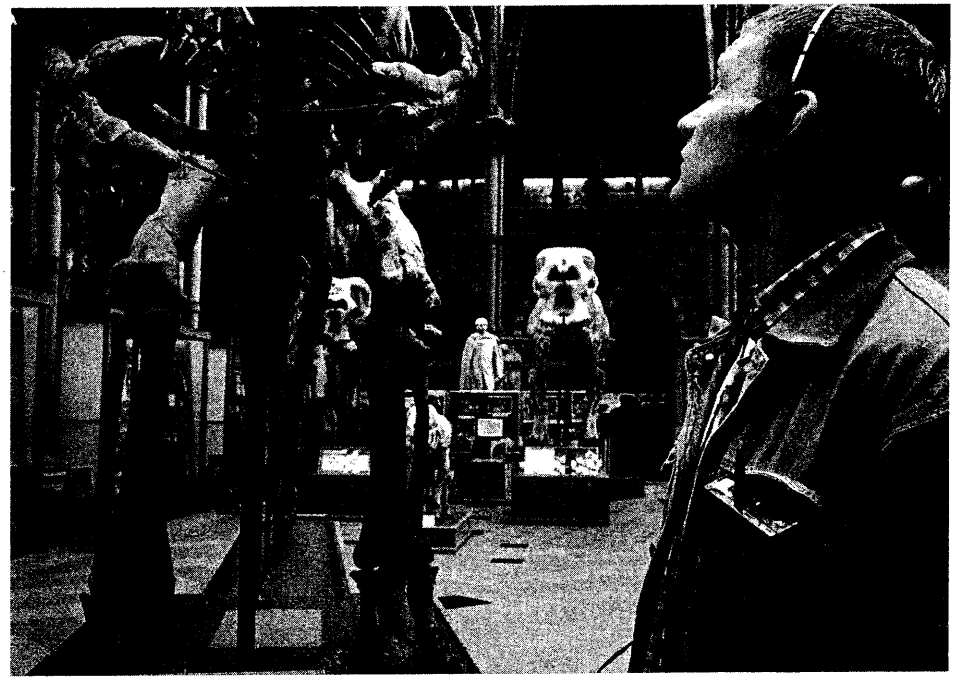


explicitly linked this 'closing of the American mind' with the atomized, distracted and uncivilized modes of personal conduct that the Walkman had engendered amongst young people: 'As long as they have the Walkman on', he argued, 'they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say.'

Bloom was not alone in chastising the Walkman for the damage it was inflicting on civic mores. Other guardians of public morality emerged with equally damning indictments of the technology and its effects. In an article in the US magazine *Christianity Today*, Mark Noll, a history professor from Wharton College, argued that the Walkman posed a serious threat to the future of Christianity, not only because it fed 'the hedonism that is the fate of America in the late twentieth century', but more importantly because it called 'into existence still one more competitor to the voice of God' (1987, pp. 22–3).

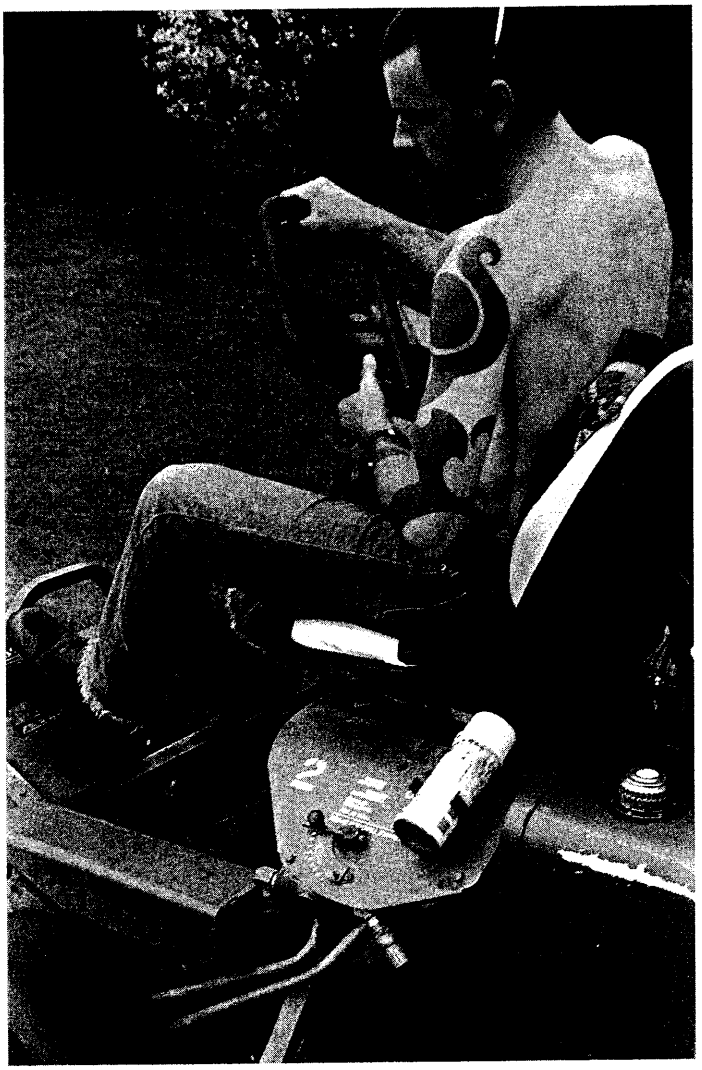
Once again, these criticisms assume in advance something both about the Walkman and the people who use it. 'Atomizing', 'distracting' and 'alienating' effects are 'read off' from some of the possibilities inherent within the technology – the fact that individuals can use it to listen privately in public spaces, for example – with little to no attention being paid to exploring how the Walkman is being actively used in everyday socio-cultural practices and to what ends. In moves reminiscent of the 'production of consumption' perspective – particularly, in this case, the comments of Theodor Adorno (1991, pp. 40–4) on the 'regressive' effects of individual listening practices – these forms of criticism allocate a debasing influence to the technology as a consequence of its mass-produced, 'popular-cultural' status and contrast this with the presumed ennobling qualities of, in Bloom's case, 'high art' and, in Noll's case, Christianity.

