**Sociology Group Assignments – Proposed General Themes**

**1 – Programmed Obsolescence**

“In the decades since Vance Packard published The Waste Makers (1960), planned product obsolescence has developed in many subtle and sophisticated ways. Yet its social and environmental impact remains largely unacknowledged; planned obsolescence continues to be elaborated and to undermine consumer choice, increase costs of owning and using products, accelerating the destruction of useful objects and resulting in higher levels of ecological spoiling. It is a phenomenon widely acknowledged though little discussed. Conceptual and empirical detail will be discussed in relation to i) `in-built' technological obsolescence the design; development and incorporation of functionally fragile components leading to premature malfunction, ii) stylistic obsolescence; the styling or fashioning of myriad consumer objects such that they are deemed to have `worn out' stylistically and aesthetically before they have failed functionally and, iii) the `superfluous within the necessary'; the over-elaboration of products such that they are functionally `overprogrammed', the specific design of many objects such that they cannot be repaired or adapted for alternate uses and, the way that many products urge and often require the subsequent consumption of extra goods and services simply to maintain them”. (Neil Maycroft)

Possible Axes to Explore: Social Distinction as a Source of Obsolescence; technological obsolescence in late modernity; capitalism and obsolescence; Illiteracy and people’s obsolescence; waste and pollution as consequences of obsolescence; an obsolescent society.

**2 – Disgust, Repulsion and the Yuck Factor**

“The term "disgust," in its simplest sense, means something offensive to the taste. It is curious how readily this feeling is excited by anything unusual in the appearance, odour, or nature of our food. In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty. A smear of soup on a man's beard looks disgusting, though there is of course nothing disgusting in the soup itself. I presume that this follows from the strong association in our minds between the sight of food, however circumstanced, and the idea of eating it.” (Charles Darwin)

Possible Axes to Explore: Disgust as a universal emotion; cultural interpretations of disgust; social and moral repulsion; the yuck factor; the wisdom of repugnance; changing dimensions of disgust.

**3 – Horror and Terror in Modern Societies**

“The counterpart of culture, I would like to suggest, is not nature but horror. The natural usually has a well-defined place in a culture. Defined, and domesticated by a system of signifiers, nature is given a name as something original, wild, spontaneous, restorative, dangerous, and so forth. There is nothing so cultivated, for example, as the nature of romantic poets. Of course, culture itself has several meanings. When culture is used to refer to that which is refined and educated, Kultur and Bildung, then the raw, primitive drives of nature can be seen as polar opposites to culture. But this demarcation is itself a cultural act of language and symbolization. Strictly speaking, I would say that the antithesis of culture is not nature but the unnatural, that is, the monstrosity that does not fit into any categories or names. As Andrew Gibson has noted, "monstrosity transgresses the metaphysics underlying symbolic boundaries, the boundaries that determine all those categories and classifications that separate kinds of being off from one another." (Paul Santilli)

Possible Axes to Explore: Why terror/horror became so attractive and sought; the pleasures of terror; a culture permeated by “frisson”; the movies and the horror; cultures of (banal) evil.

**4 – Pornography and Contemporary Culture**

“(…) Hard-core has become more familiar (even to those who choose not to consume it) as well as more profitable. Its massive revenues have demanded attention and, apparently, respect not only within porn studies but in the culture more generally. At the same time, the mainstream has increasingly and explicitly borrowed (from) pornography, whether by making porn and porn performers the object of mainstream representation (in Hollywood movies or reality TV shows, for instance) or by quotation and allusion in the codes, conventions, language and fashions of popular culture. Through such quotation, pornography achieves a mainstream currency and visibility, but whilst popular culture may be ‘pornified’ (…) as a result, it does not become pornography. To properly understand how pornographic quotation of this kind functions depends on understanding the differences as well as similarities between these pop culture examples and the hard-core they reference. Equally, whilst analysing ‘pornification’ (…) is important and relevant, this does not obviate careful and considered scholarship of pornography itself: something that, despite (…) claims, has long been a concern of anti-pornography feminists as well as those of different political persuasions.” (Karen Boyle)

Possible Axes to Explore: Porn in the age of Internet; how porn can be a moral discourse; porn as an element of popular culture: the trivialization of the obscene; the mythification of pornography.

