

Sound, Vision, Action: The Course

COMS 608/Sound Studies—Fall 2014

Tuesdays 11:30-14:30, Arts W220

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: by advance appointment, please

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

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.)

Prospectus

Built around the November 2014 Media@McGill Symposium *Sound, Vision, Action* (<http://www.soundvisionaction.cc>), this course stages an encounter between the burgeoning fields of sound studies and visual culture. The course will combine the intellectual substance of the conference with a basic education in multimodal methods from the digital humanities. We will engage work by the scholars and artists who will present at the conference. We will explore the modalities of constructing and presenting knowledge about sound and vision in humanities, and consider the political stakes in producing such knowledge. The goal is not a grand synthesis, but rather to treat the three fields (sound studies, visual culture, digital humanities) as distinct intellectual endeavors that can cross-pollinate in productive ways. Students will have special access to the conference, interview conference presenters, and opportunities to contribute to the event and post-event documents such as a durable website and multimodal academic publications.

The course and conference focus on power and knowledge. Questions of power were present at the origin of the two fields' current incarnations. Those questions are particularly crucial now. In the wake of the political changes in the 21st century, do we need a shift in theory comparable to the post-1968 shifts in continental philosophy? What would that look like?

At the same time, sound studies and visual culture are creatures of scholarly publishing. A generation ago, that meant words on a page, sometimes accompanied by images. Today, that can mean a wide range of ways of presenting ideas, often involving computing. The digital humanities can mean many things, but this course will focus on the digital humanities traditions of multimodal scholarship. If we are writing about aurality and visuality, how can we use sounds and images in our work? How can we produce compelling, didactic and pedagogically useful multimodal scholarship? What defines multimodal scholarship as opposed to other kinds of multimedia practices (like art)? We will discuss specialized tools like Scalar, Critical Commons, Ableton Live, and GIMP, as well as humanistic adaptations of tools like Wordpress, Soundcloud, Rap Genius and YouTube.

In lieu of a major term paper, students will produce a series of short responses, and t larger (and possibly collaborative) multimodal works.

Required Readings and Software

Required books will be available at THE WORD bookstore, 469 Milton St. 514-845-5640, <http://www.wordbookstore.ca/> . Please note that they take cash or check only. Books are also on 3-hour reserve at the Humanities and Social Sciences Library.

Books:

Gopinath, Sumanth. *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Cultural Form*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

In addition, all required and recommended articles will be made available to students through the course website or other means.

Required Software:

GIMP: <http://www.gimp.org>

Audacity: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

Mozilla Firefox: <https://www.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/new/>

Download helper for Firefox: <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/video-downloadhelper/>

[Video editing software to be determined]

This list may change, but once it's finalized, install these programs on your computer and make sure they are able to run. Many come with tutorials you can play around with.

A list of relevant websites will also be made available.

Recommended software (stuff the prof uses)

Dropbox: cloud-based storage and backup – if you don't have a backup strategy, you don't have files.

Microsoft Office* with Endnote*: office suite and bibliographic database

Apple Keynote: slideware

Evernote: note-taking and syncing

Adobe Photoshop and Acrobat*: image editing / .pdf manager

Rogue Amoeba Audio Hijack Pro: streaming audio capture

Ableton Live: audio editing and presentation—intro version is fine for academic use

iMovie: video editing

Many of these programs come with educational discounts with proof of academic affiliation; starred items are free or cheap at McGill. But the type of program—and your familiarity and comfort with it—is more important than the brand in most cases.

Class Schedule

When possible, bring printed copies of readings to class

("DH" is the day's digital humanities topic, which will be covered in the last hour or so; changes will be announced in class; see requirements below)

2 Sep: **Apologia: Sound Studies, Visual Culture and Digital Humanities**

Mitchell, W.J.T. "There Are No Visual Media." *Journal of Visual Culture* 4:2 (2005): 257-266.

