Sound and Scandal: How Media Make Believe

Cinema and Media Studies, CMST 28008 | Media Arts and Design, MAAD 28008
Theater and Performance Studies, TAPS 28008

Advanced Undergraduate Course (no prerequisites), Spring 2021, University of Chicago

Lectures: Tuesdays / Thursdays 2:40-4:00pm, Cobb 311
Screenings: Mondays 10:30-1:20, Logan 201

Instructor: Amy Skjerseth
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Office Hours: TBD

Description:

Why has lip syncing caused so many scandals and successes across media, from Milli Vanilli to Beyoncé? This course examines how sound synchronization binds voices to notions of identity and authenticity. Primarily focusing on popular media, we will diagnose how vocal appropriation and synthesis have been used from The Jazz Singer to today’s frighteningly authentic deepfakes and vocaloids. We may think we know lip sync and voice synthesis when we see and hear them, but close looking and listening reveal deeper issues of technological construction and vocal stereotypes. For example, Singin’ in the Rain dramatizes film's transition to sound as technicians struggled to match the "right" voice to the “right” body: a beautiful woman with an ugly voice lip syncs to the lovely voice of a woman who Hollywood deems unsuitable to appear onscreen.

From drag to dubbing, this course investigates how sound synchronization creates alternate identities and realities. We will consider lip syncing as a platform for new acts of authorship and citation in music videos, TV, animation, and more. Looking back to Hollywood and Bollywood and forward to TikTok and The Masked Singer, we will explore how lip sync’s eye-to-sound connections cue up states of credibility and belief. Questions of talent, star power, and credibility also confront performances of gender and sexuality, from RuPaul’s "lip sync for your life" to playback singers in Indian cinema: for example, Lata Mangeshkar supplied Bollywood stars’ voices for five decades, so that numerous women "sang" with the industry’s ideal female vocal sound. No matter the motive, vocal manipulation can never be taken at face value, especially in an age when contortions between sounds and their sources can be passed off as truth.

Learning Objectives

By the end of our course, students will be able to:
• Chart debates of representation and identity in media and sound studies across decades and contexts—in particular, the ideological and technological control of voices in song and speech—via close readings of course media/readings, in-class discussions, and writing workshops

• Deploy close reading skills in show-and-tell presentations and blog posts to articulate social, historical, and political connections across devices, techniques, and industries that shape audio-visual perception

• Communicate with both mass cultural and academic audiences using structures and word choices that engage deeply with your object and make arguments clear and valuable for specific readers who wish to learn more about topics of aesthetics, technology, and culture

Expectations and Course Focus: Lip Sync as Show and Tell

No prior knowledge of sound or media studies is required to take or succeed in this course. Together, we will closely read, watch, and listen to course material to learn key terms, understand technological operations, and compare and contrast social and historical contexts and effects. We will keep an evolving list of course “main ideas” and return to it each week to add new topics or to refine others. By the end of the term, you will have 3-5 focused main questions or problems to take out of the class to consider in your research and discussions.

Through blogged response papers, one show-and-tell presentation, and a final project, you will compare how media objects across time, space, and platforms use lip sync and dubbing to manipulate realities. This course is designed to equip you with sets of terms and communicative and analytical tools to express engagements with media through interdisciplinary perspectives. Each Tuesday, I will model such show-and-tell skills by pairing the week’s screening with one of our “in-class viewing” objects.

Required Readings and Screenings

*Please Note: The media currently listed may not be available if the class is remote. They are subject to change.*

All readings are available on Canvas. Be prepared to discuss each reading on the assigned date (Tues/Thurs).

Attendance at all classes and Monday screenings (of films, music videos, etc.) is mandatory.

