

Sound Culture

COMS 350 (001)— Winter 2015
Weds and Fri 1:05-2:25, W-215 Arts

This course provides students with a broad introduction to the interdisciplinary field of sound studies, through a focus on questions of sound, culture and power. Students will learn to listen like humanists, to analyze aspects of sound culture from the standpoint of critical and humanistic traditions, and to ask and pursue research questions about sound, culture and power.

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: 12-1W and 2:30-3:30F (no appointment necessary—please drop in!) and by appointment.

Office Phone: 398-5852 (I rarely pick up; I check voicemail at least once a day)

Email: jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca. I check at least once daily M-F when I'm in town—please allow a couple days for a reply. If your email requires a long reply I will ask you to see me. If you have a question that is easily answered on the course website or in course materials, I will direct you there.

TA Jonathan Karpetz

Office: Arts B22 (Basement of the Arts Building. Opposite of the Subway staff entrance)

Office Hours: by appointment and around major assignments

Email: jonathan.karpetz@mail.mcgill.ca

Availability: Office hours are set aside for you – feel free to stop by office hours without an appointment. We are happy to see you. The rest of our time is set aside for meetings, class prep, writing, reading, etc. If you wish to see us outside our regular office hours, please make an appointment. Office hours may occasionally be cancelled or rescheduled; this will be announced on the course website or in class.

Requirements

Required readings will be available through the course website.

Students should also follow *Sounding Out!: The Sound Studies Blog*.

<http://soundstudiesblog.com>. New written posts appear every Monday. Podcasts are optional.

Technology:

Students should take notes on paper with a writing utensil and arrive at class with a printed copy of the assigned readings. Laptops, mobile phone and other personal communication technologies will be used for some activities; otherwise they should be put away and turned off. On days when laptops will be essential or useful, we will let you know ahead of time. E-Mail, texting, social media not related to the course,

and other media practices that have the potential to distract others are prohibited in class. Your instructors reserve the right to ask anyone to stop using any device at any time during class.

Other Etiquette:

1. Your goal is full attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading all of required texts. I expect the very best you can give.
2. Although this is a large class, we encourage discussion. **You are encouraged to raise your hand during class and ask questions, add comments, or ask for something you didn't understand to be repeated or clarified.** When you do, please identify yourself and speak up. The room acoustics can be funny: even if you can hear the prof perfectly, your classmates may not hear you as well.
2. Show good faith and good humour toward your colleagues in the classroom. For both: disagreements are expected and encouraged, but please keep nitpicking to a minimum; personal attacks and intimidation are not acceptable under any circumstance. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones. You are free to change your mind at any time; so are others. Arguments are not contests.
3. Avoid “seek and destroy” criticism of others’ ideas (or ideas in the readings). If you have something critical to say, be ready to explain how the piece could be improved. If you disagree with the premise of a piece, then read for what motivates the argument.
4. Personal experience is sometimes a necessary part of discussion, but be thoughtful before bringing it up. Is it really relevant to the topic? Do you want others to know what you are about to say? Are you prepared to seriously consider others’ (equally valid) interpretations of your experience if they differ from your own? Anecdotes are not the same thing as systematically collected scholarly evidence, and any idea is open to multiple interpretations in a classroom.
5. Your professor finds people entering and leaving the classroom during lecture to be distracting. If you know that you must leave early on a given day, please let him know before class. If you arrive late or leave early enter or leave the classroom quietly. If you are more than 10 minutes late, don't come to class. Repeat offenders will find their semester grades reduced.
6. Trigger warnings: There's been a lot of talk in the press about content warnings and student comfort in the classroom.¹ As your prof, I will never do anything intentionally to shock or traumatize students. At the same time, it's our job to

¹ This usually involves some pundit grumbling about millennials.

discuss difficult subjects in class, and nobody can predict the effect some materials may have on someone. I will try and give previews of the kinds of content you will encounter before you encounter it. If I forget, feel free to ask. If you are having difficulty dealing with a class discussion or a reading or recording, you may raise the issue as part of the discussion (keeping in mind #4 above), or you may simply discretely step out of class. A note to me (the prof) would be helpful after the fact so that I know what happened and don't think you just got up and left.

