

FOUR MAIN CONCEPTS OF CULTURAL STUDIES AND THEIR APPLICATION TO SONY WALKMAN

MASAHIKO FUKAGAWA

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, a considerable number of researches have been conducted in the field of Cultural Studies. I will use findings from these researches to describe the four key concepts of the field: culture, identity, regulation and globalization. Then I will show how these four concepts are connected to the Sony Walkman, which can be viewed as a cultural product.

2. DISCUSSION OF THE FOUR CONCEPTS

A. What is culture?

The definition of culture is expressed best by Raymond Williams when he says: “culture is the process of human development” (Williams, p.87). Although, even today, the word ‘culture’ has a variety of meanings, the two major ones are “a state of refinement associated with the arts, philosophy and learning” and “the particular and distinctive ‘way of life’ of a specific social group or period” (Du Gay. p.11). The latter is important in cultural studies.

The objects of analysis in cultural studies are regularities in people’s ways of life in which they produce meanings by symbolic operations. Williams emphasizes the relation of culture to meaning. Williams calls this the social definition of culture and states “culture is closely connected with the role of ‘meaning’ in society” (Du Gay. p.11). Social practices are organized through meaning. Things do not have meaning until they are represented by social practices.

B. What is identity?

To quote Judy Giles, ‘identity’ is “produced from the cultural and social contexts in which we find ourselves and from which we draw certain assumptions” and for this reason identity can be defined as ‘individuality’ and ‘the self’. (Giles, p.30)

According to the Module, “Identities and differences can shift over time and in changing circumstances and places” (2001, p.18). Our identity often changes as our surroundings change. Identity is the self-definition, ‘Who am I?’, and is proof of the self existence of a person. The identity of a person is essentially ‘what is inside’, identity is determined by many outside influences and by others. These influences include language, meaning, and relationship with others.

Of these influences on identity, the most important is language. We live in a linguistic society in that our social relationships are often determined on the basis of language.

“Language is the use of a set of signs or a signifying system to represent things and exchange meaning about them” (Du Gay, p.13). Through talking about and thus sharing our lives with other people, people find themselves in a complexly rich world of meanings.

Social and material effects follow from the symbolic marking of one group as different from another. “Identity is organized through classification systems that divide social relations into opposing groups, in that if you belong to one you cannot by definition belong to the other/s”(2001, p.18). Each person belongs to a specific culture, and the culture plays an important role in the formation of a person’s identity. A common identity is produced among those who have similar culture, and therefore a common identity forms a group, though there may be contradictions within identities both at the collective and the individual level.

C. What is regulation?

Regulation is the process of distinguishing ourselves from the rest and thus trying to exclude them. Every instance of identity involves the periphery, which in turn determines who should be at the center. This kind of relationship between center and periphery always involves the problem of who hold the power in the situation, resulting in those at the center governing those on the periphery.

All societies require ways of producing order in order to prevent anarchy. Order can be “imposed by the rule of fear and violence or by consensual means” (2001, p.41).The first point that I should discuss is the power which works in our daily lives. Foucault insisted that there are three kinds of power in any society: ‘institutional power’, ‘economic power’, and ‘self-regulation’ (2001, p41).

These three powers regulate social relations and social order. When culture operates on society, these powers, especially self-regulation in the form of culture cause resistance. According to Foucault, ‘self-regulation’ power characterizes modern societies rather than external regulation and rules. As a result, new regulations will come into operation. Here, there arises a confrontation between those who rule and those who are oppressed.

D. What is globalization?

Globalization is the process of the parts of the world gradually being integrated into the whole economically and culturally. In this process, a variety of cultural entities are distributed to every corner of the earth and absorbed there. Those entities thus absorbed are transformed into pieces of information, and these pieces are redistributed by such media as television and films.

We come across products of major global manufacturers even in rural areas or developing countries. Global economic integration breaks down borders between cultures and thus puts cultures in constant changes. Globalization permeates and changes local economies, cultures and orders, which are restored by local people to something different from what they used to be. Here lies the crisis of local economies and identities vanishing.

To quote Anthony Giddens, “Globalization is the process in which human activities are integrated and being shared to the extent that the planet is becoming ‘one world’” (Giddens, p.77). Globalization goes beyond national borders. Various problems arise through globalization. To quote Immanuel Wallerstein, “a world-system is a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence” (Wallerstein, p.391). A global political and economic system is appearing now. This system is modeled on that of the United States. In other words, globalization is the process of Americanization leading to a ‘world-system’. In this sense, globalization is a synonym of cultural domination in cultural imperialism.

3. APPLICATION OF FOUR CONCEPTS TO THE SONY WALKMAN

These four important concepts of cultural studies-culture, identity, regulation and globalization, can be well illustrated by one particular cultural product: the Sony Walkman. Therefore, I will discuss how each of them is relevant to understanding the Walkman, not as an industrial product, but as a cultural product.

A. In what way is the concept of culture relevant to the Sony Walkman?

Nothing we produce and use can exist in a cultural vacuum, because we cannot but attach some meaning to such products. Once we begin to produce or use something, it is integrated in the network of cultural meanings. The Sony Walkman is no exception.