Weekly Schedule

Monday
Screening and introduction to the week’s theme

Tuesday (Class 1)
Discussion of screening and readings: to spark conversation, I compare the screening to a “view-in-class” media object in a show-and-tell style to model the work expected in presentations and the final project
Tuesday, Dinner Hour
Micro reflection to be uploaded to Canvas by “dinner hour”—between 5-8pm

Thursday (Class 2)
Presentations and Writing Workshop: 2-3 students present show-and-tell objects (10 minutes each); 2-3 students present micro reflections (~5 minutes each) for class discussion of writing mechanics

Assignments and Grading [Grade Distribution Shown in Parentheses]

Micro Reflections (30%)
Each week, every student will post a micro reflection (~300 words) on Canvas by dinnertime Tuesday evening. From one of the week’s readings, pick a theme that for you particularly illuminates how lip sync and dubbing manipulate realities—this could be “control,” “identity,” “authenticity,” “belief,” etc. Define this theme for your readers with quotations from the text and explain how one audio-visual artifact from Monday’s screening exemplifies the writer’s ideas about this theme. Your object may support or contest the author’s claim. The end goal is to closely read a device or technique of lip sync and situate it in its social, historical, economic, and/or political contexts. As you write this reflection, strive for a conversational tone that resembles a blog post but also rigorously applies and expands upon the author’s theory or insight. We will go over examples of how to achieve this during our first week of class. Starting in Week 2, each Thursday I will ask 2-3 students to read their reflections. Together, we will discuss your ideas and the efficacy of the writing mechanics that you use to convey them, so that everyone receives feedback on critical thinking and expression.

Show-and-Tell Presentation (10%)
On our first day, you will sign up for a week with a topic that interests you (out of weeks 2-9) to present a media object that is not listed on our syllabus. Your object may be a contemporary reflection on a week’s theme, such as a game or ASMR video. Each presentation will be timed at 10 minutes and follow this format: first, play a clip of your object for the class. Then, use key terms or ideas from one of the week’s readings to describe how this object uses lip sync in technological, historical, and/or social domains. Then, pose a thorny question that puts media and socio-historical critique in dialogue to launch discussion of the week’s theme. As 2-3 classmates will present each Thursday, share your plans with co-presenters in advance to avoid choosing the same object and to decide the order in which you will present.

Project Snapshot (15%)
In Week 4, you will turn in a project snapshot (~400 words, plus 5 sources cited in Chicago style) that describes what you intend to research for your final paper, podcast, or video essay. Please schedule a meeting or visit my office hours at least once before Week 4 to discuss your topic and research progress. I understand that your project direction may change, but this will give us a chance to start a dialogue about your research. During this meeting, I will also ensure that you know how to achieve expectations of academic formatting and citations.

Final Project (25%)
In Week 11, you will submit either a written paper (7-8 pages in length, double-spaced and fully footnoted with a bibliography formatted in Chicago style), podcast (10-12 minutes long), or video essay (10-12
minutes). In either format, you will choose two related media objects (i.e. two TV episodes or music games) and compare how they use lip sync or dubbing to manipulate realities, abilities, or identities. Analyze the objects’ formal elements (i.e. selection of images; particular vocal sounds) and specific techniques (e.g. mimicking lip sync techniques from a particular time or place). Compare and contrast how each object makes impressions on audiences, whether social, sexual, geographic, political, and so forth.

Discussion (10%)
I value your careful preparation of readings and participation. Please listen and respond respectfully to your peers — always follow the Golden Rule! I will reduce participation grades if students talk while others are talking, use their phones, browse the internet, behave rudely towards classmates, and so forth.

Attendance (10%)
Repeatedly arriving late will result in a reduction of your overall course grade. Late assignments will also earn a reduced grade (half of a letter grade for the first two days, and then a full letter grade per day following). If you must miss class due to illness, professional travel, or religious holidays, please let me know as soon as possible in advance of your absence.

Course Policies and Etiquette

Communication
Please see the course website for my office hours and use them as your first line of contact with me. You may email me to arrange an alternate time if you have a conflict. Note that I will only check email Monday through Friday; please allow 48 hours for a reply. If your email requires a long reply, I may ask you to see me.

Technology Use
Mobile phones must be set to silent and put away during class. If remote, we will discuss other guidelines.