Components of Your Semester Grade:

I. Be Ready and Present for Class (20%) Arriving at class ready to discuss the material is the most important thing you can do. Over the course of the semester, students will regularly be asked to write during lecture in response to a question. Questions may cover a reading due on the day of the class, any item from the previous two lectures, or other materials you would reasonably be expected to know on a given day. Questions are designed for you to demonstrate that you did and understood the assigned reading in advance of class. Some may be quiz-like, others may require you to take a position on something. Writing assignments are graded according to the following rubric: 100 (correct); 50 (clear evidence of having done the reading but get something wrong regarding what the author said); 25 (present, aka "thanks for playing"); 0 ("Dude, where's my car?"). In-class projects where there is collaboration will receive a grade of 100 if completed, 25% if not completed somehow, and 0 if you are absent. (If you require special accommodations, notify the professor during add-drop). We will drop your two lowest scores (including "0" scores for nonattendance). Beyond the two freebies, missed in-class assignments cannot be made up and are not "excused" for any reason whatsoever.

II. Connect the Course to the Culture (10%) This requirement is designed to get you to connect the course with things happening this semester—around McGill, Montreal and the world. Students must do two of any of the following to fulfill this requirement: (1) attend one of the recommended lectures, museum exhibits, concerts, workshops or other events during the semester, and writing a short (1 page) commentary on it, connecting it to themes or concepts from the course; (2) find material that would be useful for the course, such as a recording, video or other example of sound culture and write a short (1 page) commentary explaining how it is linked to themes from the course (NOTE: semester project contributions are not included here); (3) come up with another way to fulfill this requirement that honours the spirit of the assignment—check with your prof or TA first.

III. Do a Sound Study (35%) The goal of this assignment is to have you really think deeply about a sonic issue and demonstrate your analytical skills, making some use of the course material. Midway through the term, students will write one short 5-6 page academic essay that critically analyzes a sonic practice, event, phenomenon, artifact or technology. You will find this easier to do if you pick

something very specific, rather than a general phenomenon. The task of the paper is to advance an argument about your chosen object of study from a humanistic, critical standpoint. The paper must make substantial use of ideas from at least two readings from the course. You may work with a partner if you like, but the prof and TA are not responsible for any issues that arise in collaborations.

Alternatively, students may produce a 5-minute audio or multimedia piece about a sonic topic. The conceptual requirements are exactly the same as for the written paper. Please note: only do this assignment if you are relatively comfortable working with audio. We cannot provide technical support.

Either way, projects will be posted on MyCourses by their due dates. Papers will be graded according to a rubric. Written feedback will be limited around a rubric but you are encouraged to meet with us to go over your project both before and after completing it.

A 1-paragraph proposal will be due **any time between 15 and 22 February**: Proposals should describe what you plan to study as well as the ideas you want to use from the course. Our response will range from a rubber stamp—"go for it"—to a few short suggestions for improvement—to "come meet with me."

If students have other cool ideas for a midterm project, please meet with the prof **BEFORE** this date.

The project will be due by **noon, Monday 22 February on MyCourses**. Yes, we know that's not a class day.

IV. Design, Conduct and Present Original Research With Others (35%: by contract)

The semester project is a collective project that will result in a collectively authored website or multimedia "thing." The topic will arise from class discussions. We will build it together. Everyone will research and write (or produce) to contribute to it. Your grade will be the result of you completing a number of tasks according to a contract. There will be group work and peer evaluation, but you will earn your own mark. There will be opportunities for those who want to play it safe, and for those who want to go out on a limb.

The semester project is a grand experiment. The goal of the course is to teach you how to ask scholarly questions about sound. So the final project will involve doing just that. Over the course of the term, students will ask a variety of interesting and smart questions in class discussions. We will keep track of these. You can too. Some of them will open out to big research problems. After the midterm assignment, your prof and TA will collate some of these questions into research projects that the class can undertake collectively. We will then discuss the options, decide on one, and modify it as needed. To facilitate the project, the final weeks of the course are left

open. The prof and TA will suggest readings relevant to the project or to subgroups of students based on what the project is.

