NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study- First Year Writing Seminar

Sounding the City
Course number: FIRST-UG404
Spring 2016

Instructor: Prof. Paul Fess
Meeting Time: T/Th; 2:00-3:15
Location: 1 Washington Pl; Room: 401
Email: pf643@nyu.edu
Office: 1 Washington Place, Rm. 429
Office Hours: Tuesday, 3:30-5:00

Course Description:
French economist Jacques Attali tells us that the world is not for seeing; it is for hearing. Taking a cue from Attali’s claim, this course examines the poetics and politics of city sounds across a diverse range of media from the 19th century to the present day. Our goal will be to develop methods for critical listening and writing in order to describe and analyze how soundscapes shape civic life. In tuning these practices we will attend to both musical and nonmusical aspects of the urban aural experience. How, for example, do representations of rhythms and soundmarks define the temporal and spatial relations of cities? How have writers and artists deployed noise and other aberrant sonic devices in order to reconfigure and reimagine the cityscape? How have technologies shaped and been shaped by cultures of listening within neighborhoods? From this sonic orientation we will delve into such cities as New York, New Orleans, and Los Angeles through the aural imaginations of a diverse range of writers and artists such as Walt Whitman, Ralph Ellison, and Kim Gordon. We will also think alongside such sound studies critics as Jonathan Sterne, Emily Thompson, Steve Goodman, Eric Lott, and Lilian Radovic.

There is a familiar saying of unknown origins: “Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” Despite the doubts expressed in this statement we will venture to account for city sounds through the written word. Each week you will complete assigned reading, blog posts, and presentations. In keeping with the spirit of the class, we will also do a lot of listening to material that you bring to class for us to dissect. These weekly assignments will prepare you to write two short papers (4-5 pages), and a final paper (8-10 pages) on a topic of your choosing. Final papers will use original research to analyze critical issues around some aspect of an urban soundscape and the social structure of the city, for example the effects of gentrification on a music scene or the politics of noise laws.

Course Objectives
Students will: gain an understanding of the relationship between sound, noise, and city living, investigate how musical and non-musical sound structures city life, and write thesis-driven analytical papers, including a final research paper.
**Required Texts:**

**Critical Articles:**
The articles listed on the syllabus are available on the course website (https://wp.nyu.edu/sounding_the_city) under the “Scheduled Readings” page. The password for this page is gallaphonic

**Course Requirements:**
- **1st Short Paper:** This will be a 1200-word essay in which you examine the ideas of one of the Sound Studies writers we discuss at the beginning of the semester in the context of the sounds you encounter in New York City. A detailed prompt will be distributed on the first day of class. The due date for this assignment is February 11th.
- **2nd Short Paper:** This will be a 1200-word essay in which you examine the relationships between music, noise, and identity formation in the context of our readings from the New York unit. A detailed prompt will be distributed after you turn in your 1st paper. The due date for this assignment will be March 10th.
- **Final Research Paper:** This will be a 2500-word assignment in which you explore an aspect of the relationship between the cityscape and the soundscape in depth. You will be asked to use critical research and your own analysis in order to advance an original thesis that answers a research question that you form. You will complete this assignment through a series of steps (a research proposal, an annotated bibliography, and drafts) that will build to your final draft, which will be due on May 10th.
- **Presentations:** A group of two students will lead discussions on the class blog and the first 15-20 minutes of some of our class meetings. (These sessions are marked on the syllabus.) Your presentations will consist of two parts:
  - First, each group will facilitate the discussion about our reading for that day on the course blog. In order to do this, you will submit 2-3 questions to me 5 days before the presentation, and I will give you suggestions. Once you’ve received my suggestions, you should post the best question to the blog at least 3 days before the presentation so that others can respond. Questions should be directed to the reading for that day’s class, but you could also point to previous reading and discussions. As facilitators of the blog, you should keep track of responses to your question and raise points made on the blog in our class discussion.
  - Second, each group will create a presentation and lead discussion about the day’s reading. Your presentation should highlight important aspects of the reading and the discussion on the class blog. You should connect the reading to other things we’ve encountered in our discussions. You could also use your presentation to connect the reading to material (art shows, recordings, etc.) not on the syllabus. You could also use any digital platform (Power Point, Keynote, Sound Cloud, etc.)
Sonic Examples: Each of you will post one sonic example to the class website. This could be any type of “sound text,” such as a textual description, a music or movie clip, something you’ve recorded, etc. Once you’ve selected and posted your sonic example online you should write an annotation (about 200 words) for your post and be prepared to briefly discuss it in class. Your annotation should detail the significant features of your sonic example and relate it to something we’ve read or a discussion topic. *Note: These are the most basic instructions for this assignment. I highly encourage you to post additional examples and bring these examples to the attention of the class.

Blog Contributions: At least 5 days before each session, the discussion leaders will pose questions to the class on the course blog. Each student must respond to the questions by noon the day before the session. The blog will function as a place to workshop ideas about the texts before we come together to discuss them. Don’t be afraid to voice your confusion or frustration here, as those feelings often produce fruitful avenues of inquiry into the reading.

