Preliminary observations on Media Events & Spectacle

The two entities identified in the title of this course, “media events and spectacle,” have an interesting and complicated history in communications and culture studies. The concept of “media events” has been part of our scholarly conversation in a variety of ways since the 1940s, and actually can be seen to take hold of academic and scholarly interest with research around the Orsen Welles’ radio program *The Invasion from Mars* which caused a panic of sorts (depending on whom you interviewed or who you read). Professor Hadley Cantril and others examined audience reactions to this event in their study *The Invasion From Mars* (1940) which at the time contributed greatly to our understanding of communications theory, audiences and content with respect to the mass media.

Another major study in media events came in the 1950s as Kurt and Freda Lang put together a series of case studies that examined the role of television (it was a “new” mass medium at the time) on a series of major events including the 1952 presidential nominating conventions and General MacArthur’s triumphal parade through the streets of Chicago after he was dismissed as the commanding officer of American troops during the Korean War. What the Langs did was examine these media events from five points of view: the politically relevant actors, the character of television as defined by its technology and the perspectives of management, the images of political reality as reflected by television, the television perspective as a reference group, and television’s influence on the course of events and on political institutions.

While both groups of scholars made serious contributions to our understanding of media events, their ideas and methods were contested and debated over the years, but you can definitely see their influences in the landmark scholarship of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. In 1992, Dayan and Katz put together their own research over the preceding decades and *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* brought the genre and the scholarship to a new level. These two scholars basically brought together concepts from the social sciences with a textual analysis often associated with cultural studies. They defined media events as “the high holidays of mass communication.” They described these holidays using the language of the Shannon Weaver model of communications and linguistics and ascribed syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels to these events in order to separate them out from the stream of media that characterized
our environment even then. Syntactically, media events interrupt the daily routines of the public; semantically, they are usually staged as historical events with ceremonial language and production values; and pragmatically, they attract very large audiences in what they called a “festive style.” Additionally, they described three types of media events: first, the “contest,” which includes events such as the Olympics, presidential elections and the Super Bowl; second, the conquest, which usually is seen as a result of the contest and would result in events like the inauguration and the Oscars. Third, we have the coronation (which they include events such as funerals), a media event that confirms authority. This taxonomy became the starting point for a discussion that continues to this day in terms of defining and explicating what we call “media events.” While many scholars have amended these definitions arguing that these “types” tend to overlap, one of the more interesting extensions of their research from my point of view is the term “mediathon,” coined first by Frank Rich in his essay “The Age of the Mediathon,” in The New York Times in 2000. Here he describes the genre:

Alternately as grim and voyeuristic as the dance-endurance contests of the Depression and as redolent of cheesy show-biz piety as a televised Jerry Lewis charity binge, this new genre could be named the Mediathon: a relentless hybrid of media circus, soap opera and tabloid journalism we have come to think of as All Calamity All the Time. “War in the Gulf” paved the way for the host of breathless sequels that have blanketed the culture ever since: “The O.J. Simpson Case,” “Who Killed JonBenet?” “The Death of Princess Diana,” “John Kennedy Jr.’s Plane Is Missing,” “Massacre at Columbine,” “Will Elian Go Back to Cuba?” and of course the biggest crowd-pleaser of them all, “Scandal at the White House.”

Rich unwittingly extends the taxonomy developed by Dayan and Katz in order to conceptualize the media event in light of the development of the media environment. I say unwittingly because nowhere in Rich’s article does he reference the Dayan and Katz text or their taxonomy (it was a magazine article, not a scholarly journal, so he’s excused) which had been published eight years before. During the course of the semester, we will discuss other extensions and expansions of the concept of media events from Dayan and Katz themselves and some of their colleagues.

The concept of the spectacle is also rich and heuristic in contemporary research, but “appear” as events and as a term of perception throughout history. The spectacles of the gladiators, the “bread and circuses” of the Roman state, have an eerie connection to the major spectacles of our society such as the Super Bowl, (an event we discuss early in the semester). But the “spectacle” has taken on other, more politically and culturally oriented meanings in our time. Today, the “spectacle,” following Guy Debord, Doug Kellner and others, refers to a society characterized by electronic media, consumption, and surveillance, where audiences become spectators of the social and political processes. Jonathan Crary has extended this concept somewhat in his study Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture.
(1992) where he argues that the spectacle “organizes” our experiences in that they provide enticement, deception and distraction.

