COMS 350 Sound Culture
Arts W-215

General information

Winter 2024
Course pre-requisite(s): One of the following: COMS 200, COMS 210, COMS 230 or permission of the instructor
Course schedule (class day(s) and time): Tuesdays and Thursdays - 11:35 pm-12:55 pm
Number of credits: 3

Instructor information (repeat as necessary for multiple instructors and/or adapt for TAs, too)

Gustavo Ferreira, PhD. (he/him)
gustavo.ferreira@mcgill.ca
Office location / office hours: Arts W-233 / Thursdays 1:30-3:30 pm – just show up or schedule for in-person meeting or book an appointment for zoom (Calendly link on myCourses).
Communication plan: All course updates and official information will be posted on MyCourses, you should check it for updates regularly – at least once a week. To book appointments, we will use a Calendly link available on myCourses. You can direct other private inquiries by email, and I will try to respond within 2 business days.

Teaching Assistant: Sofia Di Gironimo
sofia.digironimo@mail.mcgill.ca
Office hours: By appointment. Send me an email we will find a time and place.

Course overview

Analysis of sound culture, including sonic and audiovisual media, sound art and architecture, sound in everyday life, sonic institutions, and theoretical accounts of the role of sound in communication.

This course provides an overview and introduction to the field of Sound Studies. We will explore classic, recent, and decolonial approaches to the study of sound: its politics, interpretations, and practices with special attention to the discussion of voice and voice interfaces. The overall goal is to learn to critically analyze sound production, listening practices and its discourses and how to reflect about these embody and influence knowledge, culture, identity, power, and media. We will address questions like: how to study culture through

and from sound? What listening means and what are its political implications? How cultural and technological mediations affect sound? How to study sound production, voices, and identity? What are the implications of synthetic voice creation and interaction?

Learning outcomes

- **Name** and **describe** listening and sounding techniques.
- **Define** basic concepts used for understanding sound in relation to culture, knowledge, power.
- **Analyze** discourses and practices of sound regulation, interpretation, and production. **Analyze** sound recording, synthesis and emission technologies and practices.
- **Explain** relationships between culture, knowledge, power, and sound production and listening. **Explain** how technologies shape sound environments.
- **Use** concepts, techniques and interpretations to **produce, listen and critically engage** with sounds.

Instructional methods

- Lectures (synchronous and in person)
- Group discussions and activities (synchronous in person and asynchronous online)
- Group projects (time and place at student's choice)
- Research and Analysis assignments (time and place at student's choice)

Course materials, instructions, discussions and updates will be available on myCourses. I encourage you to download the myCourses Pulse mobile app to stay connected and on track. Online office hour meetings will take place on zoom. If you need information on how to plan, access or better use these platforms and do assignments, check out McGill's Learning Resources.

Expectations for student participation

I expect you to show up to class and on time. This is the basics of participation, for more details on participation as an evaluative criterion, see below. Based on health considerations, I understand circumstances may change and make it difficult, or impossible, to attend safely in-person. If this is the case, please contact me. This is also true for our planned evaluation and instructional methods. In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Class Conduct
When interacting with others, you should always be attentive to their well-being, use polite and non-aggressive language, justify your positions, and give sources of information.

When expressing opinions, always reflect on how your thoughts align with different realities and perspectives. In this course we value solidarity as a learning practice: Try to think and take your positions from a solidary position. Acknowledge how your context is affected and affects others and how everyone, instructors and classmates have several common learning goals. Be open to help and be helped. We are allowed to disagree, and we should understand that more than one thing can be true.

Class recordings

Whenever possible, lectures will be recorded and posted to myCourses, while group assignments, presentations and discussions will not. Even in these circumstances, your voice or image may appear in the recordings. If you are concerned about privacy or other uses of the recording, please discuss with me.

Required course materials

All required readings will be available online through McGill services: myCourses, Course Readings and Library or open access links.
Other materials such as videos and podcasts will be linked or referenced on myCourses.
Full information on materials can be found on the schedule below.

Optional course materials

Recommended Readings and other materials are listed alongside required materials on the schedule below.

Evaluation

Name of assignment or exam	Due date	% of final grade
#1: Participation	Weekly	10%
#2: Listening/Thinking	1, 2, 15 Feb	15%
#3 Listening Project	1 March	25%
#4 Sounding/Recording	29 Feb	10%
#5 Interfacing	21 Mar, 4 Apr	15%
#6 Sounding Project	12 Apr	25%

Description of assignments

#1 Participation – Weekly (10%)

These assignments refer to comprehension and critical thinking about the readings. Participation means you read the assigned texts, listened, or watched other assigned materials and attend every class prepared with at least one question, thought and example about the week's topic.

The main source of evaluation for this assignment will be being active in the discussion sessions. We will have different modes of promoting discussion: (a) discussion forum question/comment with around 100-150 words; (b) in-class question-answers; (c) coming to office hours to discuss ideas and assignments.

This is a wholistic grade based on the cumulative posts and the elements above, there isn't just one combination for task achievement.
Here's an example of an A in participation: you posted every participation response, you talked in class at least two times, or you came to two office hour meetings. You were present to most sessions.
And here's an example of an B in participation: you missed more than a couple of participation responses; you talked once in class, never commented in any posting, and/or never came to an office hour. You were present to most sessions.

#2 Listening/Thinking (15%)

In this assignment, you will do a soundwalk experiment and a later reflection. Our goal is to exercise listening. A separate description sheet will be provided. In brief, we will do an in-class soundwalk (provided we have appropriate weather) and you will write a two-page, double-spaced (400 to 500 words), commentary. Two weeks later, you will revisit and edit your commentary adding reflections from further readings.

If you have restrictions for participating in the soundwalk, please contact us and we will come up with an alternative.

Grading will be based on coherence with our readings and adherence to the topic of listening, culture, and politics.

#3 Listening Project (25%)

This is the first major project for the course. You will write a listening journal for 15 days straight. Choose the same moment (5 to 10min) of every day during the period and pay attention to the sounds around you, then write about your soundscape: detail the sounds and interpret them.

After this period, you will deliver a 5-6 page, double-spaced, paper (1000-1250 words), where you discuss the changes in your listening process. You choose the approach. A few options: you can talk about how the repetitive nature of the journal affected your interpretation of the sounds, you can choose a specific day or event and speculate on two possible interpretations on that event, you can just discuss the changes in sound through time, etc. In any of them, you should include ideas from our readings and how your listening practice changed as you learned from them.

We will grade this project based on the following criteria: details of the soundscape description, novelty /creativity of your insights, understanding of the reading material, and formalities and writing quality.

#4 Sounding/Recording (10%)

This assignment will be based on an in-class recording and editing session. We will tinker with Audacity, a free and open-source audio editor considering technological literacy and editing techniques. The resulting audio files will be your deliverable.

There will be no quality assessment. Grading will be pass/fail based on participation only.

#5 Interfacing (15%)

In this assignment, you will interact with a voice interface. It can be your phone, computer, or smart speaker. I will provide a separate sheet with details, but the goal is to register the exchanges with computer generated voices and then, reflect on its implications.

You will first post your interactions and we will discuss them in class. After new readings, you will write a two-page, double-spaced (400 to 500 words), commentary considering the implications of the experience with an appendix containing the previously posted details of the interactions you had.

Grading will be based on coherence with our readings and adherence to the topic of voice, subjectivity, and AI.

#6 Sounding Project (25%)

This is the second large project. You will need to apply the mediations and voice concepts and practices discussed in the second part of the course to explain something about "sounding" culture. Meaning, the context, motivation, intent, and/or techniques used to produce sounds. You will choose a topic, event, or case to explore and produce a sound work about it. It can be an audio essay, where you present your paper, or a more experimental sound art /drama or radio/podcasting work that explores your topic. A separate sheet will give you details.

We will grade this project based on the following criteria: coherence between the chosen topic and course contents, depth of the description and discussion, and formalities and creative quality.

Course content

Part I – Knowledge
- Sound Studies overview
- Acoustemology

Part II – Listening
- Soundwalking
- Listening, difference, power

Part III – Mediations
- Radio
- Recording

Part IV – Sounding/Voice
- Meaning and subjectivity
- Voice Technologies
- Computer and AI generated voices

Class Schedule and readings:

Dates and Readings are always subject to change and will be announced in class and on myCourses.

Week 1

| **9-Jan-24** | Introductions |

Getting to know the course and instructor's philosophy. Syllabus, Assignments, general questions.

Reading: this very document.

| **11-Jan-24** | Part I - Knowledge
Sound Studies' positions |

Why and how to study sound? Historical perspectives on the field.

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

Steingo, Gavin, and Jim Sykes. 2019. "Introduction - Remapping Sound Studies in the Global South." In Remapping Sound Studies, by Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes, 1–36. Durham, [North Carolina] London: Duke University Press.

Week 2	
16-Jan-24	Part I - Knowledge
	The soundscape

How to start paying attention to sound? Thoughts on the sounds around us.

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. Pages 3-14 / 205-225.

Chaves, Rui, and Thaís A. Aragão. "Localising Acoustic Ecology: A Critique towards a Relational Collaborative Paradigm." Organised Sound 26, no. 2 (August 2021): 190–200. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771821000236.

18-Jan-24	Part I - Knowledge
	The soundscape

Discussion session on the soundscape.

#1 Forum response due 10am on the day before class.

Week 3	
23-Jan-24	Part I - Knowledge
	Acoustemologies

How to know things with sound? Philosophies of knowledge and sound.

Ochoa Gautier, Ana María. 2014. On howls and pitches. In: Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376262. Pages 31-76.

Feld, Steven. 2015. "Acoustemology." In Keywords in Sound, edited by Matt Sakakeeny and David Novak. Duke University Press. https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/book/69222. Pages 12-21.

25-Jan-24	Part I - Knowledge
	Acoustemologies

Discussion session on the acoustemology.

#1 Forum response due 10am on the day before class.

Optional Movie:
Marder, Darius, dir. 2020. Sound of Metal. Drama, Music. Caviar, Flat 7 Productions, Ward Four. 120min. Available on Netflix.

Week 4	
30-Jan-24	Part II - Listening
	Soundwalking

How to listen? Practices in soundwalking.

Messina, Paola Cossermelli. 2023. "Soundwalkin on the Edges: Land, Safety, and Priviledge in São Paulo." In Soundwalking: Through Time, Space, and Technologies, edited by Jacek Smolicki, 134–47. London: Focal Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003193135.

Aragão, Thaís. 2019. "Other Paths to Sonic Cartographies: 'Mapa Sonoro CWB' and Its Untethered Soundwalks." In Making It Heard: A History of Brazilian Sound Art, edited by Rui Chaves and Fernando Iazzetta, 167–85. Bloomsbury Publishing USA. https://www.bloomsbury.com/ca/making-it-heard-9781501344435/.

1-Feb-24	Part II - Listening
	Soundwalking

#2 Listening/Thinking. Come prepared for a walk. Unless the weather is particularly bad (compared to normal Montreal winter), we will be going for a soundwalk. Check the assignment summary above and sheet for more details.

Commentary paper from this is due on the next day (2 Feb).

Week 5	
6-Feb-24	Part II - Listening
	Where are you listening from?

What does it mean to listen? Questioning listening positionality

Robinson, Dylan. 2020. "Hungry Listening". In: Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies. University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvzpv6bb. Pages 37-74.

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.

8-Feb-24	Part II - Listening
	Where are you listening from?

Discussion session on the Listening Positionality and Race.

#1 Forum response due 10am on the day before class.

Optional Movie:
Riley, Boots, dir. 2018. Sorry to Bother You. Comedy, Drama, Fantasy. Cinereach, MACRO, MNM Creative. 112min. Available for online rent.

Week 6	
13-Feb-24	Part II - Listening
	Politics of sound and noise

When are sounds noises? The politics of listening

Radovac, Lilian. 2015. "Muting Dissent." Radical History Review 2015 (121): 32–50. https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2799899.

Thompson, Emily Ann. 2002. "Noise and Modern Culture, 1900-1933." In: The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933. Cambridge: MIT Press. Pages: 115-167.

15-Feb-24	Part II - Listening
	Politics of sound and noise

#2 Listening/Thinking. Submit your edited soundwalk commentary before class. Highlight the new elements you discussed.

We will talk about your new insights in class.

Week 7	
20-Feb-24	Part III - Mediations
	Radio Mediations

What radio sounds represent? Radio mediations.
Invited Speaker: Torbjörn Rolandsson.
*** Readings will likely change ***

Bronfman, Alejandra. 2016. "Ears." In Isles of Noise: Sonic Media in the Caribbean, 91–116. University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469628691.001.0001.

Medrado, Andrea. 2023. "The Place of Radio in the Soundscapes: Everyday Listening and Producing Sounds in Marginalized Communities of the Global South." In The Bloomsbury Handbook of Radio, edited by Hugh Chignell and Kathryn McDonald, 415–32. Bloomsbury Handbooks. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. http://digital.casalini.it/9781501385292.

22-Feb-24	Part III - Mediations
	Radio Mediations

Discussion session on the Radio Sounds and Community.

#1 Forum response due 10am on the day before class.

Optional Movie – *Warning: sensitive representations of racial violence, disability, and gender.*
Lee, Spike, dir. 1989. Do the Right Thing. Comedy, Drama. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks. 60min.
Available on Amazon prime video.

Week 8	
27-Feb-24	Part IV - Mediations
	The Studio

How recording shapes sound culture? Technologies and practices of sound recording

Meintjes, Louise. 2003. "The Record Studio as a Fetish." In Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio, 71–108. Durham, UNITED STATES: Duke University Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1167931.

Castanheira, José Cláudio Siqueira. 2020. "Studio Sounds: Digital Tools and Technocolonialism." In Border-Listening/Escucha-Liminal, edited by Alejandra Luciana Cárdenas. Vol. 1. Berlin: Radical Sounds Latin America. https://www.contingentsounds.com/border-listening-escucha-liminal-vol-1-2020/border-listening-escucha-liminal-vol-1-2020-2/studio-sounds-digital-tools-and-technocolonialism/.

29-Feb-24	Part IV - Mediations
	The Studio

#4 Sounding/Recording.
We will record and edit audio in Audacity. Please download and install it before class https://www.audacityteam.org. Bring your laptop if you can.

#3 Listening Project: Due Date March 1.

Week 9	
Reading Break	

Week 10	
12-Mar-24	Part V - Voice
	Voice, meaning and subjectivity

What and how voice means something? Language and subjectivity of the voice
Invited Speaker: Kirsten Hawson.
*** Readings will likely change ***

Dolar, Mladen. 2006. "The Linguistics of the Voice." In A Voice and Nothing More, 12–36. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=3338577.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. 2023. "7. Rewriting Algorithms for Just Recognition: From Digital Aural Redlining to Accent Activism." In Thinking with an Accent: Toward a New Object, Method, and Practice, edited by Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Pavitra Sundar. University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520389748.

| **14-Mar-24** | Part V - Voice |
| | Voice, meaning and subjectivity |

Discussion session on Voice and subjectivity.

#1 Forum response due 10am on the day before class.

Optional Movie:
Shapiro, Lawrence, dir. 2013. I Know That Voice. Documentary. Dundee Entertainment, Record Farm Industries. 95min. Available free on Plex. https://watch.plex.tv/movie/i-know-that-voice.