Pinch, Trevor, and Karin Bijsterveld. "New Keys to the World of Sound." In *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, edited by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld. 3-35. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Digital Humanities: Engaging the Issues" *How We Think: Digital Media and the Contemporary Technogenesis*, 23-54. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. (chapter 3 also included and recommended)

9 Sep: **Culture, Power, Sound**

Gopinath, Sumanth. *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Cultural Form*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

Also: <http://www.theringtonedialectic.com>

DH: basics of online publication, acquiring online materials, repositories, good computer practice

16 Sep: **Culture, Power, Vision**

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Also: <http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/mirzoeff/index>

DH: Intro to Scalar

23 Sep: **Sounds, Representing**

Westerkamp, Hildegard. "Kits Beach Soundwalk" *Transformations*. Empreintes DIGITALes: IMED 1031 (1989/2010).

Thompson, Emily. "Noise and Modern Culture, 1900-1933," *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America 1900-1930*, 115-168. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

Thompson, Emily and Scott Mahoy, "The Roaring 20s," *Vectors Journal*, 2013. Start at this URL, then launch the site:

<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/index.php?project=98&thread=DesignersStatement>

Kahn, Douglas. "Introduction." *Earth Sound Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts*, 1-24. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

DH: audio editing

30 Sep: **Identity, Subjectivity, Intersubjectivity**

Mottahedeh, Negar. "Producing a National Cinema, A Women's Cinema." *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, 1-14. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

_____. (in preparation) "An Anatomy of the Islamic Cyborg"

Jones, Amelia. "Introduction: The Leaking Frame of the Argument on How to See Differently." *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1-16. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Ultra-Red. *Practice Sessions*. 3 videos here:

<http://www.welcometolace.org/pages/view/ultra-red/> ;

and workbook here: <http://www.welcometolace.org/pages/view/ultra-red/> (see also ultrared.org)

DH: audio editing II

7 Oct: **Project I → presentation and discussion** (and review)

14 Oct: **Documenting, Remembering**

Brooks, Daphne "Divas and Diasporic Consciousness: Song, Dance and New Negro Womanhood in the Veil," *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, 281-342. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Hoffman, Anette "Widerspenstige Stimmen—Unruly Voices *Gespenster*—Spectres." *What We See: Reconsidering an Anthropocentric Collection from Southern Africa: Images, Voices and Verisoning*, 22-57. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2008.

Casemajor, Nathalie. "Framing Openness: The Digital Circulation of Israel's National Photographic Memory." *Triple Canopy* 12:1 (2014): 286-298

DH: Image editing I

21 Oct: **Visual and Audiovisual Arguments**

Mark Curran *The Market*

Nathalie Bookchin *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*

<http://bookchin.net/projects/out-in-public.html>

<http://vimeo.com/38513950>

<http://vimeo.com/39942865>

<http://vimeo.com/63828381>

<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/mar/9/out-public-nathalie-bookchin-conversation-blake-sti/>

The Lives of Others (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006)

DH: Image Editing II—Video

28 Oct: **Mediations**

Born, Georgina. "Computer Software as a Medium: Textuality, Orality and Sociality in an Artificial Intelligence Research Culture." In *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, edited by Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy. 139-69. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

_____. "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity." *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (2005): 7-36.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Daemonic Interfaces, Empowering Obfuscations." *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*, 59-95. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

DH: TBA, based on student needs and interests. We will also devote some time to working group meetings.

4 Nov: **Conference Prep:** to prepare for this class, read up on your assigned presenters (for instance, more work of theirs not assigned in the course, or criticism about their work, as appropriate). Then, meet in small groups to discuss what you are going to do for the interview. Finally, meet in a large group and discuss common themes across the interviews to give the project as a whole some coherence. The prof will be absent but he will try to Skype in for part of class.

11 Nov: **Beyond Human Scale: Perspectives Between Earth and Sky**

Kaplan, Caren. "The Space of Ambiguity: Sophie Ristelhueber's Aerial Perspective," in *Geohumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*, eds. Michael Dear [et.al.](#), 154-161. New York: Routledge 2011.

