FYSEM-UA 795
Sound: History, Culture, Politics
New York University, Spring 2021
Mondays, 2-4:30 p.m. (Room TBA)

Instructor: Ian VanderMeulen
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Office Hours:
Wednesdays, 2-4pm or by appointment
(Room TBA)

**Course Description:**

This interdisciplinary course explores the history, culture, and politics of our audible—and sub-audible—worlds. The broad analytical categories of “history,” “culture,” and “politics” will provide an overall framework for the course and survey of a range of disciplinary approaches to sound, from musicology and history to anthropology, film and media studies, and beyond. We begin with a historical survey, grappling with problems of technological, political, and even epistemological change; and critically examining prevailing notions about the increasing “noisiness” of our modern world. We then shift to a number of case studies that illuminate how attitudes about voice and audibility—particularly the problematic distinction between “sound” and “noise”—figures into constructions of religion, race, ethnicity, and other cultural categories and identities. By thinking critically about the sound/noise distinction we begin to wonder about “sound” as a category at all, and arrive at the possibilities of pure “vibration,” a turn which raises potentials for both political liberation (as in its inclusivity toward deaf populations) and authoritarian domination through sonic booms, the LRAD, and other forms of “acoustic violence.” Students will have an opportunity to think critically about such problems and apply such knowledge through written assignments, brief in-class listening activities, and a final, hands-on “sound-mapping” project.

**Course Objectives:**

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Listen more attentively to their surroundings
- Think critically and reflexively about how to describe such sounds
- Analyze ways in which sound practices and ways of describing sound are embedded in particular cultural and political histories
- Understand general debates related to “sound studies” and ways different academic disciplines (musicology, history, anthropology, film and media studies) have shaped the study of sound

**Assignments and Grading:**

**Attendance and participation (15%):** Students are expected to complete all the weekly readings, attend all class sessions, and participate actively in discussions. More than one missed
A session will not be excused without a doctor’s note or some other proof of extenuating circumstance and will result in an immediate drop in letter grade (i.e., A to A-). Active participation consists of thoughtful responses to the readings, questions posed by the instructor, and respectful responses to fellow students. Questions are also encouraged, as is general respect for the instructor, fellow students, and class time. Active participation does not mean dominating the discussion with repetitive and/or only partially relevant statements.

**Weekly posts on NYU classes (10%)**: Respond to each weekly set of readings thoughtfully in 2-3 paragraphs. These do not need to be polished, or include a clear argument; in fact, responses that articulate a central question (or set of questions) in response to the readings are perfectly fine. However, an “A-level” post will ideally respond to readings synthetically, meaning that most, if not all, readings are connected under a similar theme or set of questions. You are not responsible for forum posts for the weeks you are turning in a longer response paper or giving an oral presentation (see two items below).

**Three 2-3 page reading responses (5% each = 15%)**: Choose one set of weekly readings from each of the topical categories (history, culture, politics), to write a 2-3 page (12-point font, double-spaced) response paper. Think of these as a more critical, polished, and synthetic version of the weekly posts. Due at the beginning of class for which those readings are assigned.

**Oral presentation of readings (5%)**: 5-10 minute summary of a given weekly set of readings, given at the beginning of that class period. These should summarize each reading, tie them together under a set of themes, and offer possible questions for discussion. Students must sign up for their week-of-choice no later than the second week of class (Feb. 1).

**Final “Sound-mapping” project (55%)**: Proposal (5%); Annotated bibliography (10%); Oral presentation (10%); 10-12 page paper (30%)

Students choose a particular “space” or “territory” and create a “sound map.” Methodologies of “sound-mapping” will be discussed the third week of class but sound maps should include some mix of photographs, maps or other graphic depictions, and sound recordings to give sense of the given space/territory. (There are many computer and mobile applications out there that assist with this, which will be discussed.) Students will elaborate on this project throughout the semester through an annotated bibliography of no less than 10 sources relevant to the given project (of which up to 5 may be from the course syllabus); a final oral presentation to the rest of the class; and a final 10-12 page paper that applies analytical approaches learned throughout the semester to the given sound map. Final papers will be workshopped (read and commented-on by peers) on the second-to-last class meeting.

Questions to consider include: Who does/not have access to a given space? What is/are the sound source(s) and how is sound distributed or contained (i.e., through amplification or physical barriers)? How has a given “soundscape” changed over time? How might people experience it differently (spatially, culturally, temporally)? What are broader political stakes or implications?

**Disability Disclosure Statement:**
Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Student Accessibility (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Cheating:**
Academic integrity means that the work you submit is original. Obviously, bringing answers into an examination or copying all or part of a paper straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle. But there are other forms of cheating or plagiarizing which are just as serious — for example, presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written); writing a sentence or paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else’s idea(s) without a reference to the source of the idea(s); or submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both instructors have given their permission in advance). Receiving or giving help on a take-home paper, examination, or quiz is also cheating, unless expressly permitted by the instructor (as in collaborative projects).

**Schedule and Required Readings:**

The following book is required, as we will read it in its entirety. Copies are available for purchase at the NYU bookstore and will be placed on reserve at Bobst library.


All other readings will be made available as PDFs via NYU Classes. However, a number of other selections will be drawn from two “readers” and one other edited volume. Each of these has a rich selection of additional readings that may be relevant to final projects and thus students may wish to purchase one or more.


**Session 1, Jan. 25:**
Introduction: Sound, Noise, and “Sound Studies”
• Deborah Kapchan. “The Splash of Icarus: Theorizing Sound Writing/Writing Sound Theory” (pp. 1-22) in Kapchan ed. Theorizing Sound Writing
• Suzanne G. Cusick, “Musicology, Performativity, Acoustemology” (pp. 25-45) in Theorizing Sound Writing

Session 2, Feb. 1:
History I: Early Vibrations and the Problem of “Sounded” History
*DUE: Sign up for presentation of readings

• David Hendy. “Introduction” (ix-xvii), “Prehistoric Voiceprints” (pp. 3-47), and “The Age of Oratory” (pp. 51-102) in Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening

Session 3, Feb. 8:
History II: Religious Reform and the Taming of the Ear
*In-class discussion of sound-mapping methods

• David Hendy, “Sounds of the Spirit and of Satan” (pp. 105-153) Noise: A Human History
• Richard Cullen Rath, “No Corner for the Devil to Hide” (pp. 130-140) in Jonathan Sterne ed. Sound Studies Reader
• Eric Leigh Schmidt, “Hearing Loss” in Bull and Back, eds. The Auditory Culture Reader (pp. 41-57); originally from Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment (pp. 15-28)

Session 4, Feb. 15:
History III: Colonial Ears and the Sounds of Slavery

• David Hendy, “Power and Revolt” (pp. 157-210) Noise: A Human History
• Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia (selection)

Session 5, Feb. 22:
History IV: Urbanization and Mechanical Reproduction
*DUE (beginning of class): one-paragraph written proposal for “sound-mapping” project

• David Hendy, “The Rise of the Machines” (pp. 213-266) in Noise: A Human History

Session 6, March 1:
Culture I: Listening, Ethnography, and “Acoustemology”


Session 7, March 8:
Culture II: Recording and “Liveness”
*Due (beginning of class): Annotated Bibliographies; students introduce sound-mapping projects to other students

- Porcello, Thomas. 2005. “Music mediated as live in Austin: sound, technology, and recording practice” (pp. 103-117) in Green and Porcello, eds. Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures
- Jonathan Sterne, The Audible Past (selections)

Week of March 15: Spring Break

Session 8, March 22:
Culture III: Film Sound


Session 9, March 29:
Culture IV: Amplification, Vibration, and Urban “Soundscapes”

- Julian Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session” (pp. 451-480) in Bull and Back, eds. The Auditory Culture Reader

Session 10, April 5:
Political Implications I: Cultural Politics of Radio

- Daniel Fisher. “Radio” (pp. 151-164) in Novak and Sakakeeny, eds. Keywords in Sound
- Frantz Fanon, “This is the Voice of Algeria.” Sound Studies Reader (pp. 329-335)
• Michele Hilmes, “Radio and the Imagined Community” (pp. 351-362) in Jonathan Sterne, ed., *Sound Studies Reader*
• Jo Tacchi, “Nostalgia and Radio Sound” (pp. 281-295) in Bull and Back, eds. *The Auditory Culture Reader*

**Session 11, April 12:**
Political Implications II: Sounds of Violence and Vibrational Force

• David Hendy, “Shell Shock” (pp. 269-281) in *Noise: A Human History*
• Deborah Wong, “Deadly Soundscapes: Scripts of Lethal Force and Lo-Fi Death” (pp. 253-276) in Deborah Kapchan, ed. *Theorizing Sound Writing*

**Session 12, April 19:**
Political Implications III: Voice, Gender, Deafness

• Amanda Weidman, “Voice” (pp. 232-246) in David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, eds. *Keywords in Sound*
• Mara Mills, “Deafness” (pp. 45-54) in Novak and Sakakeeny, eds. *Keywords in Sound*
• Anne Carson, “The Gender of Sound,” (pp. 43-60) in in Cox and Warner, eds. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*
• Drew Daniel, “Queer Sound,” (pp. 61-72) in Cox and Warner, eds. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*
• Evelyn Glennie. “Hearing Essay” (pp. 125-128) in Cox and Warner, eds. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*
• “For These Students, Learning the Qur’an Begins with YouTube.” *New York Times* (on deaf Indonesian Muslims studying Qur’an)

**Session 13, April 26:**
Political Implications IV: Sound and Listening in the Anthropocene

• David Hendy, “An Ever-Noisier World” and “The Search for Silence” (pp. 304-322) in *Noise: A Human History*
• Steven Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life: Anthropology of Biology and Beyond* (selections)

**Session 14, May 3:**
Paper Draft Workshop Session:
• Small groups will be assigned ahead of time for peer review
• Students must bring hard-copy, marked-up versions of their peers’ papers to class

Session 15, May 10:
Oral/audiovisual presentations of student final projects
*Papers due at the beginning of class