Sony's own market research into Walkman usage offers some evidence with which we can analyse these claims. Sony divides usage into two particular types: 'escape' and 'enhancement'. The former dimension is most apparent in the way the Walkman has been used by people travelling to work on crowded/noisy trains, tubes and buses, for example, in order to create some personal space in those environments. Quite how this usage is leading to the decline of civic mores is not entirely clear. Certainly, there is no evidence to suggest that this so-called 'privatized listening' is inherently 'distracting' for those engaging in it – though depending on the volume at which listening takes place it may be for those nearby (see section 6 for more about this particular feature of Walkman use). The massive growth of 'talking-book' tape-cassettes, for example, which has been directly attributed to the listening habits that Walkman use has fostered, suggests that rather than simply 'amusing themselves to death' on the train/bus/tube, at least a certain – and growing – number of Walkman listeners are actually tuning into Bloom's 'great tradition': a survey in *The Guardian* newspaper (11 February 1995) indicated that among the top-selling talking-books in the UK at the end of 1994 could be found such 'pulp fiction' classics as *Samuel Pepys' Diaries* and Homer's *The Iliad*, as well as foreign language tapes, exam study guides and so forth.



In terms of 'enhancement', Sony also found plenty of evidence of 'active' listening. Talking-books, for example, can obviously span the divide of both 'escape' and 'enhancement' dimensions, depending, of course, on what the listener is after. However, one of the most frequently discussed 'enhancement' effects of Walkman usage refers to the ways in which it allows music to become mobile and enables individuals to impose their own particular soundtrack on the surrounding aural environment (Hosokawa, 1984; Chambers, 1990). Rather than representing this latter practice as inherently passive and alienating, however, many Walkman users have spoken of it as an active, creative practice which enhances rather than diminishes their relationship to the external environment. One young woman, writing of her Walkman experiences for *The New Yorker Magazine*, makes just such a point when she says:

> I know how people who don't wear Walkman feel about the rest of us. I know because they ask me if I think its a good idea to wear headphones around, as if there might be something natural or wholesome about subjecting oneself to the cacophony of, say, a midtown sidewalk next to a construction site during rush hour. Once in a while when my batteries run low, I'm forced to hear what I've been missing, and, except for the occasional titillating snatch of conversation, I don't think it amounts to much. But when I'm listening to the Walkman I'm not just tuning out. I'm also tuning in a soundtrack for the scenery around me.
>
> (1989, pp. 19–20)



This personal description of Walkman 'consumption' suggests the tactical character of its use. There is no grand 'universal' turning away from the world into privatized, atomistic distraction. The Walkman is used quite specifically (and only for a certain time-span) and there is no reason to assume that the user has slipped the reins of society. As the cultural theorist Ian Chambers, for example, has suggested, while on one level the Walkman may serve to set one apart, it also simultaneously reaffirms 'individual contact to certain common ... measures (music, fashion ... metropolitan life)' (1990, p. 2). In this sense Walkman use is still a *social* practice because, while one's listening may be private, the codes that inform that listening are inherently social – musical genres and fashion, for example. In other words, while listening privately in public, one is still socially connected in important ways.

Rather than assuming in advance that the Walkman has a preordained meaning and reading off cultural, social and political effects from these assumed meanings, what these and other examples highlight is the importance of exploring the different uses made of the Walkman in the practices of their everyday lives by different sorts of people in different contexts.

To round off this part of the section, we would like you to read an extract from an article by the cultural theorist Rey Chow. In this piece Chow explores some of the cultural and political implications of the recent appropriation of the Walkman by Chinese youth groups. This is a not an easy piece to read but do not panic if you wonder what it is all about. It is difficult, in part, because it is written in a style with which you may not be entirely familiar or comfortable.

READING F

Now turn to the Selected Readings at the end of the book and read 'Listening otherwise, music miniaturized: a different type of question about revolution', by Rey Chow.