Participation: Your participation grade will be derived from the annotations to .pdf readings you make with hypothes.is and your activity in class discussions.

Grades:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Short Paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd Short Paper</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Research Paper</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sonic Example</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blog Contributions</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
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*Please be aware that these are approximate calculations that reflect the importance of each assignment. There will be smaller assignments and extra credit added. Every assignment will be explained at length in class and through assignment sheets posted to the site.

Attendance Policy:
Attending class is essential to your success, and shows respect for me and your peers. I will allow up to 2 absences over 15 weeks. After 2, you must come speak with me and we will discuss your standing in the course.

Academic Honesty:
Do not plagiarize. Our course site will be public, and you could face legal consequences for stealing other people’s work. Besides that, you can be dismissed from NYU for cheating: “As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the
academic integrity policy.”

I will go over proper documentation style in the course of the semester in conjunction with OWL at Purdue (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/) and Writer/Designer. If you have questions regarding proper citation practices PLEASE ask me or contact a librarian for help.

**Accessibility Accommodations:**
If you have a disability, please come speak with me at the beginning of the term and contact NYU’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980.
Note: I may need to adjust this syllabus and course schedule to accommodate pedagogical needs as they arise. We will discuss all changes as a class and the new schedule will be reflected on our course blog.

**Course Schedule**
The activities listed here are due before the next class begins.
(Schedule subject to change)

**Unit 1: Close Listening**

**Week 1**
01/26: Introductions
   - Syllabus review
   - Close listening exercise

01/28: “Sonic Imaginations” by Jonathan Sterne
   - “The Soundscape” by R. Murray Schafer
   - “Noise: the Political Economy of Music” by Jacques Attali

**Week 2**
02/02: “13.7 Billion B.C: The Ontology of Vibrational Force” by Steve Goodman

**Sonic example:**

02/04: “1931: Rhythmanalysis” and “1929: Throbs of Experience” by Steve Goodman

**Week 3: New York**
02/09: “Empire of the Beat” by Walter Hughes

02/11: “The Soundproof Study” by John Picker
   - excerpts from *Leaves of Grass* (1855) by Walt Whitman

1st Paper Due
Week 4
02/16: “The Roaring Twenties” by Emily Thompson
   “Forced Listening: The Contested Use of Loudspeakers for Commercial and Political Messages in the Public Soundscape” by Ronda Sewald
   Sonic Example:
   Presenters:

02/18: “The ‘War on Noise’: Sound and Space in La Guardia’s New York” by Lilian Radovic
   Sonic Example:

Week 5
02/23: “Living with Music”
   *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison
   Sonic Example:
   Presenters:

02/25: *Invisible Man*
   Sonic Example:

Week 6
03/01: *Invisible Man*
   Sonic Example:

03/03: *Invisible Man*
   “Ralph Ellison's Righteous Riffs: Jazz, Democracy, and the Sacred” by Steve Pinkerton
   Sonic Example:
   Presenters:

Week 7
03/08: *Invisible Man*
   “Ralph Ellison and Improvised History” by Andrew Radford
   Sonic Example:
   Presenters:

03/10: excerpt from *Girl in a Band* by Kim Gordon
   2nd Paper Due
   Spring Break 03/14-03/18

Unit 3: New Orleans
Week 8
03/22: New Orleans noise debates; excerpts from newspaper coverage
   *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* by Matt Sakakeeny
   Sonic Example:
   Presenters:
03/24: *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans*

*Sonic Example:*

**Week 9**

03/29: *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans*

*Sonic Example:*

*Presenters:*

03/31: *Coming Through Slaughter* by Michael Ondaatje

*Research Paper proposals due*

**Week 10**

04/05: *Coming Through Slaughter*

*Sonic Example:*

04/07: *Coming Through Slaughter*

*Annotated bibliography due*

**Unit 4: L.A.**

**Week 11**

04/12: “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” and “The Culture Industry Reconsidered” by Theodor Adorno

*Sonic Example:*

*Presenters:*

*Event: “Urban Design, Jazz, and Creativity;” National Jazz Museum in Harlem; 7:00PM*

04/14: “Perfect is Dead: Karen Carpenter, Theodor Adorno, and the Radio; or, If Hooks Could Kill” by Eric Lott

*Sonic Example:*

**Week 12**

04/19: TBD

*Sonic Example:*


*Research Paper 1st Draft due*

**Week 13**

04/26: Discuss *The Exiles*

“Sonic Connections: Listening for Indigenous Landscapes in Kent Mackenzie’s ‘The Exiles’” by Laura Sachiko Fugikawa

*Sonic Example:*

*Presenters:*

04/28: *Research Paper 2nd Draft due*

*begin Research Paper presentations*
Week 14
05/03: Research Paper presentations

05/05: Research Paper presentations

Final Paper Due 05/10