

BGM as Sensory Regulation:

The Affective Management of Work Environments in Japan

Prof. Plourde will give a talk on her current research. Participants will have a chance to discuss the paper. Please bring your lunch to the event. Anyone is welcome to attend.

12:00 - 1:30 pm : Friday Jan 29, 2016

Building. 10, 3F, Room 322 (ICC Meeting Room), Sophia University Yotsuya Campus

Muzak is what musique concrète composer Pierre Schaeffer referred to as “acousmatic sound”—sound we hear without seeing its source. Muzak’s presence in public space is particularly relevant in Japan, a country often critiqued or celebrated as a “sound saturated society” where background music is engineered to a spectacular degree. BGM, as Muzak is referred to in Japanese, is simultaneously unnoticed, reviled, ironically appreciated, and, more recently, used to heal, calm, and manage white-collar office workers. The repetition and ubiquity of BGM in contemporary Japan is an effect of the conditions of listening in everyday postindustrial life, what Anahid Kassabian refers to as “ubiquitous listening.” The recent adoption of BGM as part of sound design practices for offices is a response to the increasing sense of social and economic precarity in neoliberal Japan. BGM is seen as uniquely suited to manage and care for overly stressed office workers, at a time in which work-life balance, mental health issues, and the negative effects of overwork on office workers are increasingly on the rise. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with USEN employees in Tokyo, this talk explores the culture industry surrounding the use of BGM as a means to affectively manage office workers and their environments in post-bubble Japan.

Lorraine Plourde is an assistant professor of media, society, and the arts and anthropology at Purchase College, SUNY. She has published articles on listening and distraction in Tokyo’s experimental music scenes and Japan’s cat café phenomenon in relation to affective labor. Her current research project explores how auditory practices of the avant-garde articulate and respond to larger social and political concerns vis-à-vis the sensory experience of everyday life in Tokyo.

Lecture in English / No prior registration necessary