**5 – Collective Memory and the (re)Construction of the Past**

“What do we mean when we use the term "collective memory"? Memory, our common sense tells us, is a fundamentally individual phenomenon. What could be more individual than remembering, which we seem to do in the solitary world of our own heads as much as in conversation with others? Even when we reminisce, we often experience this as a process of offering up to the external world the images of the past locked away in the recesses of our own minds. We can remember by ourselves in the dark at night, as we drive alone along the highway, or as we half-listen to a conversation about something else. By the same token, lesions of the brain—caused perhaps by Alzheimer's disease or physical injury—are surely internal rather than social defects, preventing us as individuals from remembering. Memory—and by extension forgetting— thus seems not just fundamentally individual, but quintessentially so, as primal and lonely as pain. What can we possibly mean, then, when we refer to social or collective memory?” (Jeffrey Olick)

Possible Axes to Explore: The (re)invention of traditions; manufacturing social identities; do societies learn to forget?; suppressing collective memories.

**6 – The Acceleration Thesis**

“What does it mean for society to accelerate? We all notice that events around us seem to take place faster all the time. Our computers process huge sums of information at ever more impressive velocities. What was experienced as being extraordinarily speedy just yesterday (for example, a 66 MHz word processor or an ISDN Internet connection) now seems extraordinarily slow. The shot lengths in movies, advertisements, and even documentaries have increased by a factor of at least fifty, and the speed with which speeches are delivered in parliament has risen by 50 percent since 1945. Athletes break speed records with frightening regularity. Although the velocities of trains, planes, and cars no longer appear to be increasing by much, traffic planners continue to promise abbreviated travel times. The time that elapses between an earthquake, a new disease, or a novel fashion in New Zealand and my being informed about it is getting shorter every year. Speed dating and drive-through funerals3 remind us that even basic life activities appear to be speeding up: fast food, fast learning, fast love. Neighbors, fashions and lifestyles, jobs and lovers, political convictions, and even religious commitments appear to change at constantly heightened rates.” (Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman)

Possible Axes to Explore: Fast transitions vs. slow movements; are we really living in an accelerated society?; The cronocentric bias; social consequences of acceleration.

**7 – Dueling and the Civilizing Process in Early Modern Europe**

“In the 1790s British reformist novelists became increasingly driven to expose the depravity of the English aristocracy by focusing repeatedly on upper-class behaviors that they identified as markers of the ancien régime; particularly, gambling and dueling. To reformists, aristocrats gambled for high stakes to demonstrate their nonchalance about money publicly. Similarly, reformists saw dueling as a public display that aristocrats would continue to honor their age-old codes of conduct above and beyond modern civil law, despite contemporary political changes. Gambling and dueling are linked by their foundation in the aristocracy’s devotion to the idea of chance, and by the tenacious peer pressure exacted in upper-class circles to preserve these behaviors as signs of social distinction.” (A. A. Markley)

Possible Axes to Explore: Culture and Civilization in Comparison; class ethos and collective action; senses of honor and dignity and their implication; how competitive sports substituted dueling; the German Mensur and the triumph of character over physical beauty.

**8 – Social Trauma, Shame, Guilt and Atonement,**

“Material forces are deeply implicated in social suffering, and the strategic calculations and practical considerations surrounding traumatic events have significant effects on social organization. I am concerned, however, to trace the manner in which these causes and effects are crucially mediated by symbolic representations of social suffering, with understanding how a cultural process channels powerful human emotions, and to what effect. These symbolic cum- emotional forces are carried by social groups whose actions transform the worlds of morality, materiality, and organization. Intellectuals, artists, politicians, and social movement leaders create narratives about social suffering. Projected as ideologies that create new ideal interests, trauma narratives can trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric. They can also instigate new rounds of social suffering.

Possible Axes to Explore: Effects of collective violence and the construction of culprits and victims; Nations living on a moral limbo of permanent guilt; how the shame-revenge-justice-opprobrium dynamical mechanisms work.

