

INTRODUCTION to SOUND STUDIES

Sociology 115

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Office hours: by appointment on [Zoom](#)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course you will evaporate into a crackling cloud of strange noises and errant observations about the social significance of sound. You will read, watch, and listen to a broad survey of materials from social scientists, philosophers, artists, historians, and ecologists. Your guide will be 20 audio lectures with a variety of activities to help you complete a final project of your design. At the end, you will hear the sound of applause as you rain down to earth a wiser student of the cultural, historical, and technical dimensions of sound.

Why? Because it is only in the last few decades that scholars have taken sound seriously. Modern culture invites us to use our eyes and trust the things we can see, often at the expense of our ears. Meanwhile modern technology has made the world a much louder place full of wonderful noises that we can barely comprehend. As some of the first sound scholars began to claim in the 1970s, modern people are used to hearing but not *listening*. For proof, look to other cultures and you will see all kinds of auditory practices for getting along in the world. And within our population we can look to each other and recognize the varieties of ability and cognitive diversity that make talk about “objectivity” sound very silly.

We live in a world of sound. Through equal parts engineering and accident, humans are largely responsible for how the world sounds, both indoors and outside. And this includes the people using mobile technology to keep the world out and their sounds to themselves. How long have we lived this way? That question depends on what historical clues we can find in the archives and architecture of the past, and how these clues echo in today’s sonic practices and acoustic spaces.

Behind the idea of *auditory culture* is an effort to understand how people use listening as a collective practice—and what we are collectively doing to make the sounds we listen to. One of the best documented examples is making and listening to music, which some argue is at the very root of human languages. But recorded speech can also be a powerful tool for moral and meditative practices. It is this speech-like quality that makes certain sounds iconic, and capable of grabbing and holding our attention. Iconic sounds have personality; we borrow and remix these personalities together in minor acts of self-expression and complacency. It is a paradox that such familiar sounds in turn give meaning to strange sounds, for example, through

sonification, where scientists and engineers turn data into audible sources of galactic understanding.

But what about the kinds of listening we don't share, the kinds practiced by experts? Although it's not what we typically think of as primary ways of knowing, listening is a critical part of skilled labor in jobs as diverse as auto mechanics, pediatricians, and laboratory biologists. The recognition of sensual practices in intellectual work has not always been accepted by the protectors of "official" knowledge. These folks tend to visualize modern science as data, that is, from a distance. The legacy of this visual supremacy is reflected by the speaking voices of different genders, cultures and classes who struggle to be heard in ways both personal and political; such conflicts over sound have real and at times deadly consequences. As a representation of identity, sound is a material for claiming one's place in society. But it can also be a way of taking control of sound for the sake of yourself and your imagined community.

Technology is essential to the above composition of listening practices, sonic representations and acoustic environments. Technologies of sound-making and listening, both simple and complex, are subject to human design and production. This means we have a hand in constructing what we hear and how we listen—and how this could be otherwise. But as long as science and engineering remain hopelessly social activities, we remain engaged in debates about the quality and quantity of *noise* in pursuit of an elusive silence. A thoughtful appraisal of sound in society reveals the intended and accidental effects of sound on our bodies and the health of our environments.

Sound studies are our way to think about vulnerable bodies encloded in vibrations and the languages we develop to know those vibrations.

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COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is a survey. Rather than pursue a single idea or argument, we will explore a variety of studies with different objectives. Because there is no one line of thought, you are encouraged to keep in mind two separate objectives in this course: your *learning goals* and your *educational goals*. Learning goals refer to your understanding of the course material—the central concepts, the methods, and the evidence. Achieving your learning goals is as simple as following the lectures, doing the readings and activities, and applying these to your final project. But just as important are your educational goals, that is, why you are interested in this topic and how you can best use what you learn for your career and your life. It is okay if you don't know how this course will relate to your education on day one. But keep this objective in mind as you go to keep focused on why you are taking this course in the first place.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This course is self-graded. You decide your grade. How will you make this decision? Two things:

1. **Memo Prompts & Discussion Posts:** You will engage in regular conversation with your classmates, reader, and instructor through memo prompts and discussion posts. Memos allow you to report on the progress of your final project, identify challenges that you experience, and improve your understanding of the course. You will also be assigned three peer memos each week. For each peer memo you are assigned, you are expected to post a response with constructive feedback, thoughtful questions, and general support.
2. **Final Project:** Your work in this course will be guided by a final project that you design. The project is intended to support your educational goals and you are strongly encouraged to think of a project that relates to your studies outside the course such as a personal or professional project that you find valuable. You will be doing as you are learning, so it is best to think of this “final” project as starting in week one and very much subject to change.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

You are expected to follow the University guidelines for academic honesty. Violations include cheating and plagiarism, as well as self-plagiarism (submitting your own work from a different assignment). Attribution and proper citations are expected for all ideas that are not your own. If you have any doubts, please speak to me *before* your work is due. The library provides a [guide to citation](#). Penalties for plagiarism are outlined in [The Navigator](#) and the [UCSC Student Policies and Regulations Handbook](#).

SPECIAL NEEDS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

All students should be able to participate in this course. Please address any special needs you may have with me at the beginning of the quarter, or when a challenge arises. If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your Accommodation Authorization from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) to me by email, preferably within the first two weeks of the quarter. Contact DRC at 831-459-2089 or by email at drc@ucsc.edu.

COURSE OUTLINE

Lectures are audio-only and available Monday mornings. Current and past lectures can be found on [YuJa](#). Readings and other material can be found on [Canvas](#) or at the hyperlinks below.

Week 1, SOUND STUDIES

Lecture 1: Why do we need sound studies?

1. EXPLORE: New York Times, [Quarantine Sounds](#)
2. READ: Roshanak Kheshti – “Acoustigraphy”
3. READ: Michele Hilmes – “Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? Does it Matter?”

Lecture 2: How does sound escape us?

1. READ: Jonathan Sterne – “Sonic Imaginations”
2. WATCH: BBC, [How the Microphone Gave Us Crooning](#)
3. EXPLORE: Diana Deutsch, [Phantom Words](#)
4. WATCH: BBC, [The McGurk Effect](#)

PART I: The SONIC WORLD and its CITIZENS

Week 2, SOUNDSCAPES

Lecture 3: What is a soundscape?

1. READ: R. Murray Schafer – “The Soundscape”
2. READ: Sophie Arkette – “Sounds like City”
3. EXPLORE: [Sound Portraits: Noise and the City](#)
4. LISTEN: Short Wave, [What Does A Healthy Rainforest Sound Like?](#)

Lecture 4: How do we use a soundscape?

1. READ: [Matt Sakakeeny](#) – “Under the Bridge”
2. READ: Michael Bull – “No Dead Air!”
3. ACTIVITY: Whitney Johnson, [Huizkol Sound Walk](#)

Week 3, SONIC IDENTITIES

Lecture 5: What does the voice say?

1. WATCH: CBC, [Vocal Fry](#)
2. READ: Anne Carson – “The Gender of Sound”
3. READ: Miyako Inoue – “Speech without a Speaking Body”
4. LISTEN: Here & Now, [What Does It Mean To 'Sound Black'?](#)
5. READ: Claudia Lopez Lloreda – [“Speech Recognition Tech Yet Another Example of Bias”](#)

Lecture 6: How does sound make a People?

1. READ: Octavia Butler – “Speech Sounds”
2. READ: Michael Veal – “Starship Africa”
3. READ: Bryce Peake – [“Listening Like White Nationalists at a Civil Rights Rally”](#)
4. EXPLORE: Luz María Sánchez – [2487](#)

Week 4, SONIC SKILLS

Lecture 7: What is an expert listener?

1. READ: Alexandra Supper and Karin Bijsterveld – “Sounds Convincing”
2. WATCH: Vice News, [The Space Composer](#)
3. BAKE: [A cake and listen to it](#)
4. READ: Stefan Helmreich – “An Anthropologist Underwater”

Lecture 8: What does health sound like?

1. READ: Tom Rice – “Sounding Bodies”
2. LISTEN: Here & Now, [Detecting COVID-19 Through Sound](#)
3. LISTEN: 99pi, [Sound and Health: Hospitals](#)
4. WATCH: [Milford Graves: Full Mantis](#) (Jake Meginsky, 2018)

PART II: CHALLENGES to SOUND STUDIES

Week 5, LISTENING

Lecture 9: Hearing and Listening—what’s the difference?