Paper Delivery Guidelines and Grading Rubrics
Papers must be uploaded to Canvas as Word documents (.doc or .docx), double-spaced with one-inch margins. Be attentive to spelling, grammar, and conventions of academic writing. Should you have questions about formatting or writing mechanics, please make an appointment with me or consult with the Writing Center.
I will provide grading rubrics for the show-and-tell presentation and writing assignments on our first day of class so that you know in advance how each assignment will be assessed.

Accommodations and Inclusivity
I am committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in our class. Any student who has documented a need for accommodation must work with Student Disability Services to request and establish an accommodation. Ideally before the term begins, please consult with SDS (http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/) at 5501 S. Ellis Ave, (773) 702-6000, or disabilities@uchicago.edu. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations.
Communication about accommodations and accessibility is key. If you are concerned about verbal discussion, please contact me to discuss alternate ways to participate. Please let me know at least a day ahead of class if you would like to receive large-format printouts or use screen-sharing instead of viewing a projector.

We must collaborate to create a safe learning environment for all. I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, ethnic or national origin, religion, political beliefs, age, sex, sexual orientation, personal difference, or the use of assistive technology. If at any time you have a concern, please bring it forward to me immediately in private so that we can work together to resolve it.

To mutually construct our classroom as an inclusive space, we must respect each other’s backgrounds and endeavor to encounter new experiences—whether they come from our peers or from our texts—with open minds. Even if you do not agree with a position taken by a text, I expect everyone to be able to demonstrate understanding of the author’s argument and context. I hold you accountable to closely read course material and to respectfully raise points of comprehension, contention, and connection in class discussions, presentations, and writing assignments.

If something in the course offends you and you feel that you need to discuss it in class, please reflect on the multiple ways that the issue may affect your classmates—apart from your own personal experience—and know that others may not feel the same way if you raise the issue in class. You may also discretely step out of class, but please send me a note to let me know why you left and if you would like to make an appointment to talk about the issue with me.

**Academic Integrity and Plagiarism**
The University of Chicago’s statement of policy on academic honesty and plagiarism can be found at: [http://collegecatalog.uchicago.edu/thecollege/academicintegrity/](http://collegecatalog.uchicago.edu/thecollege/academicintegrity/). I expect you to properly acknowledge and cite all sources; failing to do so will involve infractions under the University’s disciplinary system.

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**Course Schedule**

**WEEK 1 - Setting the Scene: Scandals and Syndromes**

*Note: No presentations on Thursday.*

**Before the first class:** Use your phone or device to create a 15-60 second video in the style of TikTok, where you lip sync to your favorite song. Post your video to Canvas by Sunday of the first week of class and watch your classmates’ videos before Tuesday in order to get to know each other’s interests.

**Monday Screening**
Milli Vanilli (1989), Ashlee Simpson (SNL 2004), Beyoncé (Obama 2013 Inauguration); syllabus review

**Tuesday: How to closely read lip sync through famous scandals**
Introduction to film and media sound analysis: terms, practices, and effects on audiences. What hierarchies of sound and vision do spectators perceive? Why is sound particularly effective in conveying “reality” on- and off-screen?

- **Justin Adams Burton, “You Got Me Feelin’ Emotions: Singing Like Mariah” in Sounding Out!**

**Thursday: Spectatorship theories as tools to analyze audio-visual mash-ups and parodies**
How do sounds make bodily impressions? Instructor show-and-tell presentation on political ventriloquism

- **View in class:** Parodies such as JibJab’s “This Land” (2004); Obama mash-ups; Sarah Cooper on TikTok


**WEEK 2 – Cinema’s Growing Pains in Sound Synchronization**

**Monday Screening**
*Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen & Gene Kelly, 1952, 1h.43’)

**Tuesday: Controlling the female voice in Singin’ in the Rain**
How does lip sync subject women’s voices to male and technological control? What happens when technology and stereotypes disrupt actors’ performances and construct ideal bodies and voices?