After this theoretical/historical discussion, we turn to a contemporary understanding of the pleasures, possibilities and problems of spectacles in contemporary media culture. We examine some of the foundational thinkers of contemporary culture studies, traditional scholars who saw in popular culture intimations of immortality (sorry Mr. Wordsworth), the myths and desires and contradiction of our time. Roland Barthes, Marshall McLuhan and Douglas Kellner are just three of the scholars who try to shed light on the ideology of popular culture with respect to the spectacle. We discuss some of the specific essays in Barthes’ Mythologies, Kellner’s chapter on the media culture and the spectacle and selections from McLuhan’s The Mechanical Bride.

We then journey with Mikita Brottman through some of the backwaters of popular culture in her rewarding text, High Theory/Low Culture. I believe this to be a valuable text, not only for Brottman’s insights, but her learned survey of approaches to the study of popular culture. We then try to apply those insights to one of America’s most common and overlooked practices: accessing and contributing and sharing items on and to YouTube. As cultural analysts how do we explain the phenomenon of YouTube? To what extent does YouTube reconfigure our concepts of media, culture and communications? After this discussion, we focus on genres that seem to be paradigmatic of our contemporary mass culture: the roles, functions and meanings of celebrities in what has been called “celebrity culture,” and the democratization of desire, the process Brian McNair has labeled the pornographication of mass culture.

Now that I have briefly outlined our course of study, let me share with you some of the methodological and academic assumptions I bring to this class. Every teacher, and indeed every student, enters a classroom – consciously or not – with an elaborate set of assumptions. Your decision to earn a post-graduate degree is itself an assumption – and indeed an assertion – about life, learning and the development of your intellect. I will endeavor to learn more of your academic and intellectual assumptions over the weeks ahead, but now I will briefly discuss some of mine.

I consider communication (and education for that matter) to be a transactional experience; that “media” is an inclusive term but always needs to be defined since different media will have different epistemological, political, and personal implications – assumptions that we can discuss further in class. Furthermore, any medium whether it is a newspaper, a book, a speech, a computer – or for that matter a classroom – is not a neutral artifact – and neither are the contexts within which “communication” occurs. My general approach to all communications technologies is that they don’t simply deliver political or social or personal messages but in many ways shape and transform them. While these may be my assumptions, please keep in mind that I do not and would not assume them to be yours.
However, perhaps the most important assumption I bring to our class is that I consider the classroom an interactive medium. That is, I will not consider this course successful if I do all the talking, all of the research, and all of the presenting. Believe me, I will do my fair share and then some, but as you will see below in the course requirements, student participation at almost every level becomes an important part of the course and consequently, an important area of evaluation in this class. Your thoughts and contributions are necessary and vital to the learning process of the class. Students may have “perfect” grades, but if they do not participate in class discussions and make coherent presentations (with some obvious exceptions), they usually cannot earn an A.

So, I welcome you to this year’s version of “Media Events and Spectacle,” and I look forward to meeting and working with you.

**Required readings**

In addition to the titles below, almost all of our readings are on NYU Classes in the course documents section with some necessary and readings and viewings in the external documents section. I will continue to post relevant material in both places during the term.


Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green, 2009. *YouTube: online video and participatory culture*, Polity, NY.


**Course Requirements**

I ask students to paginate their papers and use a consistent documentation format. Papers will be evaluated with a concern for form and content. Late papers will be accepted and read; however, I cannot promise a written evaluation or comments. Late papers will, of course, be penalized. The specific guidelines for the class presentations are TBA, but see below for general guidelines.

1. **A brief two-three page intellectual biography**: what books or other media products (music or films) and interests have helped form your aesthetic taste? This is a “reflective” essay on your part, in which you introduce/contemplate the intellectual and aesthetic you. For example, what films, books, paintings, music et al do you like or have liked, or have seemed to play an important role in your life and why do you think that’s the case? Not graded or evaluated, although read with commentary as a kind of informal introduction. **0% of final grade**.
2. **Your first major assignment** is to assess the readings of the first part of the course, say up to session # 8. Using the work of some of the various scholars, Dayan and Katz, Debord, Hedges et al in our course pack – and **one other scholar or artist of your choice**, see if you can come up with an essay that follows this somewhat pretentious title: “Notes toward a theory of Media Events and Spectacle.” Please note the title is subject to change as you wish: this is not to be considered a definitive statement. I am simply asking you to engage in a little creative theory writing. One way of doing this is to present a meditation on the major concepts contributed by this group of cultural historians and a question you would ask of them. Or consider what question they don’t actually ask and consider how they would approach it. **Here’s another way to look at it:** consider this assignment a review of the literature. Review the major authors and sort of find a thread that connects them, or a theme that ties them together. What would that be? Of course, these authors, while making great contributions to our understanding of culture and communications all by themselves, might not be enough. **Therefore, I am asking you to add an author or an artist of your own choosing to this list.** This author or artist is one who you think contributes in some way to an understanding of contemporary culture. It could be an author or an artist you have read and studied in another class or one that you have read or studied on your own. When I say that this contributor could be an artist – I’m thinking of a novelist, painter, poet, filmmaker, musician – anyone interested in cultural discourse or in creating cultural discourse. Although we can discuss this outside contributor in one of our early discussions, I will leave that additional author or artist entirely up to you; after all, this is your assignment. Approximately eight pages would be average. **25% of final grade. This paper constitutes a “midterm,” and is due session # 8.**