Together, we will design the research around the ways of knowing sound that we have studied in the course, and students will all research a piece of the problem. Alone and in groups, they will divide it up, and conduct research. Some students will then write about that research, other students may synthesize it, and still others will help orchestrate the presentation of the work. At the end of the term, we are hoping for one giant, collective term project in the form of a coauthored website on the topic of choice.

Although the work will be collaborative, in that you will rely on one another, it will be graded individually, piece by piece, according to a contract grading system. Once the project is decided upon, you will be able to sign up for the grade you wish to earn on the final project (obviously, higher mark=more work). Since others will be depending on you, they will evaluate your work on a pass-fail basis, according to a clearly defined rubric. If you pass, you get the mark. If you fail, you can try again so long as there is still time left in the course.

We will discuss the semester project in more detail as the course unfolds.

Tentative Class Schedule

Always subject to change; Changes will be announced in class and on MyCourses

Bring printed copies of readings to class.

F 8 January: Opening

W 13 Jan: **Sound, Culture, Power: Take 1**

Attali, Jacques. "Listening," in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, 3-20. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Optional For the curious (aka, stuff you'll hear all term):

Sterne, Jonathan. "Sonic Imaginations." In *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne, 1-12. London: Routledge, 2012

F 15 Jan: **Modes of Audition and Beyond**

Chion, Michel. "The Three Listening Modes." In *Audio-Vision*, translated by Claudia Gorbman, 25-34. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Friedner, Michele, and Helmreich, Stefan. "Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies." *Senses and Society* 7, no. 1 (2012): 72-86.

W 20 Jan: **Acoustemology**

Boas, Franz. "On Alternating Sounds." *American Anthropologist* 2, no. 1 (1889): 47–54.

Feld, Steven. "Acoustemology." In *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 12–28. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

F 22 Jan: **Soundscapes**

Schafer, R. Murray. "Introduction," "Listening," and "The Acoustic Community." In *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 3-12, 205-225. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994.

Note: come to class ready go for a walk. Barring inclement weather (compared to normal January weather in Montreal), we will be going for a soundwalk and discussing it as part of the class meeting.

W 27 Jan: **Understanding Urban Noise**

Thompson, Emily. "Noise and Modern Culture." In *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America 1900-1930*, 115-168. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

You are also encouraged to explore Thompson, Emily and Scott Mahoy, "The Roaring 20s," *Vectors Journal*, 2013. Start at this URL, then launch the site (you will need Flash):

vectors.usc.edu/projects/index.php?project=98&thread=DesignersStatement

F 29 Jan: **Sonic Regulation and Political Contestation**

Radovac, Lilian. "Muting Dissent: New York City's Sound Device Ordinance and the Liberalization of the Public Sphere." *Radical History Review*, no. 121 (January 2015).

W 3 Feb: **Privacy**

Hosokawa, Shuhei. "The Walkman Effect." *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 165–80.

Bijsterveld, Karin. "Acoustic Cocooning: How the Car Became a Place to Unwind." *The Senses and Society* 5, no. 2 (2010): 189–211.

F 5 Feb: **Bellaphonics, or Sound in War**

Daughtry, J. Martin. "Fragment #1: The Presence of Mind to Save an Ear: Ali's Story," "Mapping Zones of Wartime Inaudition," "Sonic Campaigns." In *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq*, 27-32, 76-102, 159-187. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015.

W 10 Feb: **Dont Rhine special guest star**

Readings TBA

F 12 Feb: **Reproducibility**

Mowitt, John. "The Sound of Music in the Era of Its Electronic Reproducibility." In *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, edited by Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, 173-97. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

W 17 Feb: **Handing Sound**

Eno, Brian. "The Recording Studio as a Compositional Tool, Part I." *Downbeat*, July 1983.

Introduction to Audicity TBA.

Note: We will be tinkering with audio software in class. If you have a laptop, bring it to class. We will be working in pairs and sharing.

F 19 Feb: **Voices**

Dolar, Mladen. "The Linguistics of the Voice." In *A Voice and Nothing More*, 13-32. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. "Sensing Voice: Materiality and the Lived Body in Singing and Listening." *Senses and Society* 6, no. 2 (2011): 133-55.

W 24 Feb: **The Archive**

Hoffmann, Anette, and Phindezwa Mnyaka. "Hearing Voices in the Archive." *Social Dynamics* 41, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 140-65.
doi:10.1080/02533952.2014.985467.