**Thursday: Presentations and Writing Workshop**

**WEEK 3 - Bollywood: Invisible Labor of Playback (“Ghost”) Singers**

**Monday Screening**
*Abhimaan* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1973, 2h.3’)

**Tuesday: The Bollywood industry and ghost/playback singers as unsung heroes**
Why did playback singers go uncredited, especially when their songs guaranteed the success of the Bollywood industry? Could viewers suspend disbelief when hundreds of women “sang” in Lata’s voice?

- **View in class**: clips from films with Lata Mangeshkar; Usha Uthup, *“Skyfall in a Sari”* 2013 video

Thursday: Presentations and Writing Workshop

**WEEK 4 - Dubbing Race**

**Monday Screening**

*Illusions* (Julie Dash, 1982, 34’); *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (Arthur Jafa, 2017, 8’)

**Tuesday: Black voice, white face; appropriation.**

How do Dash and Jafa’s films use images and music to demonstrate the appropriation of Black culture?

- **View in class**: *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)* (Ja’Tovia Gary, 2017, 6’)

Thursday: Presentations and Writing Workshop + **Project Snapshot Due (~400 words; 5 cited sources)**

**WEEK 5 – MTV and Long-Form Music Videos: Audio-Visual Citation**

**Monday Screening**

*Dirty Computer* (Janelle Monáe, 2018, 49’); “Thriller” by Michael Jackson (1983); music videos by Madonna and Missy Elliott

**Tuesday: Race and sexuality in MTV; the visual album**

Music videos use send-ups both visual (clothes, dance) and aural (samples). How do their citations circulate? How has the long-form music video developed since *Thriller*?

- **View in class**: Student-suggested videos of favorite lip-syncing


Thursday: Presentations and Writing Workshop

WEEK 6 – Foley Sound in Animation and Video Games

Monday Screening
Anomalisa (Charlie Kaufman, 2015, 1h.30’)

Tuesday: Sound technologies behind believable images: Foley and the archive of “realistic” sounds for animation
Can a dub be perceived as more real than reality? Why does the sound of breaking celery best depict a snapping bone? Why was James Earle Jones chosen to provide the voice of Darth Vader in Star Wars?
• View in class: Foley video demonstrations; “Everyone's Upstairs Neighbor” (YouTube, 2015); James Earle Jones as the voice of Darth Vader; [student-suggested video game examples]

• Read for class: Robin Beauchamp, chapter 6, “Foley,” in Designing Sound for Animation (Waltham, MA: Focal Press, 2013), 89-99
• Benjamin Wright, “Footsteps with Character: The Art and Craft of Foley,” Screen 55, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 204-220

• Vanessa Theme Ament, The Foley Grail: The Art of Performing Sound for Film, Games, and Animation (New York: Focal Press Taylor & Francis Group, 2014)

Thursday: Presentations and Writing Workshop

WEEK 7 - Vocal Drag: Voice as a Form of Emotional and Tactile Address

Monday Screening
Selections from RuPaul’s Drag Race (Logo TV, 2009-) and Nightgowns (Sasha Velour, Brooklyn revue, 2015-)

Tuesday: Drag and the embodied voice
How do lip-synced performances allow performers to don new identities? Drag provides a stage for vocal dress-up that circulates pop cultural artifacts from — and back into — everyday life. Which vocal and acting techniques cause drag performances to feel uncannily intimate? How can both vision and sound approximate the sensation of touch, so that performers seem to erotically address individuals?

• Read for class: Laura Marks, “Introduction,” in Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), ix-xvii

Thursday: Presentations and Writing Workshop

WEEK 8: Reality- and Gender-Bending Talent Shows and Videos

• If we were in-person, this week would be an interactive video game play session at Weston Game Lab, where we’d play early Bemani games (i.e. GuitarFreaks, DrumMania, DDR), Guitar Hero, and Rock Band. Since these games have complex controller systems and I do not own them, I am not yet sure if we can study these or similar games if the course is online. I’m working with Weston Game Lab staff to see what alternatives are possible. A week on reality TV lip sync competitions will stand in—and I hope you’ll bring games into our discussions.

Monday Screening

Tuesday: Reality TV and vocal unreality; taming “unruly” gendered voices
Why has lip syncing inspired a host of talent shows? What send-ups to older lip-sync techniques (i.e. Bollywood) do we witness? How have these techniques endured the test of time and cultural circulation?

• View in class: La France a un incroyable talent: Rachel Aspe singing Sybreed’s “Emma-0,” November 2012

• Read for class: Emily Nussbaum, “Celebrity Delirium on ‘The Masked Singer’ and ‘The Other Two,’” The New Yorker (February 4, 2019),

Thursday: Presentations and Writing Workshop
WEEK 9 – The Future of Lip Syncing

Monday Screening
Clips of Hatsune Miku (Japanese vocaloid); Obama deepfakes; “Old Town Road” (Lil Nas X, 2018) and TikTok Duets; “Faceshopping” (SOPHIE, 2018, 4’)

Tuesday: Technology Suspends Disbelief: Vocal Synthesis, Post-Truth Media, and Lip-Sync Art
When a fake voice is synced to a fake character in the case of Hatsune Miku, can we still call it a voice? Vocal synthesis and holograms in vocaloids; the genre and racial boundary-crossings of TikTok users. Dangers of user-generated lip syncs and political deepfakes: what happens when lip-sync technology is perfected to the point that we can’t tell the difference? Trans artists who use pitch-shifting to craft new vocal identities (videos of EDM artist and producer SOPHIE, and YouTube self-duet videos that fuse pre- and post-transition voices)


Thursday: Reading Day

*THURSDAY OF WEEK 11: TURN IN FINAL PROJECT
I’ll survey the class to ask whether members want to present projects synchronously or post them online for each other to view and comment on asynchronously.
Micro Reflections Assignment Prompt

Every Tuesday by dinnertime, you will post a micro reflection (~300 words) on Canvas. Your task is to:

1. Tackle one topic from the week’s readings with a brief audio-visual artifact from Monday’s media.
2. Choose one paragraph from the text that outlines a theme that you think especially illuminates how lip sync and dubbing manipulate realities—whether “identity,” “authenticity,” “belief,” etc.
3. Ask yourself: how does your chosen audio-visual artifact illustrate this thorny topic?
4. Your object may support or contest your author’s claim; to supply evidence, closely read concrete details of a device/technique of lip sync and situate it in its social, historical, economic, and/or political contexts.
5. Strike a conversational tone like blog post that also rigorously applies and expands upon the author’s theory or insight. Pay attention to grammar and academic writing conventions. If you have questions about writing, please ask me or make an appointment with the Writing Center.
6. Post to Canvas by dinnertime Tuesday (between 5-8pm) so that everyone can read each other’s work before Thursday’s class, when 2-3 students will read their reflections aloud. I will let everyone know on Wednesday by noon whose responses I have chosen that week.
7. On Thursday, come to class with a list of comments and questions about the construction and content of the week’s chosen papers. I have enclosed a rubric below that will guide us as we discuss the efficacy of peers’ writing mechanics in expressing ideas. Responses will receive feedback from me in the form of a circled rubric and brief comments.

Writing Workshop Etiquette:

1. Everyone reads all peers’ micro reflections and is ready to discuss the week’s chosen papers.
2. Follow the Golden Rule; respectfully raise points of confusion and ask questions (whether basic or advanced) in good faith. Personal attacks and intimidation are not permitted.
3. Encounter new experiences—whether they come from the unique situated knowledges of our peers or of our texts—with open minds. Even if you do not agree with a position taken by an author, I expect you to demonstrate understanding of argument and context and offer suggestions of style and clarity.