**9 – The social contexts of (in)action – Sleep, Silence, Secrecy, and Leisure**

“Significant changes occurred in the ways that Americans conceived of and practiced sleep between 1996 and 2006. New pharmaceuticals were produced and introduced to control sleep and wakefulness, as well as a variety of other sleep complaints. New techniques were developed to confront daytime sleepiness at school and at work, namely, the alteration of start and end times and provisions for napping. New caffeinated beverages were introduced to appeal to youth markets, and coffee consumption increased. Scientists worked to establish the genetic basis of early and late rising (so-called larks and owls) and the causes of and cures for narcolepsy, restless legs syndrome, and rapid eye movement behavior disorder. Alongside these changes, much about American sleep stayed the same or intensified along familiar lines. Insomnia continued to be a major complaint of many American adults, with some estimates placing the rate of periodic insomnia near 30 percent of Americans. Stimulant use to offset sleepiness and fatigue continued in a fashion that stretches back to the early 1800s, albeit intensified. Popular representations of normal sleep continued to focus on eight consolidated hours of sound, motionless sleep, either solitary or in a shared bed with an intimate. Clinical practice also followed these lines and focused on establishing regular, consolidated nightly sleep for patients. Sleep was emerging as a new interest but was shaped by very particular American ideas about it and its ideal forms.” (Matthew Wolf-Meyer)

Possible Axes to Explore: The medicalization of societies and the construction of pathologies and deviations; the “crime” of doing nothing in an active society; the revelation and the whistle blower as moral categories.

**10 – Cyber Society and Big Data**

“Rapid developments in communication and computing technologies have been the driving factors in the spread of the internet technology. This technology is able to scale up and reach out to more and more people. People at opposite sides of the globe are able to remain connected to each other because of the connectivity that the internet is able to provide now. Getting people together through the internet has become more realistic than getting them together physically at one place. This has led to the emergence of cyber society, a form of human society that we are heading for with great speed. As is expected, this has also affected different activities from education to entertainment, culture to commerce, goodness (ethics, spiritual) to governance. The internet has become a platform of all types of human interactions. Services of different domains, designed for different walks of people, are being provided via the internet. Success of these services decisively depends on understanding people and their behaviour over the internet. For example, people may like a particular kind of service due to many desired features the service has. Features could be quality of service like response time, average availability, trust and similar factors. So service providers would like to know of consumer preferences and requirements for designing a service, so as to get maximum returns on investment. On the other side, customers would require enough information to select the best service provider for their needs. Thus, decision-making is key to cyber society. And, informed decisions can only be made on the basis of good information, i.e. information that is both qualitatively and quantitatively sufficient for decision making.” (Hrushikesha Mohanty)

Possible Axes to Explore: The dispute privacy/security/safety; effects on the uses and abuses of information; getting to know the others by amassing huge data.

**11 – Schadenfreude – Between Emotions and Morality**

“Schadenfreude is a perplexing emotion: on the one hand, it is pleasurable, some even argue one of the most pleasurable emotions, but on the other hand, it seems disgusting and inhumane, even sadistic, since we know we ought to be sad, rather than happy, about others’ misfortunes. In order to understand such a dissonance, we should distinguish between the emotion of schadenfreude and sadistic behaviour. In both cases, someone gets pleasure from another’s misfortune, but whereas schadenfreude is an emotion whose main concern, like that of other emotions, is a personal comparative concern, sadism is behaviour whose main concern is deriving pleasure from deliberately inflicting pain on someone else. Accordingly, schadenfreude is not as morally reprehensible as sadism and as the prevailing view considers it to be.” (Aaron Ben-Ze’ev)

Possible Axes to Explore: Connections between Schadenfreude, hypocrisy, deservedness, resentment. Exploring categories of morality and emotions.

**12 – Serendipity and Scientific Discoveries**

“There were ample occasions that could have called for the use of the word serendipity. Numerous well-known accidental discoveries occurred in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the period when serendipity came into the market of words. In 1833, the year in which Walpole’s letters to Mann were first published, there occurred one of the more spectacular examples of what was later to be cited as a case of serendipity, for in that year William Beaumont published his report on the new discoveries he had made about the digestive process, which resulted from his study of a gastric fistula that had accidentally come to his attention. Shortly before, in 1828, Friedrich Woehler accidentally obtained the compound urea in his laboratory, by treating potassium cyanate with ammonium sulphate, and the synthesis of this substance, held to be identical with urine, laid the foundation of the science of organic chemistry. Again, in 1839, Goodyear accidentally discovered the process for vulcanization of rubber, and in 1856, William Henry Perkin by accident synthesized the first coal tar dye, “mauve.” These discoveries inevitably received considerable public attention, but, unlike, say, Fleming’s discovery of penicillin, about a century later, they were not described as cases of serendipity.” (Robert K. Merton)

Possible Axes to Explore: Deliberation and chance in the discovery process. The roles of intuition and creativity. The social roots of innovation.

