

DMST3900: Digital Sound Cultures

<http://www.du.edu/~treddell/3900-03/>

Winter 2009 | Mon & Wed 2:00-3:50pm

Sturm Hall 434

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office hours

Mon & Wed
11am-1:30pm
and by appt.

DIGITAL SOUND CULTURES explores some of the cultures of producers, distributors, and listeners that have formed around digital audio technologies and their important analog ancestries. The class combines reading of critical texts with the study of several audio genres, including science fiction film scores, space age lounge, cosmic music, Krautrock, psychedelia, post-punk, afrofuturism, dub, free jazz, improvisation and jam, new age, ambient techno, trance, and microsound. This class encourages us to listen to these sonic forms as intersections of technological, ideological, and imaginative forces.

We will cover the works of many individual artists and groups, with a particular desire to reflect the international scope of digital sound practices and their influences, as well as the unique role that the Internet now plays in fostering the efforts of independent producers, micro-labels, and file-sharing. The main critical methods brought to this material are drawn from philosophy, media archaeology, media studies, science fiction studies, and a wide variety of music-related writings.

Through critical listening, research and writing, this class fosters three major goals: your understanding of audio production; the histories and cultures that put the forces of production in lineages and clusters; and the nature and obligations of the critical voice.

For output, students will produce sets of audio and written media on the sound-related issues, artifacts, and practitioners of their choice.

This class fulfills a DMS Critical requirement.

Course Overview

The class will develop a sequence of three units along two tracks. One track will draw entirely from our assigned readings. These classes will typically run seminar-style but will also include some hands-on production sessions. The other track will be a series of media presentations and lectures on the theme of “technicians of space.” These lectures will include a prepared talk and the playing of media, followed by a Q&A session. The objectives of the two tracks reinforce one another.

Track One surveys the history of scholarship on audio culture, introducing many of the major writers as well as audio artists. This track also looks closely at how three different writers respond to the phenomena of sound culture, by which I mean the set of creative practices that develop in the context of technical transformations in sound recording, production, broadcast and distribution, and audience interaction and critical response.

Track Two follows a specific theme or “meme” (a distinct element of cultural ideas, symbolic images, and practices) through several generations of audio production. I am specifically interested in the sonification of our ideas about outer space. While a form of sonic cosmology is found in all ancient traditions long before Western philosophy’s notion of the “music of the spheres,” space music since the 1950s tracks two significant and unique trajectories, one material and technological, and the other ideological. First, musicians consistently respond to and account for technological innovation in their respective cultures of production by adopting space-related metaphors; the alien sounds of the theremin, the synthesizer, and the turntable, to name three, have each prompted artists to characterize their projects in terms of outer space.

Second, deriving metaphysical positions from esoteric literature, mythology and science fiction, the producers of space music sustain a line of intuitive and imaginative inquiry into the universe that modern cosmology, institutionalized as the field of astronomy and the space sciences, largely sought to dispel. Space music situates terrestrial experience within the grand scale of cosmic events, as well as sustains the belief that the human enterprise is inextricably bound in an impulse to leave the planet Earth behind.

Course Objectives

- Understand the relationship between Production, Contextual Synthesis, and Critical Voice.
- Cultivate habits of deep, conscious listening.
- Foster rhizomatic discography as a critical approach to media content and data management.
- Experience performative knowledge.
- Release critical assemblages.
- Explore new strategies for writing about media.
- Utilize the Web for networking new knowledge and media content.

Required Books

Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Continuum 2006

Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, MIT Press 2008

Timothy Taylor, *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology and Culture*, Routledge 2001

Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*, Wesleyan UP 2007

Recommended Books

Michael D. Ayers, ed., *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture*, Peter Lang 2006

Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, Indiana UP 2004

Steven Brown and Ulrik Volgsten, eds., *Music and Manipulation: On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music*, Berghahn Books 2006.

