

The University of Hong Kong
Department of Psychology

Departmental Seminar

Opera, Cinema, and the ‘Cocktail-Party Effect’

Date: May 27, 2013 (Monday)
Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
Venue: Room 8.13, 8/F The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus,
HKU
Speaker: Dr. Giorgio Biancorosso
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In this paper I interpret lyrical singing in opera as an anti-naturalistic, hyperbolic and yet enormously persuasive means of representing inattentiveness to one's surroundings. I begin by reading the first act duet from Verdi's famous opera *La traviata*, as a musical representation of the "cocktail-party effect." I then discuss stagings and film versions of the same passage of the opera as well as its cinematic counterparts from such films as Cukor's *Camille*, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Fellini's *Eight and a Half*, and Lynch's *Lost Highway*. I use my analyses to restore a sense of the original impact of Verdi's treatment of the duet through its relationship to the ambient sound and music that both precede and follow it. Through the analyses I also wish to bring to light a facet of selective attention, which points to a tantalizing hypothesis about the 'cocktail-party effect' itself: might our ability to filter out sounds that exist in close proximity be the result of an imaginary reshaping of the space around us, such as one sees on the theatre stage?