

Sound Culture

COMS 350 (001)— Winter 2017

Mon and Weds 14:35-15:55, 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, power and media. 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, media and power.

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: M 16:00-17:00; W 13:15-14:15 (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 email me with a question that is easily answered on the course website, syllabus or in course materials, I will secretly think less of you and then politely direct you there. So will Zoe.

TA Zoe de Luca

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

Office Hours: by appointment and around major assignments

Email: zoe.deluca@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; the prof's schedule gets quite full so plan ahead. Office hours may occasionally be cancelled or rescheduled; this will be announced on the course website or in class.

Requirements

Most required readings will be available through the course website. *How Noise Matters to Finance* is available at THE WORD bookstore, 469 Milton St. 514-845-5640, <http://www.wordbookstore.ca/>. Please note they only take cash or check. You may also order it online, but allow time for delivery.

Technology Policy:

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. 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 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 (25%) 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 and closed book, others may require you to take a position on something. Writing assignments are graded according to the following rubric: 10 (correct); 5 (clear evidence of having done the reading but get something wrong regarding what the author said); 1 (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, 10% 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 for reasons like being sick, family trips, not being enrolled, etc.). 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 (5%) 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/@250 word) commentary on it, connecting it a theme or concept from the course. The paper must be posted within 36 hours of the event in order for you to receive credit.
- (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 a theme from the course (note: this cannot be material related to either of your projects for III and IV below). The paper must be posted by 10am the

¹ This usually involves some pundit grumbling about millennials.

day the related reading is due in order for you to receive credit. If for any reason you don't want it mentioned in lecture, please indicate that.

(3) Come up with another way to fulfill this requirement that honours the spirit of the assignment—check with your prof or TA first, and no alternative proposals will be accepted after 31 March.

These items will be graded on a credit/no credit basis. **Deadline:** one CTC must be posted by **24 February; the other is due by 5 April**. There are no extensions, but you may submit early.

III. McGill Massive Experiment in Sound Studies 2017 (aka, MMESS 2.0): Make or analyze a sound recording that elucidates something about sound, power, culture and the digital (35%)

Our first major project is a collective undertaking that will result in a bunch of cool individual or small collaborative projects, but also form the basis for a portion of an exhibit on Sound and the Digital Economy at the Museum of Civilization in Quebec City, to open in September 2017.

A separate assignment sheet will give details, but essentially it is this: you will select, excerpt or produce a recording of 5 minutes or less; and then provide a critical commentary *on or in it* that deals with some aspect of sound and the digital economy in dialogue with readings from the course.

5pm, 14 and 21 February: set your due date, choose your recording, choose your concept

5pm 24 February to 5pm 10 March, project due on MyCourses.

IV. Do a Sound Study / or MMESS 2.1 (35%) A separate assignment sheet will give more details. 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. For the end of the term, students will write one short 5-6 page academic essay that critically analyzes a sonic practice, event, phenomenon, artifact or technology. You can build off your contribution to the MMESS (in fact, one option will be to expand and revise your work for the MMESS), or you can go in a whole other direction. 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. You must meet with the professor and have your plan approved before going through with this option. 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 and written feedback will be limited by the rubric, but you are encouraged to meet with us to go over your project both before and after completing it.

A 1-paragraph commitment will be due **on 24 March**: commitments 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 semester project, please meet with the prof BEFORE this date.

The project will be due by **noon, Tuesday 11 April on MyCourses**. Yes, we know that’s not a class day. You are always welcome to submit early.

Tentative Class Schedule

**Always subject to change; Changes will be announced in class and on MyCourses
Bring printed copies of readings to class.**

W 4 January: Opening

M 9 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

W 11 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.

M 16 Jan: **Acoustemology**

Feld, Steven. “Acoustemology.” In *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 12–28. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. (ctd next page)

Meintjes, Louise. "The Recording Studio as Fetish." *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*, 71-108. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

W 18 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).

M 23 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.

Ultra-red. "Some Theses on Militant Sound Investigation, or, listening for a change." <https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/some-theses-on-militant-sound-investigation-or-listening-for-a-change/>

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. If you are unable to go for a walk, please consult with your prof in advance, regarding an alternative assignment.

W 25 Jan: **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.

M 30 Jan: No class. Start reading *How Noise Matters to Finance* (see below).