By definition, culture is ‘the material objects produced by a society’, (2001: ‘Culture’ p.7). In this section, I will describe a way of understanding the Sony Walkman in terms of the conception of culture as the material objects produced by a society and ‘the production and circulation of meanings’.

Although the Walkman, which is just a small gadget for listening to recorded music, means nothing in itself, cultural meanings are established as a result of the social practice of young people listening to music with a Walkman while traveling in a crowded train.

The Walkman is ‘cultural’ because “we have constitutes as a meaningful object”, and it is represented within media and it has been given identity (Du Gay, p. 18). The Walkman has become part of culture. It is a cultural object because it has been constituted by society through a range of meanings and practices. Everyone can attach a different meaning to the Walkman.

Sony, as the producer, originally advertised the Walkman as a device for the young and cool. However, despite Sony’s ‘young and cool’ appeal, people received the advertisements differently from Sony’s original intention. They saw the Walkman as convenient devices not restricted to listening music: for example, some found it useful for learning English. People did not just passively consume the product as it is represented by its producer, but actively devised the ways it can be consumed; the consumer’s way of thinking was, ‘an

active production of consumption’.

B. In what way is the concept of identity relevant to the Sony Walkman?

One of the most important concepts of identity is that “social and material effects follow from the symbolic marking of one group as different from another” (2001, p.17).

The concept of identity is related to the Sony Walkman in two ways. One is the methods of representing the Walkman as different from other products in the advertisements; the other is the Corporate Identity.

Establishing an identity of a product is essential to make it appealing. For this purpose, Sony tried to build an identity between the consumer and the product through advertisement. Through advertising the Walkman was represented as a device for young, cool, active and healthy people. Thus the Walkman “becomes a metaphor, a signifier, of “youth” (Du Gay. p. 39). The cultural text of the Walkman is put into the minds of people unconsciously through Sony’s advertisements.

The second relationship of identity to the Sony Walkman is Corporate Identity. To succeed in a competitive global market, a company must readily be recognized there; to achieve this, a company must establish its identity, represent itself as distinct from other competitors. What they did to achieve this aim was to change their name from ‘Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo’ to ‘Sony’ so that it would be easier for people around the world to pronounce. The name ‘Sony’ was coined by combining the two words’ ‘Sonus’ (derived from the Latin word meaning sound) and ‘sonny’ (meaning young boy). Now Sony is a world wide brand and it is a culture in itself. When people hear the name Sony they think of new technology and good equipment.

C. In what way is the concept of regulation relevant to Sony Walkman?

Regulation and social order operate in order to prevent anarchy. According to Mary Douglas, “any system of classification is an ordering and ordering requires the rejection of ‘inappropriate elements’” (Du Gay. p.116). That is to say, there is a process of fighting and negotiation within cultures to determine regulation.

The Walkman is designed and sold for private listening of music in public space. “By bringing what was conventionally conceived of as a private act-private listening-into public space”, the Walkman made the boundaries between the private and public spheres obscure. (Du Gay. p.115). The introduction of the Walkman into society has led to disagreements between different generations. And the Walkman created a ‘moral panic’. As Douglas points out, when ‘out of place’ is somehow taken into the public, the common reaction is to try to exclude it when people feel it as a threat to order.

D. In what way is the concept of globalization relevant to Sony Walkman?

As Anthony McGrew argued, “globalization refers to those processes, operating on a global

scale, which cut across national boundaries” (McGrew, p.630). The Sony’s strategy is a good example to illustrate the process of globalization.

Sony aimed to operate in all of the markets around the world to reach all potential consumers. In order to avoid the restraints of the currency value of the Japanese yen, Sony adopted the strategy of globalization which allows their manufacturing and marketing operations to function in every corner of the world and setting up ‘local’ operation in various countries. This system is based on the concepts of Kevin Robins ‘global-local nexus’ (Du Gay. p.79). This ‘globalizing’ strategy was part of a more general approach in which the consumer adds a local change according to his liking through the use of the Walkman. This local change is commercialized and it is put on the world market.

4. Conclusion

Although producers tried to load the Sony Walkman with specific meanings and associations, consumers gave different meanings for the product. Meanings are not just ‘sent’ by producers and ‘received’ by consumers; rather, meanings are actively made in consumption, through the use to which people put these products in their everyday lives.

REFERENCES

- Du Gay, P et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, London: Sage Publications 1997
- Giles, J. and Middleton, T., *Studying Culture: A Practical Introduction*, London: Blackwell Publishers 1999
- Lemert, C., *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, 2nd Edition, Westview Press 1995
- D.P.Martinez,D.P., *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, Cambridge University Press 1998
- Minh-ha, T.T., *Infinite Layers/Third World?*, in Lemert, C. (eds) 1999
- Douglas, M., *Purity and Danger*, Lndon, Routledge 1966
- Giddens, A., *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity 1990
- Hall, S., ‘The West and the Rest’ in *Formations of Modernity*, Hall, S., and Gieben,B. (eds), Cambridge 1992
- Foucault, M., *Power as Knowledge*, in Lemert, C. (eds) 1999
- Williams, R., *Keywords*, Oxford University Press 1976
- Module 2001
- McGrew, A., ed. *The Global, the Local, and the Return of Ethnicity*, in Lemert, C. (eds) 1999
- Wallerstein, I., ‘*The Modern World System*’ in Lemert, C. (eds) 1999