Follow these guidelines for each week’s reflection (some questions may not be appropriate every week):

- Examine your artifact and read your chosen passage that defines your core concept several times.
- Ask yourself what conventions, assumptions, and values your artifact demonstrates or disrupts:
  - What is its source and author? When/What is its historical context? What medium is it?
  - What are its formal features? How do its shot compositions (point of view, lighting, camera and actor movement, shot duration, sound – dialogue, music, etc.) and transitions create continuities and/or contrasts, and what narrative and interpretive implications are made?
- What position does the author take, and what are the social, historical, and industrial contexts and consequences of the argument?
  - What claims does your author make that are related to your artifact, and how do they support them? What language is used: does it remind you of anything? What patterns does it disrupt, or what might it reinforce? What other artifacts might it relate to?
Keys to Success for Micro Reflections

Thesis: There is a main point/central argument to your analysis. You should give a detailed response to the following question: how does your artifact illustrate the key issue raised by your chosen author?

Clarity: Avoid generalizations and long introductions (every word counts with the 300-word limit!).

Close Reading: Describe/contextualize the specifics of your artifact and reading. Being specific about an artifact means selecting and unpacking aspects of it that are key to the point you’re trying to make. Being specific about a text means using direct quotes and describing how they relate to your chosen artifact.

Originality of Application: What new insights do you gain by analyzing your artifact next to your chosen text? What does the text help you to see about the artifact, and vice versa?

Proofreading: Once you’ve reached the word limit of 300 words, read it again to see if it all makes sense. Reading aloud can help you catch typos and ambiguous phrases. Also, imagine that a friend asks you to summarize your main point in one sentence. Be sure that you can underline where that main point is on your paper! Aim for clarity and conciseness throughout—remove any unnecessary detours from your argument and do not exceed the word limit.

Citations
**Always supply full and proper citations for each historical source you cite (see Chicago Manual of Style, https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html, or find the full guide with a searchable index by going to the Library homepage and searching for “Chicago Manual of Style”).
# Micro Reflections Rubric

I evaluate responses in 3 areas:

1. Closely engage with artifact and text and organize critical analysis around one topic
2. Apply course material thoughtfully and precisely to make an argument
3. Present ideas clearly

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<th>A - Excellent</th>
<th>B - Good</th>
<th>C – Unsatisfactory</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Depth of Critical Analysis</strong></td>
<td>Strong argument. Especially original, thorough, and insightful analysis. You may make an assertion that seems unlikely or puzzling, but you directly guide readers to unlock that puzzle through particulars.</td>
<td>Fulfills the assignment satisfactorily. Uses the procedure of close description that moves out to larger questions. Answers questions well to unpack one major issue.</td>
<td>Makes a few points, but not fully or not in a manner appropriate to the assignment. Ideas are unclear, undeveloped or underdeveloped.</td>
<td>Doesn’t address the assignment or otherwise fails to respond to the requirements of the analysis.</td>
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<td><strong>Use of Course Material</strong></td>
<td>Applies course material in an especially thoughtful or original manner; explores a fundamental issue with concrete details. Demonstrates genuine depth of engagement with chosen artifact and the author’s topic.</td>
<td>Good, solid application of a concept from the course. Clearly uses quote(s) from a reading that illuminate(s) your argument. The link between artifact and reading make sense and are clearly explained.</td>
<td>Uses course material but incorrectly or in a cursory fashion (e.g. citing course material without then using them). Little evidence of in-depth engagement with the artifact or reading.</td>
<td>Paper shows no engagement with course material, artifact, and/or demonstrates major errors in use of concepts from the course.</td>
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<td><strong>Writing Quality</strong></td>
<td>Exceptionally clear and creates value for your reader. Word choice, grammar, and structure make your claims precise and convincing.</td>
<td>On the whole readable, but some constructions were confusing or off-topic. Solid mechanics with accurate spelling and punctuation.</td>
<td>Several flaws related to clarity, logic, and organization. Contained grammar and spelling errors.</td>
<td>Not appropriate for college level writing; major problems with presentation, organization, and clarity.</td>
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**N.B. I will use the same rubric to evaluate your final projects.**