W 1 Feb: **Noise, Real and Metaphoric**

Knouf, Nicholas. *How Noise Matters to Finance*. Minneapolis: University Press, 2016.pp. 9-51 are required. 52-67 are recommended.

M 6 Feb: **Handling Sound I: From Studio to Laptop**

Born, Georgina, and Kyle Devine. "Music Technology, Gender and Class: Digitization, Educational and Social Change in Britain." *Twentieth-Century Music* 12, no. 2 (2015): 135–72.

Giacona, Christina. "A Tribe Called Red Remixes Sonic Stereotypes." *Sounding Out!*, February 13, 2014. <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/02/13/a-tribe-called-red-remixes-sonic-stereotypes/>.

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Download and install Audacity software: <http://www.audacityteam.org> before class.

I will also provide you with some audio to download.

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.

W 8 Feb: Reproducibility

Stanyek, Jason, and Benjamin Piekut. "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane." *The Drama Review* 54, no. 1 (2010): 14–38.

M 13 Feb: Handing Sound II: Radio Documentary

Sheetal Lodhia, special guest star. Assigned listening TBA.

W 15 Feb: Mediated Voices

Hilu, Reem. "Girl Talk and Girl Tech: Computer Talking Dolls and the Sounds of Girls' Play." *The Velvet Light Trap* 78, no. 1 (August 18, 2016): 4–21.

Oyola, Osvaldo. "In Defense of Auto-Tune." *The Sound Studies Blog*, September 12, 2011. <http://soundstudiesblog.com/2011/09/12/in-defense-of-auto-tune/>.

M 20 Feb: Audiosurveillance, Both Ways

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

James, Robin. "Acousmatic Surveillance and Big Data." *Sounding Out!*, October 20, 2014. <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/10/20/the-acousmatic-era-of-surveillance/>.

W 22 Feb: Political Economies of Sound

Gopinath, Sumanth. "Ringtones and the Deskilling of Mobile-Musical Labor: A Preliminary Investigation" and "Left Behind: Case Studies of Decline and Recapitulation in the Ringtone as Representation" *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Cultural Form*, 57-100. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

27-29 Feb: Reading week. Please post photos of palm trees to the course website.

M 6 March: NO CLASS

W 8 March: Ubiquitous Music

Kassabian, Anahid. "Ubisub: Ubiquitous Listening and Networked Subjectivity." *Echo: A Music-Centered Journal* 3, no. 2 (2001). <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/volume3-issue2/kassabian/index.html>.

M 13 March: Advertising (the week of Tims, part 1)

Taylor, Timothy. "The Changing Shape of the Culture Industry; Or, How Did Electronica Music Get into Television Commercials?" *Television and New Media* 8, no. 3 (2007): 235–58.

W 15 March: Audience? Users? Data Points? (the week of Tims, part 2)

Anderson, Tim J. "Enter the End User: A New Audience for New Media." *Popular Music in a Digital Music Economy: Problems and Practices for an Emerging Service Industry*, 12-32. New York: Routledge, 2014.

M 20 March: Political Ecology

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

W 22 March: Archive 1: Voices

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.

M 27 March: Archive 2: Working With Historical Audio

Camlot, Jason. "Historicist Audio Forensics: The Archive of Voices as Repository of Material and Conceptual Artefacts." *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 2015, no. 21 (December 10, 2015). doi:10.16995/ntn.744.

Jason Camlot, special guest star.

W 29 March: TBA: "How About Something About Art?"

Zoe de Luca, special guest star

M 3 April: Testimony in the Digital Age

Napolin, Julie Beth. "Scenes of Subjection: Women's Voices Narrating Black Death." *Sounding Out!*, December 19, 2016.
<https://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/12/19/scenes-of-subjection-womens-voices-narrating-black-death/>.

W 5 April: **History and Cultural Memory**

Rodgers, Tara. "Tinkering With Cultural Memory: Gender and the Politics of Synthesizer History." *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (n.d.): 5–30.

M 10 April: Make-Up Day or additional stuff, as needed.

T 11 April: **Sound Study due, 5pm**

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 are happy to explain any mark given in a meeting during office hours. We do not promise to

do so over email. Calculation errors can just be pointed out to us email (write both the prof and the TA together, please) and we will quickly fix them.

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). Grade grubbing, especially at the end of the term, will not be looked upon favourably.

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 (MMESS, Sound Study, 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.

