Some preliminary observations on The Mass Mind

“The mass mind” course has been around a long time – it first appeared in our department in the 1970s examining the media and culture industries and their patterns of assembling and exploiting audiences. As the media environment changed, so did the course content and certainly the point of view. Professor Terence Moran took over this course during the 1980s, and taught this course with a critical eye on mass culture. Taking his cues from McLuhan, he saw in advertising, pseudo events, and the corporate control of culture revelations about American character, desires and values. Later, when I began teaching this course, the major media industries, that is, television, film and the musical arts were still, more or less, intact – although the unraveling was imminent with the development of internet. This course then had units of study on the mass culture debates, advertising, media events such as the Superbowl, sitcoms, the blockbuster film and so-called reality television. That approach intensified as new media began to repurpose older media, and new concepts and topics became relevant. As the new century stumbled through its first decade, the mass mind contained units devoted to some of the major narratives of film and television, along with the role of live performance in a mediatized culture, modern (and earlier) forms of minstrelsy, celebrity culture, and how contemporary musical performances conceptualized authenticity.

While this course has changed drastically over the years, some aspects have not changed: our mission, as I conceive it, is to examine the various the artifacts and practices of contemporary American culture in light of contemporary analytical views. If I wanted to be a stickler for grammatical correctness, I would rename this course the mass minds because this apparent paradox would indicate the escalating decentralization of mass culture that has taken place over the past decade or so. As I conceptualize it, the “what” of the mass mind is located in and around the various culture industries, cultural practices and processes that develop, produce and distribute, share and repurpose the images, narratives, sounds and events that create the fabric of everyday life.

While we may know where the mass mind is located and what it delivers to a population, and how various populations make meaning of these artifacts, how we (a certain academic cohort) talk about it and evaluate it are questions that will help focus this semester’s inquiry. These questions have been at the core of cultural history and scholarship for the immediate past
century, but we have to start somewhere, and I begin this course with a discussion of the words “popular,” “mass” and “culture,” words that have rich histories and that tend to invite ambiguity.

We then examine part of a work that has contributed to our understanding of American culture, Daniel Boorstin’s 1961 classic The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-events in America. This text introduces many of our contemporary concerns: the study of the image, the concept of the pseudo-event as a way of understanding contemporary culture, the ascent of celebrity culture and the blurring of traditional aesthetic genres into the various cultural products of our time. While this text is limited theoretically, it does provide a historical starting point. Kiku Addatto in her work, Picture Perfect: Life in the Age of the Photo Op, brings Boorstin’s concepts into our time. The relevant chapters for us are reprinted in our course pack, and they introduce and comment on some of our subsequent units of study – namely the role of the image, and the development and functions of celebrity in our culture.

After this brief investigation of society’s devotion to the photo op, we start to examine the complicated concept of culture. Is culture a process, a set of practices, a set of artifacts, an outlook, or a goal? Perhaps all at once? To try to sort this out, we read a short historical essay by Richard Simon on the New York City version of the mass culture debates (which contains the discussion of three extraordinary novels), and then a somewhat longer chapter of Lawrence Levine’s Highbrow Lowbrow: the making of cultural hierarchy in America entitled “Shakespeare in America.” These two very different pieces provide some perspective on the idea of categorizing and evaluating human expression. For example, Levine analyzes a time in America, not unlike ours, when the “high art” of Shakespeare was folded in with American low brow parody, providing a rich cultural mix. In our time, the blurring of cultural, aesthetic and sexual boundaries is one of our ongoing practices as well as one of our greatest conundrums.

After this theoretical/historical discussion, we turn to a contemporary understanding of the pleasures, possibilities and problems of the mass mind. We 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 the schools of popular culture interpretation. We try to apply those insights to one of America’s most common and overlooked practices: accessing and contributing to YouTube. As cultural analysts how do we explain YouTube? To what extent does YouTube reconfigure our concepts of media, culture and communication? Then we focus on genres that seem to be paradigmatic of our contemporary mass culture: the roles, functions and meanings of celebrities and the democratization of desire, the process Brian McNair has labeled the pornographication of mass culture.

Now that I have I 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 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. Of course, all of this is open to discussion; and, 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 The Mass Mind and I look forward to meeting and working with you.

**Required readings**

In addition to the titles below, there is a course pack for this class and you can purchase it at the Advanced Copy Center on LaGuardia Place.


**Required films: About the required films 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 and perhaps another 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 our contemporary mass mind. Where and how we experience these cultural artifacts seem to have changed the status of film in our culture. Of course, the Academy Awards is one pseudo-event we intend to discuss, because this is one important aspect of the contemporary mass mind – the star system, the narratives they choose to tell, and how they tell them, should all be part of our discussion. This semester we have several films out currently that comment on aspects of the mass mind, and “Avatar,” and “Up in the Air” come to mind. Last year, films such as “The Wrestler” and “The Reader,” “The Gran Torino,” and “Revolutionary Road” became part of our discussion. **We will make the decision to discuss at least two major contemporary films in one of our early classes. We should spend some class time discussing their cultural significance.** What follows are a group of films that in the past have been part of our discussions of mass culture, or that brought to light some of the contradictions and issues in understanding mass culture. These films include in no particular order: “Quiz Show,” “The Insider,” (starring Al Pacino among others), “I’m Not There” (the Dylan film), “Factory Girl,” (an interesting take on the art world of the 1960s). When we are discussing our pornography unit, you might want to take a look at “Girl Six,” Spike Lee’s approach to that industry in particular and the mass mind in general.

In past versions of this course I have suggested the various biopics, notably, “Ray,” “Kinsey,” “The Aviator,” and “Beyond the Sea.” “Network” is a film that by now has achieved iconic status, and would be worthwhile to view if only for its historical aspects. Are there any others? I also would like to suggest “Capturing the Friedmans,” a remarkable film from 2002. If students want to make presentations on any of these films – or any of the contemporary ones noted – that would certainly be possible, just inform me so I can put you in the schedule. Keep in mind that while we need not show any full length films in class, group presentations should include a representative film clip in order to aid in our discussion. **Your discussions should concern to what extent each film expands or comments on themes explored in our readings.**

**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 in which you introduce 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. If you have already been in one of my classes, and have done this assignment, you may opt out of this one. **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 # 7 Using the work of some of the various scholars, Boorstin, Adatto, Brottman, authors in our course pack, et al – 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 an
understanding of the mass mind.” Please note the title (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. Here’s another way to look at it: 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 ten pages would be average. 25% of final grade. This paper constitutes a “midterm,” and is due session #8.

3. A proposal for your final project – this assignment can be handed in at any time during the semester, but not less than two weeks before the paper is due. 0%, but read with commentary. You should take advantage of my office hours and discuss this project with me.

4. Two reaction papers: ideally, one reaction paper would be written in the first half of the course and the second one in the latter half of the course. One reaction paper can be a film review if you like. The other can be a reaction to a class or a series of classes. 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. I’ve made suggestions on the class schedule for handing them in. Four – five pages for each reaction paper would be average. 20% of final grade.

5. Class presentations, discussions and attendance. Regular attendance as well as thoughtful and intelligent participation in class discussions are part of your overall evaluation. 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 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. More details to be discussed later. 25% of the final grade.

5. Your final exam essay/project: This is a “take-home” exam. For this project consider the work of the theorists we studied and review Brottman if you like. Following their lead and/or their methodology, discuss, describe and explain the significance, as you see it, of a mass mind genre or artifact – either one that we have discussed in class or one of your own choosing. Use at least three outside source for this assignment. Write a unified essay,
double-spaced and paginated, leaving some margin room for my comments. Approximately **ten pages** would be average. **30% of the final grade, due 5/07.**

**Recommended Background Reading**

Many books and publications and articles have been useful in helping to develop the academic concept known as “The Mass Mind.” 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 the mass mind better, 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.


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
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<th>Session</th>
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<td># 1</td>
<td>1/20</td>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong>: syllabus review; review of special terms, theories of the mass mind/society; class discussion: how do you conceptualize popular culture?</td>
<td>Syllabus.</td>
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<td># 2</td>
<td>1/27</td>
<td><strong>Lecture/discussion/student presentations</strong>: the image society and life in the age of the photo op. <strong>Intellectual bio due.</strong></td>
<td>Boorstin and Adatto in course pack.</td>
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<td># 3</td>
<td>2/03</td>
<td><strong>Student/presentations</strong>: Cultural hierarchy and cultural history.</td>
<td>Simon, Levine in course pack.</td>
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<td># 4</td>
<td>2/10</td>
<td><strong>Lecture/student presentations</strong>: another view of pop culture texts: the embrace of high theory and low culture.</td>
<td>Brottman, introduction and chapter 1</td>
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<td># 5</td>
<td>2/17</td>
<td><strong>Student presentations</strong>: “Rumor, Gossip and Scandal: Barthes and Tabloid Rhetoric,“ &amp; “The Last Stop of Desire: Roland Barthes goes shopping”</td>
<td>Barthes, Brottman, chapters 3, 4.</td>
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<td># 6</td>
<td>2/24</td>
<td><strong>Student presentations</strong>: “Blueprints and Bodies: Lacan and the Pornographic Imagination.”</td>
<td>Barthes, Brottman, chapter 5.</td>
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<td># 7</td>
<td>3/03</td>
<td><strong>Lecture/presentation</strong>: How YouTube matters? <strong>Student presentations</strong>: YouTube and mainstream culture.</td>
<td>Burgess and Green, chapters 1, 2.</td>
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<td># 8</td>
<td>3/10</td>
<td><strong>Student presentations</strong>: YouTube and popular culture, its cultural politics, and its &quot;uncertain&quot; future. <strong>Reaction paper due.</strong></td>
<td>Burgess and Green, 3-5.</td>
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**Spring Break!!**  
*March 16-20*

| # 9     | 3/24  | **Lecture/presentation**: Whither the art and/or commodity of film? **Student film presentation, midterm due.** | Czitrom, Denby, Heffernan, et al. Pseudo-event extraordinaire: the Academy awards. |
| # 10    | 3/31  | **Lecture presentation and student presentations**: Celebrity Culture and the mass mind: how do we understand celebrity culture? | Turner, chapters 1, 2, 3 and the relevant chapters from the course pack. |
| # 11    | 4/07  | **Student presentations**: new directions in celebrity culture. | Turner, 4, 5, 6, 7 and the relevant chapters in the course pack. |
| # 12    | 4/14  | Lecture/presentation: how can we understand the implications of the sexualization of culture (the pornosphere to public sphere)? **Reaction paper due.** | Kendrick, et al, McNair , Introduction and part 1. |
| # 13    | 4/21  | **Student presentations: student roundtable**: modern conception of pornography in everyday life. **Film presentation**: "The pornography of everyday life" | McNair, parts two and three. |
| # 14    | 4/28  | **Final Class**: course review; discussion of final exam | Articles in course pack. |
|        | 5/05  | **Final exam due.** See syllabus for details. |                                      |