Sound Histories: Seminar in Media History and Historiography

This seminar will focus on “Sound Histories” in two senses. First, we will concentrate on the theory and practice of media historiography, through readings and an introduction to archival research, as a way to think about what history is and how it can be practiced in a “sound” manner – and what that implies. Second, we will center our historical readings on “sound histories:” historical work that focuses on the emerging field of “sound studies,” or the study of aural culture in the US. This includes aspects of music history, radio history, aural aesthetics, sound technologies, and the listening practices they produce. Questions to which we will address ourselves include: what challenges does aural culture present to historians? How might we define “sound studies” as a field, and what are its parameters? Can we discern the beginnings of “sound theory” emerging from the readings in this class, or if not, from what theoretical bases do these histories proceed? How can we position histories of sound culture within the visual emphasis predominant in media studies?

Required Readings

Keith Jenkins, Re-thinking History
Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995)
Kozloff, Sarah, Overhearing Film Dialogue (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2000)
Lastra, James, Sound Technology and the American Cinema (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)
Morton, David, Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000)
Lewis Ehrenberg, Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998)


Selections (available for copying) from:

Requirements

All students are expected to attend and participate fully in each seminar session. Grade will be based on:

Research paper (and proposal) 80%
In-class reading presentation/archive assignment 10%
Participation 10%

The research paper should be 25-30 pp. in length, including endnotes and bibliography. It should make an original contribution to the scholarship in the area covered by the seminar, drawing on and developing theories and concepts from the readings and discussion, and be based at least in part on archival research. A proposal, due March 22, should sketch out the basic research topic, locate its argument within course concerns, and identify key evidentiary sources, including a preliminary bibliography.

The in-class reading presentation should be 2-3 pp. long, drawn from the seminar bibliography, and consist of a summary and critique of the book selected; copies should be distributed to all members of the class.

The archive assignment will involve investigating archival collections and materials available on campus and writing up a brief description of one selected source.

I. Historiographical theory and method

**Jan 26**
Jenkins, Keith, *Re-Thinking History*

**Feb 2**
Trouillot, Michel-Rolf, *Silencing the Past*, chaps. 1, 2, 3
Anderson & Curtin, “Writing Cultural History: The Challenge of Radio and Television”
Hilmes, “Rethinking Radio”

II. Histories of Sound Culture
Audio Recording and Acoustics
Feb 9
Sterne, Jonathan *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*

Feb 16
Morton, David, *Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America*

**Radio Broadcasting**
Feb 23
Archive assignment due

Mar 1
Vaillant, Derek, “Sounds of Whiteness: Local Radio, Racial Formation, and Public Culture in Chicago;”
Loviglio, Jason, “Vox Pop: Network Radio and the Voice of the People,”
Savage, “Radio and the Political Discourse of Racial Equality,”
Douglas, Susasn, “Letting the Boys Be Boys: Talk Radio, Male Hysteria, and Political Discourse in the 1980s”

**Film Sound**
Mar 8

Mar 15 Spring Break

Mar 22
Proposals due

**Popular Music**

Mar 29
Experimental/Art Sound
Apr 5

Apr 12 Presentations
Apr 19 No Class
Apr 26 Presentations
May 3 Presentations

Papers due May 10 by 5 pm.

As a guide for analyzing the readings throughout the seminar, think about these things as you read:

1) What overall argument is the author making? What are the major sub-points and which, to your mind, are the most important?

2) Within what critical framework does the author position him/herself?

3) How does “history” work within this critical framework? Is “history” being used primarily to support a theoretical project, or does theory emerge (even if implicitly) from the historiographical project?

4) What evidentiary sources does the author draw on? How well do these sources serve the thesis of the book, and how might we critique this aspect of the author’s work drawing on our post-structuralist examination of historiographical theory?

5) How does this author contribute to what might be defined as the area of “sound studies?”