1. WATCH: [The Verrazano Bridge in high wind](#)
2. READ: Jonathan Sterne – “hearing”
3. READ: Michel Chion – “The Three Listening Modes”
4. LISTEN: 99pi, [Accidental Music of Imperfect Escalators](#)

Lecture 10: What do we get wrong about deafness?

1. READ: Mara Mills – “deafness”
2. LISTEN: Surprisingly Brilliant, [The Electronic Ear](#)
3. READ: David Polansky – [“Digital Hearing Aids Turn the World into a Giant MP3 File”](#)
4. WATCH: [Touch the Sound](#) (Thomas Riedelsheimer, 2014)

Week 6, AURAL HISTORY

Lecture 11: What can we know about the sounds of the past?

1. READ: Mark M. Smith – “echo”
2. READ: Henry David Thoreau – “Sounds”
3. WATCH: Stephen Vitiello, [A Bell for Every Minute](#)
4. READ: Carolyn Birdsall – “Earwitnessing”

Lecture 12: How can we hear the past today?

1. LISTEN: [Toto in an empty mall](#)
2. READ: Richard Cullen Rath – “No Corner for the Devil to Hide”
3. READ: Barry Blesser and Ruth Salter – “Ancient Acoustic Spaces”
4. READ: Emma Jacobs – [“Researchers Listen for Clues to the Prehistoric Past”](#)

WEEK 7, AUDITORY CULTURE

Lecture 13: How is culture made through sound?

1. READ: Charles Hirschkind – “Cassette Sermons”
2. READ: Donald Brenneis – “Grog and Gossip in Bhatgaon”
3. LISTEN: All Things Considered, [The Sound of Laughter](#)

Lecture 14: How do people use music?

1. READ: James Lanza – “Sound of Cottage Cheese”
2. READ: Douglas Kahn – “Drugs and Sound”

3. WATCH: [Imagine the Sound](#) (Ron Mann, 1981)
4. READ: Ben Ratliff – “In Praise of Blue Notes”

PART III: MAKING and UNMAKING SOUND in SOCIETY

Week 8, AUDIO ENGINEERING

Lecture 15: Why does broadcasting (still) matter?

1. READ: Frantz Fanon – “This is the Voice of Algeria”
2. LISTEN: David Foster Wallace, [“Host”](#)
3. READ: James Batcho – “Revisiting the Howard Dean Scream”

Lecture 16: What does personal listening mean?

1. READ: Mark Grimshaw – “Sound and Player Immersion in Digital Games”
2. READ: Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo and Latoya Peterson– “Put Me on Game”
3. READ: Joseph Klett – “Baffled by an Algorithm”

Week 9, SOUND DESIGN

Lecture 17: What is a sonic icon?

1. LISTEN: 99pi, [The Sizzle](#)
2. READ: William Gaver – “Auditory Icons”
3. WATCH: [The Wilhelm Scream](#)
4. LISTEN: 20k, [Classic Cartoon Sound Effects](#)
5. READ: Alexandra Supper – “The Search for the Killer Application”

Lecture 18: Can sound make you sick?

1. READ: Lisa Diedrich and Benjamin Tausig – [“Mysterious Sounds and Scary Illnesses as Political Tools”](#)
2. READ: Mitchell Akiyama – “Silent Alarm”
3. WATCH: GMM, [Speech Jamming](#)
4. READ: Ana Swanson and Edward Wong – [“Report Points to Microwave ‘Attack’”](#)

WEEK 10, NOISE CONTROL

Lecture 19: Silence?

1. READ: Diane Margolis – “Backyard Soundings”
2. READ: Mack Hagood – “Quiet Comfort”
3. LISTEN: NPR, [The Last Sound](#)

Lecture 20: What is soundscape ecology?

1. READ: Bryan Pijanowski et al. – “Soundscape Ecology”
2. READ: Steph Yin – “[Why Bats Crash into Buildings](#)”
3. READ: Sabrina Imbler – “[In the Oceans, the Volume Is Rising as Never Before](#)”
4. WATCH: Vice News, [Greenland is Melting](#)
5. EXPLORE: David Dunn, [The Sound of Light in the Trees](#)