Julian Cope, *Krautrocksampler*, 2nd Edition, Head Heritage 1996

-----, *Japrock sampler: How the Post-War Japanese Blew Their Minds on Rock 'n' Roll*, Bloomsbury UK 2007

Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Quartet 1998

Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Harvard UP 1996

Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music*, Routledge 2002

Katharine Norman, *Sounding Art: Eight Literary Excursions through Electronic Music*, Ashgate 2004

Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*, Routledge 1999

-----, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*, Penguin 2006

Peter Shapiro, ed., *Modulations: A History of Electronic Music*, Caipirinha 2000

David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory*, Serpent's Tail 2004

-----, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds*, Serpent's Tail 1995

Rob Young, ed., *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*, continuum/the wire 2002

Some Movies and Documentaries

Modulations: Cinema for the Ear, dir. Iara Lee, Caipirinha 1998

Better Living Through Circuitry, dir. Jon Reiss, Studio K7/Cleopatra 1999

Scratch, dir. Doug Pray, Palm Pictures 2001

OHM+, prod. Thomas Ziegler, Jason Gross, & Russell Charno, Ellipsis Arts 2005

ASSIGNMENTS

There will be three major assignments in the class. Each assignment concentrates on a specific aspect of our material. Each assignment requires an audio production as well as written component. During each unit, you will also be required to make a contribution to our review blog. This will include a 2-3 paragraph review of an individual track or album, and, if possible, a link to the musical object. Please do not illegally share files for this assignment.

1. **PRODUCTION:** What specific production techniques and strategies interest you? What works or artists illustrate these strategies?

Review Blog (5%)

Set 1. Critical Mashup: “Stockhausen vs. the Technocrats” (15%)

10 minute audio mix + 5 page essay

2. **CONTEXTS:** What are you learning from our readings and listenings? What kind of theoretical or cultural contexts are helping you follow threads of interaction and engagement among these writers and artists? Discuss one specific collection of writers, works and artists that illustrate this broader conceptual development.

Review Blog (5%)

Set 2. Contextual Synthesizers: Research and Theoretical development (30%)

15 minute audio mix + 10 page essay

3. **CRITICAL:** Discuss your own assembled collection of writers, sound artists and musicians, individual audio works, and critical writers that have communicated something to you and/or evoked a strong emotion.

Review Blog (5%)

Set 3. The Critical Voice (40%)

20-30 minute audio mix + 10 page essay

COURSE CALENDAR

Unit One. Production

Mon Jan 05 | Introductions

Wed Jan 07 | AC: “Stockhausen vs. the Technocrats” (381-5) + web resources

Mon Jan 12 | AC II (Ch. 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) + web resources

Wed Jan 14 | Strange Sounds I (Theory) + AC III (Ch. 21, 22, 23, 24) & VIII (Ch. 47, 49, 51, 52)

- **Review Blog entry 1: due by Friday, Jan 16**

Mon Jan 19 | MLK Holiday – no class

Wed Jan 21 | Technicians of Space 1: Sonified Science Fiction

- **Set 1. Critical Mashup: due by Friday, Jan 23**

Unit Two. Contextual Synthesizers:

Research & Theoretical Development

Mon Jan 26 | Strange Sounds II (Time)

Wed Jan 28 | TOS 2: The German Space Program

Mon Feb 02 | Dub (Intro, Ch. 1-2)

Wed Feb 04 | Dub (Ch. 5) + TOS 3: Cognitive Dub Science

- **Review Blog entry 2: due by Friday, Feb 06**

Mon Feb 09 | Dub (Ch. 7, 8, Coda) + SU (Ch. 5)

Wed Feb 11 | Dub Text Exercises

- **Set 2. Contextual Synthesizers: due by Friday, Feb 13**

Unit Three. The Critical Voice

Mon Feb 16 | Dub (Coda) + AC V (Ch. 36), VII (Chs. 41, 46) & VII (56, 57) + SU (Ch. 6)

Wed Feb 18 | TOS 4: Microcosms / Telharmonic Space

Mon Feb 23 | Strange Sounds (Ch. 8) + SU (Ch. 11)

Wed Feb 25 | TOS 5: Space Rituals and Improvisational Technologies

- **Review Blog entry 3: due by Friday, Feb 27**

Mon Mar 02 | Strange Sounds (Ch. 6) + AC (Ch. 7) + SU (Ch. 3)

Wed Mar 04 | TOS 6: Contemplative Radio

Coda. Final (w)Raps

Mon Mar 09 | AC III (Ch. 25) & VIII (Ch. 48) + SU (Ch. 9, 17)

Wed Mar 11 | Wrap Up Discussions

Thur Mar 12 | Final Presentations (2-3:50pm)

