

Sound Culture

COMS 350 (001)— Winter 2018

T/Th 11:35-12:55, 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 critically to analyze aspects of sound culture from the standpoint of the humanities and interpretive social sciences, and to ask and pursue research questions about sound, culture, media and power.

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: T 13:00-14:00; Th 10:15-11:15 (no appointment necessary—please drop in!) and by appointment.

Office Phone: 398-5852 (I rarely pick up; I check voicemail only when on campus)

Email: jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca.

See Laura Portwood-Stacer's "How to Email Your Professor (without being annoying AF)." It offers useful tips if you're unsure of the etiquette (works for TAs too!)

<https://medium.com/@lportwoodstacer/how-to-email-your-professor-without-being-annoying-af-cf64ae0e4087>

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. Please do not email us with a question that is easily answered on the course website, syllabus or in course materials on the website.

TA Jessica Fontaine

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

Office Hours: by appointment and around major assignments

Email: jessica.fontaine3@mail.mcgill.ca

Availability: Office hours are set aside for you – we encourage you 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.

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 phones 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. Your prof and TA will offer the same in return.
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.
3. Everyone has the right to be wrong. 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 try out ideas before you totally understand them. You are free to change your mind at any time; so are others. Arguments are not contests.
4. Trigger warnings and safe spaces: 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, traumatize or belittle students or groups of people. At the same time, I cannot absolutely guarantee my class will be a "safe space": students come from different backgrounds and are at different points in learning about the world. And while I am all for activist education, safe spaces have their own fraught history: <http://societyandspace.org/2017/02/14/the-discomfort-of-safety/> . It's our job to discuss difficult subjects in class, and nobody can predict the effect some materials or discussions may have on someone. At the same time, we have to be willing to give one another the benefit of the doubt, remember that class is a space for learning for all of us (including the prof) and that people will

¹ This usually involves some pundit grumbling about millennials and thundering about free speech.

make mistakes and should be forgiven for them. 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 #6 below), or you may simply discretely step out of class. A note to me (the prof) or a visit to office hours would be helpful after the fact so that I know what happened and don't think you just got up and left, which is considered rude (see #7 below).

5. 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.
6. 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—including your interpretation of your experience—is open to multiple interpretations in a classroom.
7. 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.

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 10 if completed, 1 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 1am the day the related reading is due (i.e., the night before) in order for you to receive credit. If for any reason you don’t want it mentioned in lecture, you may indicate that in the piece, or in a private email to the prof.
- (3) Come up with another way to fulfill this requirement that honours the spirit of the assignment well before the due date—check with your prof or TA first, and no alternative proposals will be accepted after **1 February**.

These items will be graded on a credit/no credit basis. **Deadline:** one CTC must be posted by **27 February; the other is due by 10 April**. There are no extensions, but you may submit early. It is expected that you will be present in class the day that you post.

III. The Listening Project (35%)

Our first major project is to apply concepts and practices of listening that we have learned in the first half of the course, using them to explain something about power and difference.

A separate assignment sheet provides details, but essentially it is this: you will choose a sonic event and compare two different perspectives on it, using one of the readings as your guide or foil. You may fulfill this assignment through writing a 4-5 page paper (1000-1250 words) or through making a recording of no more than 5 minutes (though please note that we do not provide technical support).

You may work with a partner if you like, but the prof and TA are not responsible for any issues that arise in collaborations.

A 1-paragraph commitment is due 23 February, 5pm (16 February, 5pm for comment). The assignment is due 2 March, 5pm with automatic extension to 12 March, 5pm (see assignment sheet for details).

Projects will be graded according to a rubric and written feedback will be strictly limited by the rubric, but you are encouraged to meet with us to go over your project both before and after completing it.

If students have other cool alternative ideas for a project, please meet with the prof at least a week before the proposal due date.

IV. The Sounding Project (35%) A separate assignment sheet will give more details.

Our second project is to apply concepts and practices of recording, producing and representing sound that we have learned in the second half of the course, using them to explain something about culture.

A 1-paragraph commitment is due 6 April, 5pm (3 April, 9am for comment).
The assignment is due 13 April, 5pm.

Projects will be graded according to a rubric and written feedback will be strictly limited by the rubric, but you are encouraged to meet with us to go over your project both before and after completing it.

If students have other cool alternative ideas for a project, please meet with the prof at least a week before the proposal due date.

Tentative Class Schedule

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

T 9 January: Opening

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

Part I: Hearing and Listening

After this part of the course, you should be able to:

1. name, describe and use different techniques of listening;
2. explain how listening, knowledge, and power are interrelated;
3. analyze the role of culture, power, and context in how people and institutions hear, understand, and react to sound.
4. from the readings, offer examples of how scholars in history, anthropology, media studies, disability studies, film, critical race theory, and science and technology studies study or use listening in their scholarship; from the examples given in class and in the readings, you should also be able to discuss commonalities and differences of approach across disciplines;

5. define and use concepts from the readings, inflected in terms of their specifically sonic relevance (we will add more terms as we go along); for instance: casual listening, semantic listening, reduced listening, vibration, visual culture, sound culture, deaf futurism, unsound, mishearing, acoustemology, public address system, public speech, sound ordinance, noise, liberalism, functional music, ubiquitous listening, subjectivity, genre, *musica mobilis*, de-listening, soundscape, ubiquitous listening, private, public, listening ear, sonic color line, testimony, authenticity, surveillance, data, model, articulation, acousmaticism.²

Th 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.

T 16 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.

Th 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).

T 23 Jan: **Publicity and 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. If you are unable to go for a walk, please consult with your prof in advance, and we will construct an alternate assignment

Th 25 Jan: **Ubiquitous Music**

² Some authors coin or reframe more terms than others. This is not an indication of the relative importance of one reading over another. Some important ideas can be conveyed with existing language conventions; some cannot. A good coinage helps you name something in the world that previously would have been harder to identify.

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>.

T 30 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.

Th 1 Feb: **Power**

Stoever, Jennifer, "Introduction: The Sonic Color Line and the Listening Ear." In *The Sonic Color Line*, 1-28. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

Recommended but difficult: 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/> .

T 6 Feb: **Authenticity**

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/>.

Grazian, David. "Introduction: Black and Tan Fantasy: Searching for Chicago Blues." *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Chicago Blues Clubs*, 1-31. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Th 8 Feb: **Audiosurveillance: Between Big Science and Big Corporations**

Helmreich, Stefan. "Gravity's Reverb: Listening to Space-Time, or Articulating the Sounds of Gravitational-Wave." *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 464–92.

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

Intermezzo: Audio-Technical Practices—Studios and Signal Processing

After this part of the course, you should be able to:

1. name, understand and perform rudimentary audio recording and editing tasks;
2. explain how audio-technical practice and signal processing shapes our sonic environment;

3. analyze recording technologies and practices for how they mediate power and difference, for instance, in terms of gender or race, as well as how power shapes audio-technical practice.
4. define and use concepts from the readings, inflected in terms of their specifically sonic relevance (we may add more terms as we go along); for instance: track and multitrack, edit, overdub, mix, EQ, frequency, dynamic range and compression, reverb, echo, leaky pipeline, indirect discrimination, mechanical reproduction, agency, intermundane, revertibility, recombinatoriality, rhizophonia, leakage effects, deadness and liveness, take, fetish.

T 13 Feb: **Handling Sound**

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.

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.

Th 15 Feb: **Reproducibility**

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

T 20 Feb: **The Studio**

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.

Part II: Sounding

After this part of the course, you should be able to:

1. explain how sound matters to cultural practices and phenomena like voice, language and speech; music; advertising; art; archives; technology design; and the production and management of social space.
2. explain how sonic practices, knowledge, and power are interrelated;
3. analyze the role of culture, power, and context in how people and institutions make, circulate, manage and reproduce sound.
4. from the readings, offer examples of how scholars in different disciplines study or use sound in their scholarship; from the examples given in class and in the readings, you should also be able to discuss commonalities and differences of approach across

disciplines. To the list for “listening,” we will add: philosophy, feminist studies, musicology, classics, archival studies, ethnomusicology, art history.

5. define and use concepts from the readings, inflected in terms of their specifically sonic relevance (we may add more terms as we go along); for instance: politics of frequency, CPTED, sonic weapon, détournement, culture industry, distinction, sound art, conceptualism, synthesizer, synthesis, tinkering, gender, verbal continence, voice, signifier, phoneme, pre- and post-linguistic, transduction, embodiment and the sensing body, extended technique, play, domesticity, archive, colonialism, colonial *acousmêtre*, standpoint acoustemology,

Th 22 Feb: **Shaping Sonic Space**

Akiyama, Mitchell. “Silent Alarm: The Mosquito Youth Deterrent and the Politics of Frequency.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 35, no. 3 (2010): 455–71.

T 27 Feb: **Advertising and Popularity**

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.

Th 29 Feb: **Sound Art**

Kim-Cohen, Seth. “A Dot on a Line.” *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sound Art*, 211-255. New York: Continuum, 2009.

5-9 March: **Reading week. Please post photos of palm trees to the course website.**

T 13 March: **Instruments and Synthesis**

Rodgers, Tara. “Tinkering With Cultural Memory: Gender and the Politics of Synthesizer History.” *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (2015): 5–30.

Bring your computer to class. For this class, you will download and install VCV, the virtual modular synthesizer. <https://vcvrack.com/> Like Audacity, it is free.

Th 15 March: **Prof at Society for Cinema and Media Studies, class details TBA**

Also: play with VCV rack (if you want).

T 20 March: **Voice and Subjectivity**

Carson, Anne. “The Gender of Sound.” *In Glass, Irony and God*, 118–37. New York: New Directions Books, 1992.

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

Th 22 March: **Voice, Space, Bodies**

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

T 27 March: **Voice and Technology**

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/>.

Reem Hilu, special guest star

Th 29 March: **Prof at Princeton, class details TBA.**

T 3 April: **The Politics of Archives**

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.

Th 5 April: **TBA**

T 10 April: **Sounding White Supremacy**

Peake, Bryce. "Listening Like White Nationalists at a Civil Rights Rally." *Journal of Sonic Studies*, no. 14 (2017).
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/375960/375961>.

Bryce Peake, special guest star!

Th 12 April: **The Grand Synthesis: or; What have you learned about sound culture?**
Collective class project: details will be announced in advance of class meeting.

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 (TDD), [<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>]. A meeting with the professor would be ideal.

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, as are violations of other course policies.

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 via 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. We will be polite but secretly think less of you.

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 we 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 (both the projects) 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 or shared with third parties.

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.

Meta:

