21A.360 / STS.065
Anthropology of Sound
Fall 2010 MIT

Course Description

Examines the ways humans experience the realm of sound and how perceptions and technologies of sound emerge from cultural, economic, and historical worlds. In addition to learning about how environmental, linguistic, and musical sounds are construed cross-culturally, students learn about the rise of telephony, architectural acoustics, and sound recording, as well as about the globalized travel of these technologies. Questions of ownership, property, authorship, and copyright in the age of digital file sharing are also addressed. A major concern will be with how the sound/noise boundary has been imagined, created, and modeled across diverse sociocultural and scientific contexts. Auditory examples — sound art, environmental recordings, music — will be provided and invited throughout the term.

Requirements

Students will write three 7-page papers. The final paper will be accompanied by a sound artifact (e.g., an audio montage, a piece of sound art) composed by the student. Themes/assignments described below, in paragraphs keyed to due dates. Each paper represents 25% of the subject grade. No emailed papers accepted. Papers docked by a letter grade for each day late. Students will be evaluated on class participation, including discussion and in-class exercises (25% of subject grade). Punctual attendance obligatory. No final.

Credit cannot be received for both CMS.407 and 21A.360.

Required Books


Articles on Stellar:
1. September 14

2. September 21
Thinking about Sound


LISTENING IN CLASS


3. September 28
Acoustemologies, Soundscapes, Noise


LISTENING IN CLASS

4. October 5
Voices


LISTENING IN CLASS

Antonin Artaud. 1947. To Have Done with the Judgment of God. Radio Play. Online: www.earlabs.org/label/LC/LC008.htm


George Carlin. 1972. “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television.”

FILM EXCERPTS IN CLASS
Pygmalion, Anthony Asquith, 1939
Klingon language documentary, Star Trek III: The Search for Spock, Leonard Nimoy,1984

3:30 GUEST LECTURE
David Wunsch, Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Massachusetts, Lowell

SOUND WORD PAPER DUE
For this paper, choose a word describing a particular kind of sound — e.g., ring, ping, zoom, whoosh, clang, buzz, bang, sigh, hush — and try to reconstruct a possible history of the word. You might begin by looking to the Oxford English Dictionary (http://dictionary.oed.com.libproxy.mit.edu/entrance.dtl) for the word’s etymology and for early usages. If the word has a scientific or technical meaning — as does, for example, reverberation — include and discuss in your history how that meaning arose and has or has not been modulated by popular meanings. Answer these questions along the way: how would you situate your word in an acoustemology? How and in what sorts of soundscapes does it figure? What is the relationship of your sound word to the category of noise? You must engage with class readings to aid your analysis. Provide a bibliography, formatted in the way you see sources cited here in the syllabus.
5. October 12
Telephones and Radio


LISTENING IN CLASS

6. October 19
Phonograph/Gramophone Records, Compact Discs, MP3s

GUEST LECTURE
Kieran Downes, Anthropology, MIT


LISTENING IN CLASS
Éduoard-Léon Scott de Martinville and David Giovannoni. 1860 “Au Claire de la Lune.”

FILM IN CLASS
Scratch, Doug Pray, 2001
October 22: Event of Interest outside Class: The Elusive: Listening


7. October 26
Sound, Culture, Technology, Property

GUEST LECTURE 2:30-4
Wayne Marshall, Foreign Languages and Literatures, MIT


8. November 2
The Sound of Music (and Noise)

GUEST LECTURE
Patricia Tang, Music, Harvard University/Music and Theatre Arts, MIT


SOUND TECHNOLOGY PAPER DUE

This paper should deliver a discussion of a technology of sound relay or reproduction in connection with these two matters: the question of retrieving sound from other places and times and the question of how to imagine property in sound. Anchor your discussion by choosing a particular example of sound sent or reproduced — as do Feld and Katz — thinking through how your example’s medium of relay or reproduction (telephone, recording) shapes or is shaped by its political economic context. This is a paper that demands that you grapple with the materiality of a technology and its effects. You must engage with class readings to aid your analysis. Provide a bibliography, formatted in the way you see sources cited here in the syllabus.
9. November 9
Sonic Publics

GUEST LECTURE
John Picker, Literature, MIT


130pp.

10. November 16
Styles of Silence

GUEST LECTURE
Wendy Jacob, Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT


107pp.

FILMS IN CLASS
*Into Great Silence*, Philip Groening, 2005
*Sound and Fury*, Josh Aronson, 2000

November 23
Soundwalk?
11. November 30
The Sounds of Science


~115pp.

LISTENING


my own recordings, audio and visual, from Alvin

Hydrophonia Sound Art Contest - Turn Ocean Noise into Sound Art http://synth.me/music-gear/hydrophonia-sound-art-contest-turn-ocean-noise-sound-art


Christoph Campregher’s *Molecular Code* Project, discussed and linked to in
http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/319/5865/905b#dancegallery

FILM IN CLASS

*Theremin*, Steven M. Martin, 1993
SONIC COMMUNITIES PAPER DUE
Describe a sonic public we've not discussed in class. Present an example of how a community uses sound (speech or music or even silence) to express or enact its identity. As part of this assignment, deliver a sound-based artifact — a recording, an audio essay, a piece of sound art. You may use any mode of sound representation/reproduction you like — a wax cylinder, an audiotape, phonograph records, a digital file, sound notation. Be ready to present your work to the class. You must engage with class readings in your paper. Provide a bibliography/discography, formatted in the way you see sources cited here in the syllabus.