Kaplan, Caren and Raegan Kelly. "Dead Reckoning: Aerial Perception and the Social Construction of Targets" *Vectors* 2:2 (Jan. 2007)
<http://www.vectorsjournal.org/index.php?page=7&projectId=11>

Bijsterveld, Karin. "A Booming Business: The Search for a Practical Aircraft Noise Index." *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth*

Century, 193-232. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

Parks, Lisa “When Satellites Fail: On the Trails of Cosmos 954 and USA 193”, *FlowTV*: 10:1 (2009): <http://flowtv.org/2009/06/when-satellites-fall-on-the-trails-of-cosmos-954-and-usa-193lisa-parks-uc-santa-barbara/>

DH: more than diagrams: describing and critiquing operations

14-15 November: Sound, Vision, Action conference→ attendance is expected (except for unavoidable conflicts)

18 Nov: Conference Debrief. The first thing we will do is come up with a list of themes that should be discussed. Take good notes during the conference to be prepared.

25 Nov: **Second Projects Due**—class time will be presentations.

2 Dec: **No class, prof out of town. Revise your projects.**

9 Dec: **Submit portfolio and statement.**

Course Requirements and Expectations

Etiquette:

1. Full and complete attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading (of required texts). I expect the very best you can give.
2. Good faith and good humor 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 circumstances. There will be a strict limit on seek-and-destroy hermeneutics. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones.

Technology Policy:

This course will encourage the thoughtful use of scholarly technologies such as talk and reading, computers and the internet, pen and paper, projection and chalkboards, etc.

1. For the digital humanities component, you will need access to a computer for this course. If you do not have a laptop you can bring, we will find another solution. I will probably pair people up. It is your responsibility to make sure your computer is charged and in working condition. I can provide training on basic tools, but not technical support.

2. For our “talking about ideas” components, you will use a writing utensil and paper (unless you bring me a note from the Office for Students With Disabilities). The classroom will not be an environment of “ambient computing.” If you need to open a computer (or any device with a microprocessor and internet connection) to look stuff up, you will do that and then close the computer.
3. We will discuss the politics of printing out readings vs. looking at them on screen. For written texts without significant multimedia components, I will expect you to print them out and bring them to class.
4. We will discuss this technology policy on the first day of class.

Product (and % of semester grade):

I. Participation (20%)

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion. You should come every week ready to discuss the readings. I notice (and appreciate it) when students make good contributions to the course online or in other ways besides speaking up in class. Please note that I distinguish between quantity and quality. I also notice when students are routinely late and/or absent.

Requirements for class discussion are as follows: good faith, attention to the readings, and relevance to the course. We want to avoid “seek and destroy” sessions. If you have something critical to say, be ready to explain how the piece could be improved. If you disagree with the premise of the piece, then read for what motivates the argument.

If necessary, I will keep a speakers list and call on people.

II. Brief responses (20%)

Many weeks, students will be asked to write short responses, usually to direct questions that I pose. Responses should be approximately 500 words and should be posted on the MyCourses site by 5pm the Monday before class. Students may be asked to read their response aloud as a springboard to discussion.

III. Didactic Media Projects and Portfolio (60%)

During the term, you will produce three didactic multimodal projects and a portfolio. The goal is to produce something useful and interesting in a humanities context. It may be a multimedia presentation of an argument that combines words, sound and images in some self-conscious fashion. It may be a tool for teaching or exploration (with a clear pedagogical goal). It may take some other form. These projects may be done individually or collaboratively. If you collaborate, please keep in mind that the prof is not responsible for weird group dynamics or deadbeat classmates. In terms of size, think in terms of something the size of a short paper (8-10pp). You can't say or do much—you get to make one point and illustrate it. The project does not need to be “digital” though it should carry forward the spirit of multimodal scholarship from digital humanities work.

At the end of the term (9 December), you will submit the projects, revised, along with a 1000-1300 word commentary on the work as a portfolio. Even if you do the projects collaboratively, the portfolio is to be individually submitted and the commentary is to be individually authored.

Didactic Media Project I: Open—Due 7 October

This project may be done individually or collaboratively. You will develop a short piece that engages with at least one of the readings from the course. It might extend or apply an argument or otherwise demonstrate it, or it could use the piece as a point of theoretical departure. At this point, we will mostly have focused on sound, so you may want to use sound as your “multimodal” component in relation to writing, but you are, of course, welcome to make work in any form so long as it fulfills the goals of the assignment.

