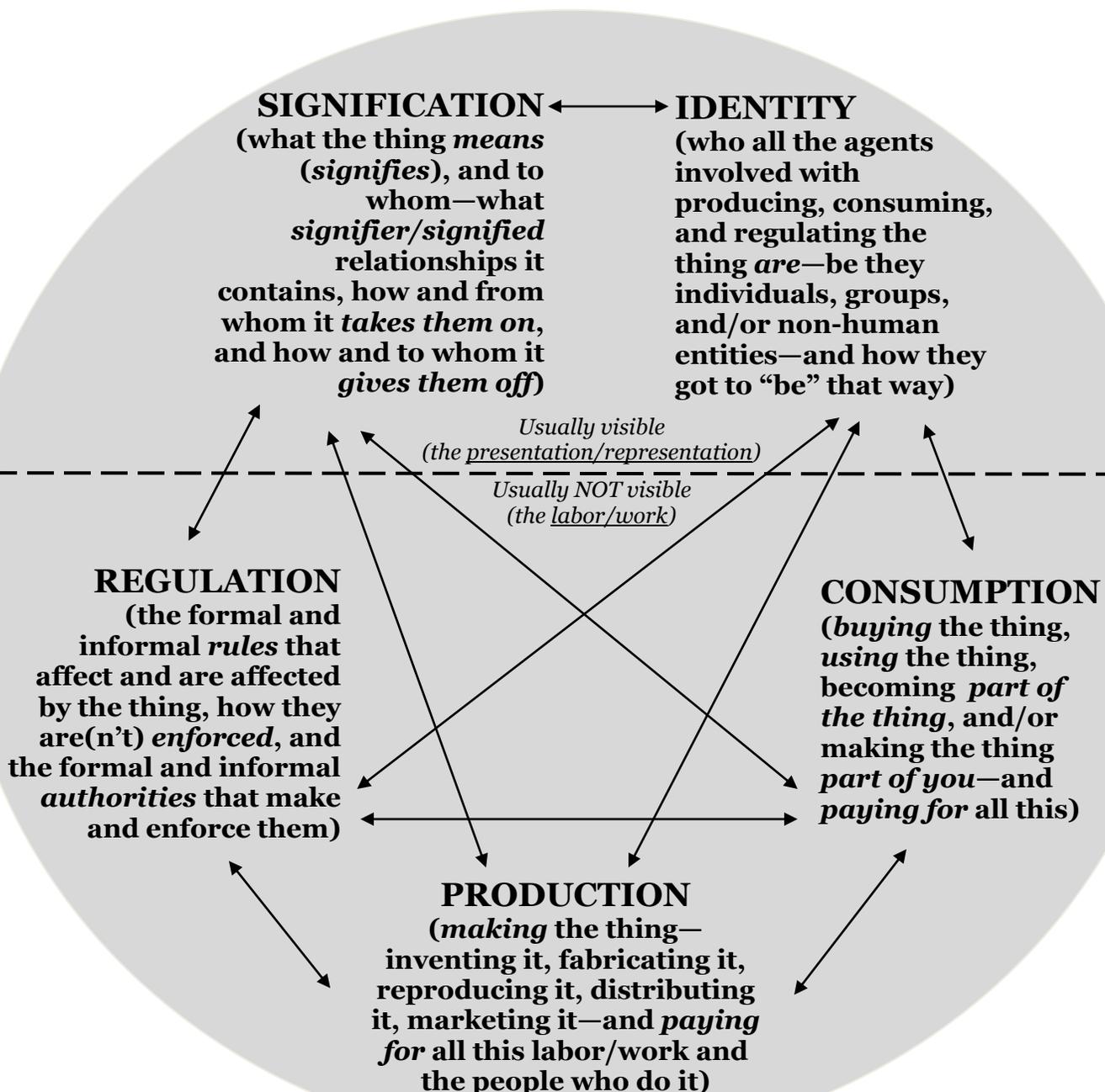


THE CIRCUIT OF CULTURE

(adapted from *Representation*, Stuart Hall's cultural studies textbook)

Larry Grossberg, an American cultural studies practitioner who studied with Stuart Hall at the Birmingham Centre (where cultural studies all began), defined cultural studies as “radical contextualization.” What this means: in order to understand how a cultural site, text, practice, or object *works*, you have to look at it from as many angles, and in as many contexts, as possible.

The diagram below breaks culture down into five component elements—an oversimplification, for sure, but a useful one: if we can understand how a site/text/ practice/object works in terms of **production, consumption, identity, regulation, and signification**—and, crucially, how each of these elements of culture *relates to, co-constructs, and is a part of* all the others (hence all the arrows), we can get a pretty good idea how it works in culture. (Note: for brevity's sake, I abbreviate “site/text/practice/object” as simply “thing.” Some practitioners prefer “thingy.”)



Here are some questions—by no means an exhaustive list—you might ask of the thing (site/practice/text/object) you are studying, to get a handle on how it works in terms of each element of the Circuit of Culture. Remember that none of these elements ever works alone; they are all very closely connected...

• **PRODUCTION**

- ☞ Follow the money! Who's *paying for* it, and/or *backing* it? Where's the money (and other resources) coming from? Is it on Fox? Paid for in part by the Melville Trust?
- ☞ Who's *making* or *producing* it? What is his/her/their story? Socio-economic background? Interests (financial and otherwise)? Personal experiences? Positions (or "biases")?
- ☞ Who *thought it up*? (Same questions apply from above.)
- ☞ How different are the people who are paying for it, making it, and thinking it up? All together living in a co-op? All the same person? Paid for by a housewife in St. Cloud, made by a sweatshop laborer in Shenzhen, designed by a firm in Wayzata?

• **CONSUMPTION**

- ☞ Are the people who consume it (or use it, or do it) different from the people who produce it? If so, again as above: how different?
- ☞ Is it something you buy? If so, what does it *cost*? Who can afford it? Who can't? Why?
- ☞ *How, where, with whom, and why* do you consume (do/watch/read/listen to/eat) it?
- ☞ Is it *advertised* or *marketed*? If so, how, where, why, and to whom?

• **REGULATION**

- ☞ Is it *legal*, or *against the rules*? What rules? Who makes and enforces them? How/why?
- ☞ Is it '*obscene*'? '*pornographic*'? '*subversive*'? Why, and according to whom?
- ☞ What kind of *certification, acceptance, and/or rubber-stamping* do you need before you can produce or consume it? Who does this certifying, accepting, and/or rubber stamping?

• **IDENTITY**

- ☞ Who produces, consumes, and regulates it? Who would NEVER be involved with it? Why?
- ☞ Who *cares* about it? Who thinks it's *important*? Why?
- ☞ What others *think of* people who do/use it? Why?
- ☞ What do you have to *know, understand, and believe* in order to do/use it? What has to be "*common sense*" for you, in order to be the kind of person who does/uses it?
- ☞ How does the object create insiders and outsiders—or, an "*us*" and a "*them*"? Who is "*us*"? Who is "*them*"? Who decides? How?

• **SIGNIFICATION**

- ☞ What does it *signify* (what is it a *signifier* for)? What *signifies* it (what is it a *signified* of)? And to whom: to its creators/authors/doers? To other audience? To you?
- ☞ In what *context* do you find it? What's going on around it?
- ☞ What kind of *language* and *tone* and *feelings* are involved, and how do they work?
- ☞ How is it *structured*?
- ☞ What *genre conventions* does it work with? (A war? A chick flick? R&B? A rave?) What gives it away (i.e., what *signifies* adherence to these conventions)? How does it live up to, not live up to, or transcend the expectations of that genre?
- ☞ What does it look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like—to you, and to others?
- ☞ What *arguments* is it making—intentionally or not? How, and why, does it make them?