F 26 Feb: **Sonic Surveillance**

Crawford, Kate. "Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2009): 525-35.

Possible other reading TBA.

2-4 March: **Reading week. Please post photos of palm trees to the course website.**

W 9 March: **Political Economies of Sound**

Gopinath, Sumanth. "The Business of Ringtones: The Unstable Value Chain and Accumulation of Capital by Rent in the Global Ringtone Industry." In *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Cultural Form*, 3-56. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

F 11 March: **Political Ecologies of Sound**

Smith, Jacob. "Green Discs," "The Run-Out Groove." In *Eco-Sonic Media*, 13-41, 142-70. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

W 16 March: **Sound Art and Politics: Frances Dyson, special guest star**

Dyson, Frances. "The Racket." In *The Tone of Our Times: Sound, Sense, Economy, and Ecology*, 117-139. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014.
<http://site.ebrary.com/id/10944460>.

Kelly, Caleb. "Introduction: Sound in Art." In *Sound: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Kelly, Caleb, 12-18. London: MIT Press, 2011.

F 18 March: Media@McGill #aisthesis conference panel featuring Francis Dyson and Caleb Kelly. Details forthcoming. <http://aesthesis.ca>

W 23 March: **Music, Labor and Politics of Culture: Jonathan Karpetz, special guest star.**

Piekut, Benjamin. "When Orchestras Attack: John Cage Meets the New York Philharmonic." In *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*, 20-64. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

F 25 March: Good Friday Administrative Holiday

Readings TBA, based on our research project.

W 30 March:

F 1 April:

W 6 April:

F 8 April:

W 13 April:

F 15 April:

Other Policies

Accommodation: If you require special accommodations or classroom modifications of any kind, please notify both the professor and Office for Students with Disabilities by the end of the first week in which you are enrolled in the course. They are located in Room RS56, Redpath Library Bldg., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TTY), [<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>].

French: You have the right to submit your written work in French. If you plan to write in French, please get in touch with me during add-drop so we can talk about how to handle it, as I am not fluent in French. Since there is a writing-intensive component to the class, we should discuss logistics.

Class discussions are in English, but you're certainly welcome to resort to French if you can't find the right word in English and we'll figure it out together.

Nondiscrimination: I value equality of opportunity, and human dignity and diversity. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, ethnic or national origin, civil status, religion, creed, political convictions, language, sex, sexual orientation, social condition, age, personal difference or the use of assistive technology in negotiating that difference. Among other things, this means that you do not have to agree with your teacher, the assigned readings, or the majority of your classmates in order to do well in this course. You are, however, obligated to demonstrate an understanding of the course material *whether or not you agree with it*. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

You are bound by the same rules as your teachers; rude or disruptive behaviour is grounds for reduction in a semester grade.

Grades and Appeals: We take grades very seriously because we know you do. We do not give out grades over email or the telephone. We cannot even disclose that you are enrolled in the course to third parties, including your parents, roommates, boy/girlfriend/spouse, pets, etc.

Should you wish to dispute a mark, it must be done according to the grade appeal policy on the course website. Keep in mind that disputes can result in a lower mark (if you ask for your assignment to be regraded, the grade can go up or down).

Late papers may not receive comments and will earn a reduced grade (one increment of a letter grade for the first two days, then an increment per day, including weekends).

It is your responsibility to make sure I and/or your colleagues (as appropriate) receive any assignment you turn in. It is also your responsibility

to properly back up your work: keep more than one digital copy and always have a paper copy of anything you submit.

You must complete all the major assignments (Sound Study, Original Research, Connect the Course) to pass the course.

Reproduction of Course Materials:

Students are encouraged to take notes and share them with one another. However, they may not be sold or otherwise monetized for personal gain by students or third parties (for instance, by for-profit note-taking services), without the professor's expressed, written prior consent. Photos or audio- or video- recordings of class proceedings are explicitly prohibited without the professor's expressed, written prior consent. Under no circumstances may they be posted online.

Required Academic Integrity Statement: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity)

Special Required Emergency Syllabus-Eraser Clause: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Feline Sound Studies:

