Sound Studies  
COMS 608 — Fall 2011  
Thursdays 11:30-14:30, W-220 Arts

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Office hours: By appointment, please. I am on campus TTh and sometimes other days.

Prospectus:

This course aims to acculturate students to the booming field of Sound Studies. The past few years have seen a proliferation of scholarly work on sound by writers in the human sciences. There are now a range of histories and ethnographies of listening, studies of soundscapes built and natural, and a proliferation of books and articles on sound media, sound art and sound works. Scholars are rethinking longstanding pieties about the nature of sound and listening, the role of speech, hearing and music in modern life and modern thought, the politics of sound, and the relations among the senses. Our goal will be to map and assess some of this work. As we proceed, we will consider methodological questions: how might one study sound in the shifting fields of the humanities? How does that work relate to other knowledges of sound outside of the humanities, for instance in the arts, physics, psychology, music, and architecture? And what are the political dimensions of the research objects we construct and the arguments we make?

Class time will feature weekly lectures and discussions as well as occasional creative or experimental in-class projects. Students will undertake a semester project and help direct discussion one or more times.

Required Books (on reserve at the library):

(and maybe)

And a selection of essays.
Requirements

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. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones.

Product (and % of Semester Grade):

I. Participation in Class Discussions (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 on the listserv 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. Discussion Facilitation (20%)

Each week, at least two students will help facilitate discussion and one will “clean up.” Depending on enrollment and other factors, you may perform one role more than the other.

Discussion leaders will help facilitate discussion in two ways.

1. They will help lead discussion for the week. Please arrive prepared to respond to readings, point out passages worth close reading or consideration, and connect the week’s readings with other weeks’ readings. Although a response paper is not required, a 1-2 page thought piece may be a useful exercise if you are shy or need to feel better prepared. Please avoid (as much as possible) more than passing references to materials from other courses or materials you’ve read from outside the course.

2. Additionally, a week’s discussion leaders will bring in an object for us to discuss in relation to the readings. Your object may be an image, a sound recording, a device, or
anything else you see fit to bring in. I prefer that people bring in objects created by someone other than themselves, but if you made something particularly cool, please consult with me. If you need audiovisual equipment, please let me know as soon as possible (no later than Wednesday morning) so that I can make arrangements. Audiovisual material should be of short duration – 5 minutes is ideal; 10 minutes if it’s amazing.

Please note that class dynamics will vary from week to week and will follow people’s particular interests and energies. DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED if you prepared something wonderful and the class went in another direction. This happens to me all the time and is part of the teaching process. It is better to have a good class session than to stick to a plan.

The Cleaner will take notes of any readings, authors or texts mentioned in class but not on the syllabus. Within 24 hours of the end of class, he or she will then email the people who mentioned them and ask for a full reference. If the reference doesn’t appear in a day or two, the cleaner should send a reminder email. Once he or she has collected all of the relevant citations, the Cleaner will add the references to the course bibliography (we will discuss how best to do this). If a classmate doesn’t respond, the cleaner should do his or her best to track down the errant source.

III. Semester Project (60%)

All semester projects will result in

- a 5-6 page proposal due the 27th of October
- a short scholarly talk on the 1st of December
- a formal scholarly paper of at least 20 pages due by 4:00pm on 8 December
- Please note that a proper scholarly apparatus (notes, cites, page numbers) is a requirement for your papers, although I am somewhat flexible on matters of tone.

Though it is unreasonable of me to expect a paper of “publishable quality” at the end of a seminar, I do expect a polished paper that reflects sustained thought and careful revision. It should also use a recognized scholarly reference system. I recommend Chicago Style with footnotes, but will accept MLA, APA, Chicago parenthetical, Harvard, or any other style widely used in the humanities or social sciences.

You are encouraged to meet with me throughout the semester as you work on your project, and you are encouraged to submit your proposal early.

Here are four options to give you ideas of what to write. These are meant only as guides. Please feel free to propose alternatives or combinations.

Option 1: Application Paper
For this paper, you will synthesize a methodological or theoretical approach from a few of the readings assigned for the course and do your own sound study of a phenomenon out in the world. This paper may include some original research, but it is not intended to be a massive research undertaking.

Proposals for this option should include a discussion of the proposed theoretical or methodological framework and your chosen object of study. If research is required, you should explain what it is and how you will finish it by the end of the term. Ideally, proposals will also discuss early hypotheses or “try out” an aspect of your approach.

Option 2: Revision Paper

Revision is not a skill often taught in graduate school, but it should be. This is your chance to take a piece of writing (somehow relevant to the course) that you’ve already begun and revise it toward a concrete end (for instance, for publication in a journal), using materials from the course to refine your thinking about your project and develop your analysis. Keep in mind that the purpose of this option is to facilitate extended reflection upon research you have already undertaken; it is not to facilitate further research.

Proposals for this option should include a discussion of the project as it currently stands; why you want to rewrite it for this course; a substantive plan for further revision – especially in terms of how you want to make your argument, your vision of the paper’s intellectual or political task; and a discussion of other work that you need to do in order to be able to rewrite the paper (such as additional outside reading or revisiting source materials). You should also append a copy of the current version of the paper to the proposal.

Option 3: Synthesis Paper

This option is modeled on the PhD comprehensive examination process for Communication Studies. The final paper will make use of the course bibliography and a few select additional readings to answer one or two questions in a 20-page paper. The exact wording of the questions will be arrived at in consultation with me.

Proposals for this option come in two parts: a single page will offer one or more sample versions of the question and any additional sources you think you will need to consult. The remaining 5 pages should begin discussing two or more (but not many more) texts from the course in light of the question (or set of questions) you posed on the first page.

Option 4: The Research Paper

Given the constraints of a semester full of coursework and other events, this is the most difficult option. It is not for procrastinators or the faint of heart. For this paper, you will conduct substantial research on a phenomenon relevant to sound studies. The
paper will be made up primarily of original research, as opposed to commentary on course materials, though it must not be a paper you could have written before you took this course. The conclusions reached in the paper, likewise, should be conclusions you could not have reached before doing the research.

Your proposal will be a research proposal. It will define the question you hope to answer and your methodological approach, paying close attention to how your actual research will answer your intellectual question. The proposal should also point to a few methodological exemplars: people who have used a similar approach successfully.

If you are interested in going part of the way down this path and producing a research proposal as your term paper, please discuss it with me.

I am open to other options. Please meet with me before the proposal deadline.

How to Present on 1 December

It is my preference that students present in as fluid a fashion as possible – i.e., give a speech, don’t just read a paper. However, recognizing that not everyone is comfortable doing that, students may elect to read from a written text. If you choose to read to us, please make enough copies of your text so that everyone can follow along. If time limits are short, you will need to read an excerpt.

More details on the proposal, the presentation and the paper will be offered during the term.

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.

More on Grading:

You have the right to submit your written work in French. If you plan to do so, please contact me well in advance of the due date so I can make arrangements for evaluation, as I am not fluent in French. All verbal presentations must be in English.

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

All readings required unless otherwise noted. You are expected to bring all required readings to class. Any changes to the schedule will be announced in class.

1 Sep: Defining Sound, Defining the Field


8 Sep: Space


Leydon, Rebecca “The Soft-Focus Sound: Reverb as a Gendered Attribute in Mid-Century Mood Music.” Perspectives of New Music 39, no. 2 (July 1, 2001): 96-107.


Recommended


15 Sep: Reproducibility


Recommended:


22 Sep: Listening: Phenomenology, Interiority and Beyond


**Recommended:**


**29 Sep: Voice**


**Recommended:**


6 Oct: Deafness, Disability


Recommended:


13 Oct: Modernity


20 Oct: NO CLASS – Meet with your assigned partner and discuss project proposals

27 Oct: NO CLASS
3 November: Mobility and Circulation


Recommended


10 Nov: Anthropology of Sound and Sonic Ethnomusicology


Recommended:


…and browse this issue of Anthropology News


14 Nov: Ken Wissoker talk on publishing (unrelated to sound in particular but relevant for those of you who hope to publish a book one day)

16-20 Nov: American Anthropological Association Meeting in Montreal. Sound events TBA.

17 Nov: Textures of Sound


Recommended:


24 November: Noise

(probably)


Recommended (or alternatively):


1 December: Students Present and Discuss Works in Progress

8 Dec: Final Paper Due by email.
Auditors:

Auditors are welcome to participate in the course on the following conditions:

- They request (and I grant) permission to audit the course.
- They follow the same rules of etiquette as enrolled students. That means attending all classes and arriving each week ready to discuss the readings.
- Depending on enrollment, they may be called upon to facilitate discussion during the semester.

Unpleasant Business:

Late papers may not receive written comments and will earn a reduced grade.

Activities for which you must be present (e.g., inquisitor, finder of objects, cleaner) cannot be made up. If you know you will be absent on a day for which you are obligated, you can arrange a trade with one of your colleagues. Notify me of the trade if it happens.

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.

The Coerced 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. 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. K grades revert to “F” grades at the end of the next term unless a contract extension is signed by both professor and student. Under no circumstances will I offer an extension to a K that was granted without a contract.

It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in. If you email it to me or leave it for me at a time other than the due date, make sure you get a note from me saying I received your paper. Otherwise, assume I don’t have it.

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).