- **Set 3. The Critical Voice (Final): due by Friday, Mar 13, 2pm**

GENERAL POLICIES

Attendance

I will keep track of attendance. I expect you to be ready and willing to discuss reading material and content presented in class. I also expect you to listen attentively to lectures and media presentations. Falling asleep in class constitutes an absence. Due to the intensively collaborative nature of the class, falling behind can seriously hinder other students. Failure to have work ready by its due date or an audition session may result in failure of the project. Students are expected to attend during “Play sessions” as well, when the lab will be open for you to work, collaborate, demo, and discuss your work with each other in a more open format. After two unexcused absences, each additional unexcused absence will result in a 10% drop from your final grade in the class.

Peripheral Devices

I prefer to keep the classroom, lab and lecture hall free from distractions, so please do not use your cellphones, instant messaging services, PDAs, or laptops in the class unless you are working with software used in our class. You should keep a journal, log or sketchbook for class notes.

Grading

I will grade and comment on all of your work during the quarter, twice early enough in the quarter that you may have a realistic sense of your progress before the final assignment is due.

A = generally, this grade is reserved for those works that surpass expectations. The grade recognizes:

- > sophisticated critical writing and production skills
- > a strong desire to experiment with different concepts and techniques with excellent results
- > outstanding use of source materials, research analysis and synthesis of own content
- > written work contributes considerably to deep listening and understanding of the audio works and artists you emphasize
- > significant and substantial contributions to class discussions, projects and networked assignments

B = meets and in some areas exceeds expectations and criteria. The grade recognizes:

- > very solid critical writing and production skills

- > a willingness to experiment with different concepts and techniques, usually with very good outcomes
- > original use of source materials, research analysis, and synthesis of own content
- > written work contributes to deep listening and understanding of the audio works and artists you emphasize
- > substantial contributions to class discussions, projects and networked assignments

C = fulfills all requirements. The grade recognizes:

- > satisfactory critical writing and production skills
- > a tendency to stick to familiar concepts and techniques
- > a reliance on untreated source materials, lack of research analysis, and little synthesis of own content
- > written work states the obvious, and while it clarifies the production process, it neglects theoretical issues
- > rushed and unpolished contributions to class discussions, projects and networked assignments but keeps up with the schedule

D = fails to fulfill some requirements. The grade recognizes:

- > less than satisfactory critical writing and production skills
- > sticks to familiar concepts and techniques
- > a reliance on untreated source materials, lack of research analysis, and no synthesis of own content
- > written work is insubstantial and fails to clarify the audio works and artists you emphasize, and never addresses theoretical issues
- > rushed and unpolished contributions to class discussions, projects and networked assignments, and some inability to keep up with the schedule

F = fails all requirements. The grade recognizes:

- > an inability to master anything more than basic critical writing and production skills
- > an unwillingness to experiment with new concepts and techniques
- > an over reliance on source materials
- > little or no written work is completed and poorly developed emphasis on audio works and artists
- > lack of contributions to class discussions, unfinished projects and networked assignments, and failure to keep up with schedule

Plagiarism

I expect all assignments to represent the outcomes of your own critical thinking and production efforts. A student found to have plagiarized another's work – that is, represented someone else's critical thinking and production efforts as your own – will receive an F for the course, and I will report the matter to the Dean's office.

TECHNOLOGY POLICIES

While you are not required to purchase the software that you may use for this class, not having the software is no excuse for failing to complete your projects. It is your responsibility to work out times when you can use the DMS lab or to make other arrangements for doing your work. Please do not download and/or install trial versions of software onto campus computers.

All of the computers in Sturm Hall 434 and the 211 lab have SoundForge, Acid, Vegas, Native Instruments Komplete, Audiomulch, and Ableton Live. All stations have the UC-33 Controller. The MIDI lab includes an additional MIDI keyboard, two computers with course software, desktop monitors, and a multi-channel mixing deck. Please schedule time for this space.

Lab Rules

It is your responsibility to adhere to all rules regarding the use of the DMS labs and equipment. You will be given a sheet stating all rules.

Back up your work

I recommend that you get an external hard-drive for backing up your projects. When working in the labs, you should always store projects in your own folder, which you should create within the general “Student Work” folder. If any of your work is lost or damaged and you do not have a backup copy, you will be held responsible.

Always use CAUTION when monitoring with headphones