Didactic Media Project II (and III): Interview and Synthesis

For the conference, each of you will be assigned to (probably 2) groups. Each group will be responsible for interviewing a presenter or team at the conference about their work. Each team will also get to ask the first question at the end of the guest’s conference presentation.

Interviews (14-15 November 2014): The interview questions should be substantial, and built not only off the assigned reading, but further engagement with the presenters’ other works. Groups will be assigned at the end of add/drop, and I have blocked off a week in November where groups can spend their time reading and preparing.

The interview itself should be recorded. Audio or video are fine options, but there should be some document other than a written one. Once there is a recording, the interview should be transcribed and edited, and the group may also wish to add a commentary of their own.

Project (due 25 November): The second didactic project will build off the interview. It may essentially be an enhanced version of the interview, or some other multimodal engagement with that person’s work. I am expecting that groups will collectively author their projects at this point (which will probably mean that students are involved in 2 projects in this round), but I am open to alternative proposals.

Portfolio and Statement (due 9 December): You will, individually, submit portfolios of your work along with a short (1000-1500 word) commentary. You will also revise the multimedia works from previous submissions (group work can be revised collectively, of course). Your solo-authored commentary will assess the works, especially in terms of how they could be improved to serve an academic function, and what multimodal skills you might hope to develop for your own future growth as a scholar.

IV. Post-Course Publication (0%, but it’s a cool idea)

Revised versions of student work will be considered for publication on the soundvisionaction.cc website, or included for submission in a refereed multimodal publication (we are currently in discussions with Open Humanities Press).

Other Policies

French: You have the right to submit your written work in French and most years a couple students in my seminars choose to do so. 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 particularly good at French. Normally it's not a problem but we should discuss how it will work.

Class discussions are in English, but you are encouraged to resort to French if you can't find the right word in English and we'll figure it out together. You are also welcome to read course materials in French (where they are available in French).

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 suite 3100 Brown Student Services Bldg., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TDD), [<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>].

Nondiscrimination: If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know. 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*.

Auditors: I would like auditors to participate in the weekly writing exercises for the weeks they will attend, so that everyone in the room is on equal footing. If I grant you permission to audit, you are bound by the same etiquette rules as the enrolled students.

How to Interpret McGill's Inflated Graduate-Level Grades:

- A: Good work
- A-: Satisfactory
- B+: There is a problem with what you submitted
- B: There is a substantial problem with what you submitted
- B-: Lowest possible passing grade in a graduate course; indicates a major problem but not a failure
- C+ or lower: Officially considered a "fail" by the Graduate Studies Office.

In rare cases, if your performance on any assignment is not satisfactory, I may ask you to do it again.

You must complete all the major assignments to pass the course.

Late assignments may not receive written comments and will earn a reduced grade (one increment of letter grade for the first two days, then an increment per day, including weekends). Late weekly papers will not be useful for class and will receive a diminished grade immediately.

Activities for which you must be present cannot be made up.

It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in.

It is also your responsibility to properly back up your work: keep more than one digital copy of your work. In the case of writing, keep a paper copy as well. I recommend syncing your important documents to a cloud storage service.

The K contract: At McGill, grades of incomplete are called “K” grades and they are only supposed to be assigned after the student and professor have agreed upon a contract. I do not give incompletes (“K” grades) except in truly extraordinary personal circumstances that can be documented. K grades revert to “F” grades at the end of the next term unless a contract extension is signed by both professor and student. Extensions also will not be granted except in truly extraordinary circumstances.

The Passive-Aggressive K: Should a student fail to turn in a final paper and fail to contact me well before my deadline for submission of grades, I will issue a K grade without a contract. Graduate studies, however, still expects a contract to be filed and it will be the student’s responsibility to make sure one is submitted. In these circumstances, should the paper be completed at a later date, it will receive a mark. However, students who receive a “K” in this fashion will not be eligible to receive an “A” or “A-” for the course. I will not sign an extension for a K grade that was granted without a contract, and no late paper will be graded without a K contract being in place beforehand. I also cannot promise comments on a paper submitted after a passive-aggressive K.

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 for more information).

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.