3. **Two reaction papers:** one reaction paper should be written in the first half of the course and the second one in the latter half. The other can be a reaction to a class or a series of classes or a reading or readings that were under discussion. As to the content of your reaction: this is not a commentary on how the class was taught, but on the content of the class discussion. Choose a class session or a series of class sessions, that provokes some thought on your part – and advance the discussion, or question the discussion. You might want to suggest what question or questions you think the discussion answered and what question or questions you think the discussion did not come to grips with. **Due anytime during the semester, but as noted, it would be more beneficial if the reaction paper was written and submitted close to the class or classes under discussion. About four pages for each reaction paper would be average. 20% of final grade.**

4. **Class presentations, discussions and attendance.** Regular attendance and thoughtful and intelligent **participation in class discussions** are part of your overall evaluation. Because of our class size students will have the opportunity to complete at least one presentation – **those who do more than one are exempt from one of the two class reaction papers**. We will discuss during our first session. As for the class, please respect your fellow students and keep lateness to a minimum. Also, leaving the class periodically should be curtailed; such actions tend to disrupt student and instructor concentration, and become problematic when a student is doing a presentation. We also want to maintain punctual beginnings and endings. Two absences are allowed before your grade is affected. Students will be asked to make several short, concise presentations on chapters of the required texts or assigned essays or films. **Please note that these presentations are to help create an atmosphere for class discussion not for the simple regurgitation of the article or chapter.** Please take the concept of “presentation and discussion” literally. For example, if a student were to make a presentation, say, on the Boorstin chapters, he would briefly explain or review aspects of the pseudo-event from the text and then provide examples from the media. The presenter is urged to include the class in a discussion of the material. And while I will be evaluating the student’s presentation, the class – your listening and contributions – are also part of the evaluation process. More details to be discussed later. **25% of the final grade.**
5. **Your final exam essay:** This is a "take-home" essay exam. For this project consider our units of study from the second half of the semester: film and convergence culture, celebrity culture, and pornography. Develop a theory (or use a theorist that we discussed in class or a theorist you are particularly knowledgeable of) that can explain how these genres of mass culture reveal aspects of American culture; consider the work of the theorists we studied and review Brottman for a variety of perspectives. Following their lead and/or their methodology, discuss, describe and explain the significance, as you see it, of the ascendency of these genres in contemporary American culture. How would you account for their ascendency? As you develop your project, think of ways this essay could become part of conference panel or a journal article. The chapter from Chris Hedges’ book, *Empire of Illusion* that we discussed during the term can serve as a model, although in his chapter he takes on too many contemporary media artifacts. Write a unified essay, double-spaced and paginated, leaving some margin room for my comments. A proposal or an outline somewhere towards the 3/4 semester mark would be helpful to you and me – and the basis for a discussion/meeting between you and me. About eight would be average. **30% of the final grade.**

6. **Please note:** students who make a second presentation either with a colleague or by themselves can have a second reaction paper waived.
### Media Events and Spectacle: Class Schedule, Spring, 2013

