

4.s14 Bad Translation: Experiments in Language and Typography

Instructor: Bo-Won Keum (she/her)

Time: Mondays 10am–1pm

Location: 1-136

Class blog: translation.bo-won.com

Course Description

In his essay, “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin writes: “it is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.” The same can be said of the designer who must give an idea visual form: form beholden to the syntactic constraints of whatever shape it must materialize in, whether as a series of marks etched into stone, a block of text living in the codex, or a pixel activated on a screen. How does the grammar behind tool and substrate set the rules for translation? When do these translations fail, and why—and what do those failures generate instead? How can translations, good and bad, productively challenge an idea’s core?

Part visual language study/seminar, part workshop, this class will examine translation as method and practice for visual experimentation. The course will start by examining typographic printing history, where students will gain knowledge of the various technological precedents for fixing forms of language. Students can also expect to experiment with calligraphic form, modular alphabets, notational conventions, musical transposition, and image-to-text as well as text-to-image translations. These experiments will be supplemented with guest visits from artists, writers, and/or technologists, as well as references of theoretical writings from Walter Benjamin, Albrecht Dürer, Louis Lüthi, Hito Steyerl, Byung-Chul Han, Édouard Glissant, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, among others.

Final Project

Final project proposal is to perform an act of translation, informed by a method (1:1, transpositions, transcriptions, reproductions, bootlegging, etc) that we’ve explored throughout the course. The original source can be a piece of public art on campus, a performance, or happening of your choosing, as long as it can be accessed and experienced in its original form by members of class. This should be seen as a kind of research project, set to investigate and understand your source material *through translation of form, format, media, or language*. Equally if not more important than the form(s) of the final output is how you make your decisions and why, and what you learn in the process.

This translation will be presented to the class on the penultimate session of the semester. This translation will also be explained in the form of a printed companion text booklet (zine), which we will compile and bind on the final session.

Learning Objectives

Students can expect to, by the end of the course:

- Gain a historical perspective of various printing techniques and methods
- Be familiar with some of the theoretical discourse around translation
- Have hands-on experience with various printing tools, technologies, and font-making software
- Have an understanding and perspective of translation as a form of creative practice
- Have an informed and uniquely developed method for translation across media
- Have basic understanding of how books are designed, printed, and produced

Expectations: Prerequisites

While there are no formal prerequisites to this course, this course is aimed at graduate students and upper-level undergraduates who have experience in textual analysis and seminar-style discussions, are comfortable taking initiatives to learn new tools and languages, and enjoy lateral thinking and/or making unexpected connections.

Expectations: Workload

The credit breakdown for this course is 3-0-9, meaning 3 hours of in-person class time and 9 hours of coursework to be completed outside of class. These 9 hours will be filled with a mix of readings, exercises, project concept iteration and production, and at certain weeks, lab and/or gallery site visits, which are marked in the class schedule below. Not all weeks will carry an equally balanced mix of work. (On weeks where there is no expectation for project work, for example, students may expect 9 hours of readings.)

Expectations: Output

Students contribute to the class blog for various translation tests and experiments. Students will also maintain a journal to hold notes for readings at the beginning of the course, and then to hold documentation of the process for their final project.

Expectations: Resources

For their final project, students can expect to have access to ppppress's risograph at Venus Print Labs and to Beaver Press (to be confirmed). ppppress' facilities also include bookbinding tools; please refer to the website for more information: sites.mit.edu/ppppress. Students are also encouraged to access any of the fabrication studios or makerspaces open to the MIT community, mapped here: <https://design.mit.edu/about/making>. If there is collective interest in one makerspace in particular (such as N52), we can arrange a group training.

Evaluation

Please note that this is a P/D/F class. For information on how the P/D/F is evaluated as part of your MIT coursework and degree requirements, please consult:

<https://registrar.mit.edu/classes-grades-evaluations/grades/grading-policies>.

Attendance and Academic Integrity

Full attendance and punctuality is mandatory. In the event of a medical or personal emergency, students will be required to alert the instructor ahead of time.

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity are outlined in this document:

<http://integrity.mit.edu/>.

Materials

1 laptop

- 1 smartphone with camera
 - 1 journal, which will be used for the final project
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Class Schedule

Week 1: 2/3

What is translation? And why translate?

Course scope, communication channels, and assignment introduced. Together, we define the motivations and stakes in translation.

Project for next class:

- Offer a translation of yourself, in whatever mode of “translation” is interesting to you right now and that you’d like to talk about, as a way of introducing yourself. Upload to the blog.

Week 2: 2/10

The Task of the Translator

Readings:

- Walter Benjamin, “[Task of the Translator](#)” trans. Harry Zohn (1923)
- Susan Sontag, “[The World as India](#)” from *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (FSG, 2002)
- Emily Wilson and Vincenzo Latronico, “[Counter-Heroics](#),” *The Serving Library Annual 2019/2019*.
- Joseph Grigley, “[Songs Without Words](#),” *The Serving Library Annual 2019/2019*.
- David Osbaldeston, “[Untitled \(Negotiation\)](#),” *The Serving Library Annual 2019/2019*.