**13 – Waste, Garbage and Trash in the Modern World**

“Waste is now electronic,” writes Gopal Krishna in describing the escalating number of obsolete electronic devices headed for the dump. This is the other side to electronic waste—not a by-product of the manufacturing process, but the dead product headed for disposal. E-waste—trashed electronic hardware, from personal computers and monitors to mobile phones, DVD players, and television sets—is, like the electronics industry, growing at an explosive rate. Electronics consist of a broad range of devices now designed with increasingly shorter life spans, which means that every upgrade will produce its corresponding electronic debris. In the United States, it is expected that by 2010, 3 billion units of consumer electronics will have been scrapped at a rate of 400 million per year. Many of these electronics have yet to enter the waste stream. Of the hundreds of millions of personal computers declared useless, at least 75 percent are stockpiled. Computer owners store the outmoded model as though there might be some way to recuperate its vanishing value, but the PC is one item that does not acquire value over time. At some point, stockpiled computers and electronics enter the waste flow. Most of these consumer devices are landfilled (up to 91 percent in the United States), while a small percentage are recycled or reused. Recycling, moreover, often involves the shipping of electronics for salvage to countries with cheap labor and lax environmental laws. The digital revolution, as it turns out, is littered with rubbish.” (Jennifer Gabrys)

Possible Axes to Explore: Problems of waste disposal; the uses of garbage according to social classes; the wastegenic society.

**14 – Foresight, Forecast, Prediction, and Prevision: Looking into the Future**

“Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, as scientific, medical, political and economic practices produce ever more extensive futures, the sciences charged to explain that social world have abdicated their responsibility for the study of this social domain to futurologists whose primary interest is to develop increasingly sophisticated tools to forecast and model the future. This neglect of the social future as subject matter has created a black hole of knowledge and concern about a core problem of the contemporary social condition. I am referring to the crucial disjuncture between the technological capacity to produce futures that extend over thousands of years, the lack of knowledge about potential outcomes and impacts of these mostly technological creations and the socio-political inability and/or unwillingness to take responsibility for the futures of our making. In this paper I explore past sociological approaches to the future and consider their suitability as conceptual and methodological tools to address the contemporary dilemma. Where I find the tradition lacking I ponder what changes might be necessary for a contemporary sociology of the future to become appropriate to its subject matter.” (Barbara Adam)

Possible Axes to Explore: Why social predictions fail? How to study the future and the transformations it implies. Trends and trend spotters. Gurus and scientists.

**15 – Robots and Humans: from the “Turk” to the neo-Luddites**

“In addition to efforts to enhance the human body with a range of technologies, other important progress is being made in robotics and artificial intelligence that is also setting the stage for a human-machine merger. Due to major improvements in algorithms and sensors, machines are becoming more autonomous, software is becoming ‘smarter’, and robots are being developed that are beginning to look and act more like humans than machines. In fact, one area of research in robotics is towards developing realistic looking robots that mirror human appearance (i.e., androids); another strand is towards developing facial features that cause a robot to appear as if expressing emotions; in particular, facial expressions like smiling or raising eyebrows. Once ‘humanoid’ robots are equipped with artificial intelligence —and thus acquire more autonomy from their human masters—the vision of an android in the spirit of Star Trek’s “Data” might become a reality. At this point one can imagine two interesting scenarios: firstly, that the world may become populated by different types of species than those we see around us today: non-enhanced and enhanced humans, cyborgs, robots, and androids among them, all of which will function, in different but perhaps also in similar ways, in day-to-day social life. And secondly, from advances in technology there could emerge one intelligent species, based on the merger of human and machine. In my view, before humanity could eventually merges with machines, there will be several intermediate forms of human-machine combinations, some of which we will term cyborgs. Again, when I speak of “merging with machines,” I mean equipping humans with the technology (typically information technologies) to enhance the human body and mind, to go beyond current capabilities, essentially, to become more “cyborg-like.” An “emerging cyborg law,” then is the legal issues which will be important to consider for our technological future. Further, whether a complete machine body containing a human consciousness uploaded to a machine architecture is a human or machine, is an interesting philosophical question, and the subject of discussions by various authors.” (Woodrow Barfield)

Possible Axes to Explore: Robots and the end of work/employment. Associations between artificial and biological beings. The moral and emotional side of robotization.