Week 11	
19-Mar-24	Part V - Voice
	Machine Voices

Is machine voice a voice? Voice mediations

Hilu, Reem. 2016. "Girl Talk and Girl Tech." Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film & Television, no. 78 (Fall): 4–21. https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT7802.

Alvarado, Luis. 2020. "Let The (Techno) Sculpture Speak Machines and Orality in Recent Peruvian Sound Art." In Border-Listening/Escucha-Liminal. Vol. 1. Berlin: Radical Sounds Latin America. https://www.contingentsounds.com/border-listening-escucha-liminal-vol-1-2020/border-listening-escucha-liminal-vol-1-2020-2/let-the-techno-sculpture-speak-machines-and-orality-in-recent-peruvian-sound-art/.

| **21-Mar-24** | Part V - Voice |
| | Machine Voices |

#4 Interfacing. You will interact with a voice interface. Take note and post your interactions and we will talk about it in class. For details, check the assignment description and the assignment sheet.

Week 12	
26-Mar-24	Part V - Voice
	Voice Interfaces

What are computer voice interfaces made of? Cultural histories of machine voices

Faber, Liz W. 2020. "Good Secretaries and Bad housewives: femininity in the Digital Age" and "Behind the Screen: Siri and the Acousmêtre." The Computer's Voice: From Star Trek to Siri. University of Minnesota Press. https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/book/81028. Pages: 137-181.

Humphry, Justine, and Chris Chesher. 2021. "Preparing for Smart Voice Assistants: Cultural Histories and Media Innovations." New Media & Society 23 (7): 1971–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820923679.

| **28-Mar-24** | Part V - Voice |
| | Voice Interfaces |

Discussion session on Voice Interfaces

#1 Forum response due 10am on the day before class.

Optional Movie:
Jonze, Spike, dir. 2014. Her. Drama, Romance, Sci-Fi. Annapurna Pictures, Stage 6 Films. 66min. Available on Crave.

Week 13	
2-Apr-24	Part V - Voice Voice and AI

What are the problems with the AI approach to voices? The engineering conceptualization of voice

Barnett, Julia. 2023. "The Ethical Implications of Generative Audio Models: A Systematic Literature Review." In Proceedings of the 2023 AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society, 146–61. AIES '23. New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3600211.3604686.

Ma, Anna, Elizabeth Patitsas, and Jonathan Sterne. 2023. "You Sound Depressed: A Case Study on Sonde Health's Diagnostic Use of Voice Analysis AI." In Proceedings of the 2023 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, 639–50. FAccT '23. New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3593013.3594032.

4-Apr-24	Part V - Voice Voice and AI

#4 Interfacing. After the previous weeks' readings. Post your commentary on your interface interactions.

We will discuss these reflections in class.

Week 14	
9-Apr-24	Wrap Up Final remarks and discussions on the Sounding Project

We will be available to discuss last questions on the Sounding Projects before due date.

An overview of the semester.

#6 Sounding Project due date: 12 April.

11-Apr-24	Make Up day – Monday class schedule, so no classes from this course.

- Language of submission
  "In accord with McGill University's [Charter of Students' Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives." (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

  « Conformément à la *[Charte des droits de l'étudiant](#)* de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue. » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 21 janvier 2009)

- Academic integrity
  "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](#)" (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See [McGill's guide to academic honesty](#) for more information).

  « L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon [le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et procédures disciplinaires](#). » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 29 janvier 2003) (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le [guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill](#).)

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools: I expect you to do your own work and I do not advise you to use these tools. However, you are not forbidden to use them in this course. If you use Generative AI (such as ChatGPT), I expect you use it as a revising, suggestion tool, not as your writer. You should be transparent as when and how you used it in your assignments adding an appendix for each assignment detailing what tools you used, how they were used, and how the results from the tool were incorporated in your work.