We examine how the task of translation has been interpreted in theory and consider what that means in practice.

Project for next class:

- To produce 2 more translations of yourself, with the readings in mind. Upload to the blog.

Week 3: 2/18 (TUESDAY)

Typography and The Book

Location: MIT Distinctive Collections

Readings:

- Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message” from *Understanding Media* (1964)
- Beatrice Warde, “[The Crystal Goblet](#)” (1956).
- Edward Mendelson, “[The Human Face of Type](#),” *The New York Review of Books*, August 4, 2011.
- Louis Lüthi, Excerpts from [On the Self-Reflexive Page](#) (Roma, 2010).

We look at forms of affect in various historical and contemporary artist's books hosted in the MIT Distinctive Collections.

Project for next class:

- Bring a calligram.

Week 4: 2/24

The First Translation Machine: The Printing Press

Location: Classroom or Barker Library

Readings:

- Willem Frijhoff, "[The Printing Revolution](#)" from *The Triumph of Typography* (ArtEz Press, 2015)
- Stephan Füssel's History of Johannes Gutenberg, videos [1](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#)

Dr. Erica Zimmer of the MIT Beaver Press will conduct a letterpress workshop as we discuss the early history of the printed book. We will use our "self-portraits" as material to typeset.

Week 5: 3/3 + 3/6

Artifacts of Translation: Using the Risograph

Location: Venus Print Labs

Readings:

- Hito Steyerl, "[In Defense of the Poor Image](#)," *e-flux* journal 10, November 2009.
- Jurij Meden, "[Film as an Object in Time, or Film Fermentation, Part 1](#)" from *Scratches and Glitches* (Austrian Film Museum, 2021).
- VIDEO TBA

Optional readings:

- Rachel Ossip, "[Ghost World](#)," *n+1*, issue 32, Fall 2018.

We will visit Gearoid Dolan at Venus Print Labs and become acquainted with the risograph and its additive and subtractive qualities. We will use our "self-portrait" as material to riso-print; results and reflections on the workshop should be uploaded to the blog as a blog post.

Project for next class:

- Bring a bootleg.

Field trip on Thursday, 3/6 at 6pm:

We will, as a class, tour C. Spencer Yeh's installation in [Impossible Music](#) at Tufts University Galleries and catch [Yeh's performance with Non-Event](#) at 7pm.

Week 6: 3/10

"Bad" Copies and the Commons

Readings:

- Byung-Chul Han, Selections from *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* (2011).
- Alex Waterman, "[Res Facta](#)," *dot dot dot*, issue 12, October 1 2006.

We consider covers, bootlegs, skeuomorphisms, and the "bad" copy in art, literature, and music.

Week 7: 3/17

Hybrids, Creolizations, New Languages

Readings:

- Édouard Glissant trans. Betsy Wing, "Translator's Introduction" and "For Opacity" from [Poetics of Relation](#) (University of Michigan Press, 1997)
- Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, [Dictée](#) (University of California Press, 1982) (*please skim, but skim closely*)
- CFGNY, Interview with Olivia Kahn-Sperling in *Interview Magazine*, "[CFGNY Stages a 'Vaguely Asian' Fashion Show at Japan Society](#)"
- Axxenne & Camille Circlude of Bye Bye Binary, "[Hidden in Plain Sight](#)", for Gender*Language.
- Rahel Aima, "[Definition Not Found](#)," *Real Life Mag*, September 16, 2016.

Optional readings:

- Manthia Diawara, [Edouard Glissant: One World in Relation](#) (2009)
- Don Mee Choi, [Translation is a Mode=Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode](#) (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020)

We will discuss forms of multiplicity, opacity, and existing *in* translation. We will also be visited virtually by members of Bye Bye Binary, a type collective that builds inclusive, non-binary and post-binary fonts under construction.

SPRING BREAK

Week 9: 3/31

Text-to-Image and Image-to-Text: AI's Poetry

Readings:

- Rachel Ossip, "[Eat Poop You Cat](#)," *n+1*, Issue 48, Fall 2024.
- Danielle Dutton, *A Picture Held Us Captive* (Image Text Ithaca, 2022).

We will be visited by Rachel Ossip, Deputy Editor of Triple Canopy and author of the *n+1* essay, "Eat Poop You Cat". Rachel will lead a discussion and workshop on AI text-to-image and image-to-text translation.

Homework:

- Prepare proposal presentations.

Week 10: 4/7

Proposals for final translations

This day will consist of presentations of proposals, potentially involving site-visits to the original sources.

Week 11: 4/14 + ?

Production and project check-ins.

Designing the booklet

Starting this week, I will be conducting weekly sessions for designing and building the companion text booklet. This will be held outside of regular class hours, times to be determined closer to the date.

Week 12: 4/28 + ?

Production and project check-ins.

Week 13: 5/5 + ?

Presentation of final translations

Location TBA with a guest critic, TBA.

Week 14: 5/12

Documentation Day

Location TBA, likely at Venus Print Labs. We will collate, bind and distribute our documentation booklets amongst each other. Each person will walk away with a copy.