**16 – Rankings, Ratings, Lists and Comments: Towards a Sociology of Appreciation**

Many sociologists have investigated taste and its relationship to social practice. Much of this interest is attributable to the work of Bourdieu, whose treatise Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984) remains one of the most influential works in sociology. Bourdieu situates taste at the centre of a comprehensive theory of the relationship between social inequality and cultural practices. Specifically, he views taste as an acquired cultural competence involving an awareness of the symbolic value of objects. In his later work on fields of cultural production, Bourdieu argues that the symbolic value bestowed on individuals and objects is the result of cultural consecration. In short, symbolic value is created through the collective actions of groups and institutions that possess the requisite cultural authority. This same view is held by Meyer, who asserts that ‘taste formation’ involves a ‘collective interpretation of a symbol or artefact which results in a collectively shared evaluation’ and argues that this process ‘takes place within the context and constraints of social institutions’. There have been several empirical studies of cultural as a process that involves ‘the attempt by a group or organization to impose a durable symbolic distinction between those objects and individuals worthy of veneration as exemplars of excellence within a field of cultural production and those that are not’. Typically, these distinctions are embodied in awards, prizes and honours. The process of cultural consecration, which is intimately entwined with that of taste formation, is especially important in the premium wine industry. Symbolic value is created whenever wine show judges determine that some wines are worthy of medals or trophies and others are not. This symbolic value can then be converted into economic value because the quality of a wine, as certified by a medal or trophy, has implications for its price. Premium wines are considered ‘premium’ precisely because consumers are willing to pay a premium for them. Thus, cultural consecration is implicated in the process of product differentiation on the basis of perceived quality.” (Michael Patrick Allen and John Germov)

Possible Axes to Explore: the construction of lists and rankings on contemporary society. How ratings and comments shape choices and produce hierarchies. The effects of appreciation on the definition of social and symbolic orders.

**17 – Privacy in the XXIst Century: Facebook vs. Big Brother**

“We are co-owners of many types of private information. For example, we not only control our personally owned private information, we also are given information that belongs jointly, and we even have private information that belongs to our whole family. There may be private information belonging to a corporation where we are employed or to groups of which we are members. Consequently, on many levels, we often co-own information with others. In each case, we erect boundaries around the private information to mark the lines of ownership and control. Hence, control that maintains ownership rights is important for both personal boundaries and for collectively held boundaries. While control helps preserve ownership, the need for it also suggests that private information is not just a possession. Instead, embedded in the notion of owning private information is the potential for vulnerability. The choice to share the information or keep it often hinges on a risk-benefit ratio for those involved. We know that revealing exposes us to a certain amount of vulnerability, but so does concealing. Thus, the possibility of risk heightens the significance of control issues for privacy management. We feel the need to control our risk-benefit ratio by determining how much vulnerability we are willing to experience. Because of the possible liabilities found within ownership and co-ownership of private information, we engage in boundary control for personal and collectively held boundaries.” (Sandra Petronio)

Possible Axes to Explore: Violations of privacy and personal space and the opening of intimate details via social networks. Privacy and property rights. Varieties of privacy.

**18 – Luck, Chance, Fate and Reproduction: on the social dimensions of destiny**

“Most of the philosophical discussions of luck have been focused upon the relevance of this concept to issues in ethics and, to a lesser degree, epistemology. The loci classici for the former debate in the recent literature is an exchange between Nagel (1979) and Williams (1979) on how luck undermines responsibility and thus, a fortiori, moral responsibility. Essentially, the concern raised is that there are morally relevant consequences of our actions which are due to luck, and that this undermines our moral responsibility for those actions. For instance, one example that is discussed by Nagel, and which has been the locus of a great deal of debate in the subsequent literature, is that of the drunk driver. Nagel asks us to compare two moral agents, both of whom drive home drunk, but only one of whom has the misfortune to kill an innocent bystander as a result. Nagel notes that our moral approbation of the ‘unlucky’ driver is far greater than our moral approbation of the ‘lucky’ driver, even though we are willing to grant, on reflection at least, that the only difference between the consequences of the two situations is a difference brought about by luck. It would appear then, argues Nagel, that luck has an influence on our moral judgements. Now one might respond to this sort of example by arguing that all it shows is that we should be more careful about our moral judgements by first being clear that the consequences at issue are not due to luck. But this will not do, contends Nagel, because there is a sense in which luck afflicts the consequences of all our actions since no matter how likely it was that what happened occurred in the way that it did, there is always the logical possibility that events could have been different and different in such a way that can be described as being affected by luck. We are thus faced with the dilemma of either abandoning the project of a luck-free system of moral assessment altogether, or else radically revising our moral intuitions.” (Duncan Pritchard)

Possible Axes to Explore: Responsibility and autonomy vs. luck. Luck and deserving. Entitlements and justice vs. luck. Economic distributions of resources.

**19 – Cartoons, Jokes, and Laughter: Towards a Sociology of Humor**

“Humor is a quintessentially social phenomenon. Jokes and other humorous utterances are a form of communication that is usually shared in social interaction. These humorous utterances are socially and culturally shaped, and often quite particular to a specific time and place. And the topics and themes people joke about are generally central to the social, cultural and moral order of a society or a social group. Despite the social character of humor, sociology, the discipline that studies society and social relations, has not concerned itself much with humor. When sociology emerged in the nineteenth century, it focused mainly on the great structural transformations of the modern times: modernization, industrialization, urbanization, secularization, etc. It was not very interested in the “unserious” business of everyday life: interactions, emotions, play, leisure, private life, and other things not directly related to great developments on the macro-level of society – such as humor. In the course of the twentieth century, sociology became more diverse and increasingly concerned with the micro-reality of everyday life, but it still remained overwhelmingly devoted to the study of social problems, great transformations, and other serious matters. As a result, humor came into focus mainly when it seemed problematic in itself, or was concerned with important social issues: race and ethnicity, political conflict, social resistance, gender inequalities. Meanwhile, questions about the social nature of humor were addressed by many other disciplines. Many of the classical humor theoreticians touch on social aspects of humor. However, these questions were mostly answered from a more philosophical or psychological perspective. Anthropologists and folklorists were much ahead of the sociologists in paying serious and systematic attention to the social meanings and functions of humor Only after the 1970s can we speak of a serious emergence of a sociological interest in humor.” (Giselinde Kuipers)

Possible Axes to Explore: Comparative studies on jokes in different countries. Intensive analysis of the significance and variety of jokes in the social realm.

**20 – Hoaxes, Deception, and Provocations: Scrutinizing Scientific Discourses**

“In January 2009 Margaret Simons revealed on the online site Crikey.com that a hoax had been perpetrated against the Australian conservative journal Quadrant. In its January/February 2009 edition, Quadrant had published an article by Sharon Gould entitled ‘Scare Campaigns and Science Reporting’. Sharon Gould was, however, a pseudonym invented by Katherine Wilson, whose article had been conceived with the intent of fooling Quadrant’s editor Keith Windschuttle. Over the previous decade Windschuttle had performed a prominent role in denouncing left-leaning academics for misrepresenting the truth in Australian research on frontier conflict and race relations. According to Windschuttle, these ‘revisionist’ historians, whom he claimed dominated academia, had fabricated their sources and bent the truth in order to support their ideologically-driven agenda of darkening the image of British colonial history. In an effort to straighten the record, Windschuttle published two historical volumes (one on frontier relations in Tasmania and another on the White Australia Policy) as well as an historiographical critique of ‘postmodern’ approaches, entitled The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering our Past (1997). Windschuttle remained in the frontline of the ‘history wars’ under the former coalition government. The government appointed him onto the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Board in 2006 and in early 2008 he assumed the editorship of Quadrant. The Windschuttle hoax was intended to strike out at a ‘cultural warrior’ who had taken an aggressive stance with respect to standards of truth, while at the same time adopting a highly critical position on multiculturalism as the bearer of ideological views of history. For Windschuttle, ‘relativist’, ‘postmodern’, ‘multicultural’ challenges to the doxic conceptions of truth represented an attack on ‘objective’ standards of truth and on proper academic process. Supposedly, then, the laugh was on Windschuttle when he was caught out accepting an article that had clearly breached the standards of the scholarly process he had so noisily upheld.” (Maria Hynes)

Possible Axes to Explore: Can Sociology produce “true” statements? The new roles of the experts. The end of the prominence of the academic world?