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ses.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>1/30</td>
<td>Introduction; course overview; class discussion: How do you/we conceptualize the “media event”? The spectacle? Student presentation schedule discussed.</td>
<td>Syllabus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>2/06</td>
<td>Super Bowl Presentations: the myth, the ritual, the spectacle, and the ads! Intellectual bio due.</td>
<td>See the Super Bowl folder on NYU Classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>2/13</td>
<td>Class Discussion: media events revisited and redefined; the spectacle scoped; prehistory of the modern media event.</td>
<td>Boorstin; Dayan and Katz, Rich,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>2/27</td>
<td>Lecture/presentation: Our Academy Award event class. Student presentations: Whither the art and/or commodity of film?</td>
<td>Denby, Czitrom and Haastrup, et al. Pseudo-event extraordinaire: the Academy awards, articles on NYU Classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>3/06</td>
<td>Student presentations: Film in the Age of Media Convergence.</td>
<td>Tryon, chapters 1-3, Reinventing Cinema, chapters on NYU Classes.</td>
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<td><strong>Spring Recess!!</strong> March 18-24</td>
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<td>#9</td>
<td>4/03</td>
<td>Lecture presentation and student presentations: How do we understand celebrity culture?</td>
<td>Turner, chapters 1, 2, 3 and the relevant articles on NYU Classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>4/10</td>
<td>Student presentations: new directions in celebrity culture.</td>
<td>Turner, 4, 5, 6, 7 and the relevant articles on NYU Classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#11</td>
<td>4/17</td>
<td>Student presentations: Celebrity culture</td>
<td>Appropriate articles on NYU Classes.</td>
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<td>#13</td>
<td>5/01</td>
<td>Lecture/presentation: how can we understand the implications of the sexualization of culture (the pornosphere to public sphere)?</td>
<td>McNair, Introduction and parts 1&amp;2.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#14</td>
<td>5/08</td>
<td>Final Class Student presentations: student roundtable: pornography in everyday life.</td>
<td>McNair, part three; Brottman, chapter 5.</td>
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TBA: Final exam due. See syllabus for details.
**Some Recommended Reading**

Many books and publications and articles have been useful in helping to develop this course known as "Media Events and Spectacle." Here is a partial listing, sometimes with a brief commentary. These books would make welcome additions to your reading as well as your library. By the way, if you come across any interesting books in your intellectual travels that you think can help us understand our spectacle driven culture, feel free to bring it to my attention. Thanks, sjf.


Carey, James. 1988. *Communication As Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. While this whole book is recommended, chapter two "Mass Communication and Cultural Studies" is the essay that best serves our study of the "mass mind."


Czitrom, Daniel. 1990. *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. This is a very valuable book: it contains three case studies of media that helped bring about “the mass mind.” These include: the development of the telegraph, the rise of radio, and the evolution of the motion picture industry; along with these case studies is a remarkably lucid account of the growth of the philosophy of communications, from the “founding fathers” Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey and Robert E. Park to Marshall McLuhan and Harold A. Innis.


Brantlinger, Patrick. 1983. *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*. This is perhaps one of the finest compilations of the history of mass culture debate. Brantlinger traces the debate from the ancient Greeks to twentieth century discussions of Post-Modernism.


Ewen, Stuart. 1988. *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. You will never talk or think about "style" in the same way again.

__________. 1996. *PR!: A Social History of Spin*. As you might expect, this is a historical look at the development of spin. It contains a remarkable case study on Edward Bernays, the “father” of public relations and master of the pseudo-event.


interviews an alpha male, Sylvester Stallone, on the meaning and changing of contemporary masculinity. One of the more interesting pseudo-events of the 1990s.


Rothenberg, Randall. "The Age of Spin." Esquire. 126:6, December, 1996. This is a reworking of Ewen's ideas in PR, along with a "story interview" with Stuart Ewen.


**Journals on cultural theory and popular culture:** the following journals provide current thinking on "mass mind" issues.

- Critical Studies in Mass Communication
- Critical Quarterly
- Cultural Studies
- Feminist Review
- European Journal of Communication
- International Journal of Cultural and Media
- Journal of Popular Culture
- Literature and History
- Media, Culture and Society
- New Formation
- Screen
- Southern Review
- Textual Practice
- Theory, Culture and Society
- Women: a cultural review
- Women's Studies
**Lecture/presentation:** How YouTube matters? **Student presentations:** YouTube and popular culture, its cultural politics, and its “uncertain” future.

**Burgess & Green** intro & chapter 1, and Seabrook on blackboard.

**Articles on blackboard** (course documents as well as external links), **Burgess and Green,** 2-5.

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**Required film: About the required film for class discussion**

A film review can be the basis for one of your reaction papers, and we will have at least one class session devoted to a discussion of how film (or the movies, depending how you see them) – and the role of the “film experience” is in the process of changing in contemporary culture. And as a class, we should choose a particular film or perhaps a series of films that we can discuss and relate to the major ideas of the course. Of course, this medium is in a transitional state in terms of its status in American culture. Where and how we experience these cultural artifacts – their conditions of attendance – seems to have changed the standing of film in our culture. Chapters from one of our texts, **Movies in the Age of Convergence** speak to this very issue (the relevant chapters for our discussions are on blackboard). Of course, the Academy Awards is a major media event that we intend to deconstruct in class because this event connects a number of aspects of contemporary spectacle culture – the star system, part of the celebrity culture business, and the narratives they choose to tell, and how they tell them.