Book Review: Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman, 2nd edition

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Why think about the Walkman in the 21st century? Can the Walkman help us understand today's media and cultural practices? Through the notion of the 'circuit of culture', this book aims to teach students to critically examine what culture means, and how and why it is enmeshed with the media texts and objects in their lives. Those who read this book's first edition must read this enriched second edition, writes **Yves Laberge,** *as it remains timely and relevant for today, in its accurate understanding of how we, collectively, identify and consume culture.*

**Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman. 2nd edition.
Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Anders Koed Madsen, Hugh
Mackay, Keith Negus. SAGE. April 2013.**

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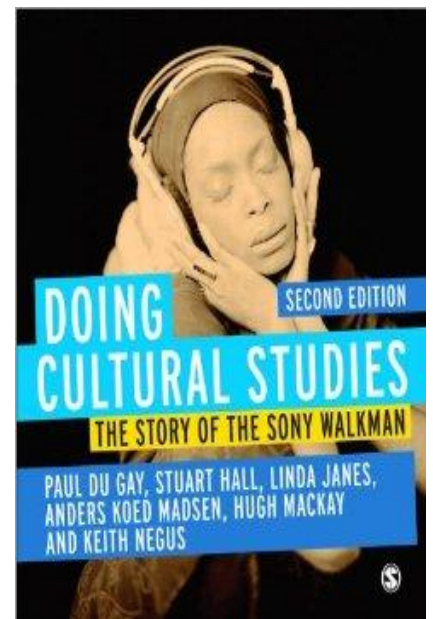
First published in the UK in 1996, and arguably the most famous book in its field, *Doing Cultural Studies: the Story of the Sony Walkman* is the text that lead to Cultural Studies becoming a respected and accepted discipline throughout the rest of the world. More than two decades after the works of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall made their mark, the first edition of this vivid book contributed to reconfirm the status of Cultural Studies as an institutionalized discipline within academia, especially outside Anglo-Saxon circles. After being updated and enhanced, this new 2013 edition includes a new chapter plus exercises, and will continue to appeal to students of media studies, sociology, culture and even marketing.

The aim of the original text was to understand the social dynamics related to the Walkman, which was studied according to five basic and interlinked dimensions: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. The book's conclusion appears clearly: culture can be studied not only as a series of contents or as a connected set of manufactured devices, but also as an ensemble of practices embedded into modes of production and ways of consuming. The Walkman as a technology product has created a new way for people to consume the music they like individually (with headphones) and therefore a new way to identify and relate to culture, coined here as "privatized leisure" (p. 104).

However, any 21st century observer might object and ask, somewhat perplexed, "who owns a Walkman nowadays?" The quickening pace of technology has brought us the iPod, the iPad, digital radio stations, and countless other affordable and advanced music players. So what relevance does the original study have for a society that no longer uses the "old" product at its centre? Sixteen years after the first edition, the authors can now write in a comparative fashion between two eras: "Comparing the cultural practices associated with the Walkman with the practices related to modern Web-based mobile devices reveals both continuities and changes in the ways such technologies have been represented, identified with, produced, consumed and regulated, and the way they have

been discussed in the media as well as in academic debates within the cultural and social sciences" (p. xii).

The second edition is made up of six chapters, with added boxes (labeled as "Back to the Future") plus a detailed Introduction to the Second Edition. Accordingly, it also contains extra readings and updated bibliographical references. Among these sixteen selected readings are Bruno Latour's prominent essay on "Technology is society made durable", plus Thomas A. Harvey's take on "brand loyalty at young age" in his text "How Sony Corporation became first with kids". A few recent texts also included discuss "Iran's Twitter Revolution" , by Ross Kaminsky, and the dynamics of Web 2.0 in the era of Netscape vs. Google and Wikipedia (see: "Patterns and business models for the next generation of software", by Tim O'Reilly).

One of the book's many strong points is the emphasis on explaining concepts and historical background, ensuring that new readers (perhaps those who are too young to ever have owned a Walkman) have a thorough understanding of the context. For example, although the Walkman is often seen as a great example of Japanese design, the authors explain how it borrowed various elements from old U.S. transistor radios and previous German styles, such as the 35mm Leica camera. Another discussion covers how technology products such as the Walkman are often re-appropriated in new and sometimes unpredicted ways by a new generation of users. In describing this phenomenon, the authors use the term "transculturation", that is, "how subordinated… groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (p. 66).

The Sony Walkman turned 30 years old on July 1st, 2009. Credit: Ham Hock CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Like almost any text in Cultural Studies, this one too carries a theoretical perspective from the Left, owing much to the Frankfurt School and especially the works of Horkheimer and Adorno in their critical studies of the culture industry: "While cultural production is 'industrial', so too is industrial manufacturing 'cultural' " (p. 76). In the specific case of the Walkman, Sony – as any integrated media corporation that uses the strategy of media synergy – "is producing both technological products and cultural forms" (p. 76). Investigating these cultural forms remains fundamental to Cultural Studies as a discipline. As such, the excellent Chapter 5 ("Consuming the Walkman") demonstrates how Cultural Studies can explore, critique, and deconstruct consumption and bring a critical analysis, coined as "the production of consumption perspective" (p. 81). The authors conclude that the Walkman cannot be seen as "good" or "bad" for individuals since consumption forms are not uniform: "what may be a positive effect for one person or group may be highly negative effect for a different individual or group" (p. 102).

In their substantive Introduction to the Second Edition, Paul du Gay and Anders Koed Madsen explain that what one consumes indicates what he or she identifies with in terms of cultural practices and personality, and this

preoccupation related to representation is well understood by designers and marketing experts. For example, in Apple's recent products such as the iPhone, "production chains, consumption patterns, and identity-work can be connected in ways that establish cultural practices" (p. xxii). In theoretical terms, the legacy of *Doing Cultural Studies* confirms that this classic read is not just about the Walkman itself, but represents a series of clear observations about the symbolic meanings of culture.

My only quibble with this new edition would be about the otherwise very useful "Back to the Future" boxes of new comments, which are always constructed in the form of questions rather than affirmations (see pp. 7, 11, 18). Though teachers may see the usefulness and pedagogical strengths of precise questions (in this case without answers), other readers may prefer to get clear explanations that provide clues. After all, it can be argued that we are buying and reading books to find answers, not because we want more questions from the authors!

Otherwise, this fundamental reading on Cultural Studies should be read not only by students and scholars in this particular field, but by students in a variety of domains including sociology of culture, political economy of culture, popular music studies, media studies, and marketing. Non-scholars will also be able to follow it and appreciate its numerous ideas. Most importantly, those who read this book's first edition many years ago must read this enriched second edition as it remains timely and relevant for today, in its accurate understanding of how we, collectively, identify and consume culture. The now forgone era of the Walkman serves as a useful comparison about how some things seem to change or can remain the same in subtle ways. That is what academic books are made for.

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