**21 – Stars, Famous and Infamous: the Culture of Celebrity**

“Many social commentators have denounced the election of entertainment celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Venture, and Al Franken to political offices as indicative of American democracy’s collapse, treating the political victories by these celebrities as evidence of America’s preference for entertainment over political deliberation. As the literature demonstrates, this conflation of celebrity and politics is not a recent phenomenon, as politicians have long employed dramaturgical elements to mobilize constituencies. Indeed, celebrities and politicians share many similarities. Both must construct public personalities appealing to their audiences and employ similar actors and strategies to help create these personalities. While some scholars working in this field agree with the concern that celebrity’s presence in politics inhibits serious political discourse, other scholars contend that the use of celebrity performances by politicians may actually attract a wider segment of society to meaningfully participate in politics. Daniel Boorstin’s The Image is one of the most widely referenced works within the celebrity literature. Published roughly 50 years ago, Boorstin’s work introduces many of the concepts still used by scholars today, and provides valuable context into the history of this relationship. As Boorstin documents, the merger between celebrity and politics is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, one finds evidence for the wedding of politics with stagemanship in President Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘fireside chats’ in the 1930s. As Boorstin explains, Roosevelt’s administration carefully constructed these ‘chats’ to reassure Americans by providing an image of a calm and capable President not too far removed from ordinary Americans to fail to appreciate their problems but also smart enough to know the solutions. From this revelation it is not surprising to discover, as Boorstin notes, that Roosevelt’s administration included ‘poets, playwrights, and a regular corps of speech writers’ in addition to ‘newspapermen’.” (Brian McKernan)

Possible Axes to Explore: Fame ‘Damage’: Scandal, Notoriety and ‘Failure’. Stardom and the Star System. Audiences and Celebrity

**22 – Ennui, Boredom, Melancholy, and Acedia: Capital Sin or the label for a New Society**

“It is often claimed that about ten per cent of us suffer from depression in the course of life. What is the difference between profound boredom and depression? My guess is that there is a considerable overlap. I would also guess that almost one hundred per cent of the population suffers from boredom in the course of their life. Boredom cannot simply be understood as a personal idiosyncrasy. It is a much too comprehensive phenomenon to be explained away in such a way. Boredom is not just an inner state of mind; it is also a characteristic of the world, for we participate in social practices that are saturated with boredom. At times, it almost seems as if the entire Western world has become like Berghof, the sanatorium Hans Castorp stayed at for seven years in Thomas Mann’s novel The Magic Mountain. We kill time and bore ourselves to death. So it can be tempting to agree with Lord Byron: ‘There’s little left but to be bored or bore. Psychological investigations also indicate that men suffer more from boredom than women. These investigations also support Schopenhauer’s claim that the feeling of boredom diminishes with age. It may be that women to a lesser extent than men verbally express boredom, but that they are affected by it to an equal extent. Possibly, women have other needs and sources of meaning than men and are therefore less affected by various cultural changes that give rise to boredom. Nietzsche too claims that women suffer less from boredom than men, motivating this by saying that women have never learnt to work properly – a more than dubious form of justification.” (Lars Svendsen)

Possible Axes to Explore: The historical dimension of boredom. A trait of modernity? The effects of boredom in a society of affluence.

**23 – Ignorance: not knowing, not wanting to know, not caring about knowing**

“Knowledge and the intensive use of knowledge are usually assigned positive attributes in science and practice and are considered instruments that can open up possibilities and guarantee economic and social success. Knowledge has been the object of extensive research for a very long time, whereas the absence of knowledge, which is commonly understood as ignorance, has so far been largely neglected and therefore hardly explored and discussed. The relationship of knowledge and ignorance in modern society is perceived to be a paradoxical one, in the sense that the increase of knowledge means an increase in what is. Thus, the ‘knowledge society’ becomes a ‘knowledge-and-ignorance society’. This paradoxical condition seems to make it necessary to also study ignorance and the circumstances under which it comes into existence. An analysis of available literature in social science, suggests that the topic remains unclear and leads to even more confusion and new questions, rather than to satisfying answers. Investigating ignorance involves differentiating it from related terms and phenomena, such as uncertainty, mistakes, negative knowledge, liminal knowledge, tacit knowledge and intuition. There are different concepts on the relationship between ignorance, risk and uncertainty While Smithson as well as Smets use ignorance as a generic term, which includes e.g. ‘uncertainty’, Kahneman and Tversky understand ignorance as a subform of uncertainty. Wehling assumes ‘that uncertainty is generally treated as a form of however limited, hypothetical and uncertain knowledge, while ignorance describes the lack and absence of knowledge’. Thus, a mistake is to be distinguished from ignorance, as a mistake is also based on knowledge, albeit on alleged knowledge.” (Daniel Dorniok)

Possible Axes to Explore: Ignorance and the limits of science. Ignorance as a moral category. Ignorance as discarding.