

4.s14 Publication Studio: Copies and Bad Translations

Instructor: Bo-Won Keum (she/her) bkeum@mit.edu

Time: Mondays 10am–1pm

Location: 3-329

Class blog: badtranslation.bo-won.com

Course Description

This design studio and seminar is about the creative opportunities that emerge in copying, reproducing, and translating content—specifically in the slipped and botched, the illicit and bootlegged, and the overly literal and “bad” translations. Using theoretical frameworks in linguistic translation and media theory, we will examine the ways in which these “bad” translations can serve as both a prompt and a method for creative inquiry.

We will start first by examining the histories of typographic printing and the technological precedents for fixing forms of language. Students will work with and expand on various “translation” machines, such as the printing press, and consider the various ways through which we copy, reproduce, and translate texts and images. Students can expect to test these methods, build their own fonts, and learn how to bind their own books. These will be supplemented by readings, guest lectures, and site visits. By the end of the term, each student will have developed a project and accompanying printed and bound publication, grounded in a specific translation topic of their choosing.

Final Assignment

Your task is to perform an act of translation: a “copy” of a source work* that crosses over from one system into another. This translation can be as “good” or as “bad” as you like; what matters more is what *you intend this translation to do* and what stakes are involved in doing so. (A helpful question might be: what does your translation seek to understand, test, and interrogate—or even break?) This translation should teach you (and by extension, the class) something about the system it comes from or the system it enters.

This translation will be presented to the class on the penultimate session of the semester. You will also be required to submit a document (in the form of a booklet) that explains your translation. This will be submitted on the last day.

*Clarification on source work: This could be a piece of writing, a conversation, an event, a performance, a work of art... What matters is that it is singular, contained, and shaped by a system that can be examined, deconstructed, and translated.

Learning Objectives

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

- Situate their work within historical and contemporary practices of copying, reproduction, and translation in print and media culture
- Engage key theoretical texts on translation, mediation, and reproduction, and apply those ideas to creative practice
- Use a range of “translation machines” (i.e. printing technologies, font-making tools, and bookbinding) as methods for generating form
- Develop and articulate their own approach to translation across media, using misalignment, distortion, or “bad” translation as a productive strategy
- Design, produce, and document a printed publication that demonstrates a sustained act of translation

Expectations: Prerequisites

While there are no formal prerequisites to this course, it is best suited for graduate students and upper-level undergraduates who enjoy text analysis, seminar-style discussions, and developing critical methodologies for making work. Students should have some familiarity with, or genuine curiosity about, process-driven work grounded in critical inquiry. They should be comfortable working independently, taking responsibility for iteration, and learning new tools or frameworks as needed. The course will be most rewarding for those who are self-directed and excited by 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. (Not all weeks will carry an equally balanced mix of work.) These 9 hours will be filled with a mix of readings, exercises, project concept iteration and production, and at certain weeks, lab and/or site visits, which are marked in the class schedule. Those days are tentatively listed for Wednesday but will be subject to change in consultation with the group.

Expectations: Output

In addition to the final assignment, students will be expected to contribute regularly to the class blog for various translation tests, experiments, and reflections on readings (which are essential; without them, the stakes and nuances of the final project will not be clear.)

Expectations: Resources

For their final project, students can expect to have access to N52 fabrication shop and copy room, [the Architecture Shops](#), and pppress's risograph at Venus Print Labs, which also includes some bookbinding equipment (please refer to the website for more information: sites.mit.edu/ppppress.) Students are also encouraged to access any other fabrication studios or makerspaces open to the MIT community, mapped here: <https://design.mit.edu/about/making>.

Please note that students will be responsible for purchasing and/or acquiring their own materials for the final project and its documentation. Students are encouraged to pool resources for paper and binding materials. There is also a \$25 lab fee for downloading Fontself, an Adobe Illustrator add-on that can create font files. (This purchase guarantees you a lifetime license to the product.)

Evaluation

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

Please be punctual, especially for classes that involve guests or site visits. In the event of absence due to a medical or personal emergency, please let me know ahead of time.

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity are outlined in this document:
<http://integrity.mit.edu/>.

Materials

1 laptop with Adobe CC installed
1 smartphone with camera

Schedule at a Glance

	Week	Class	Mid-week Lab	Description	
2/2	1	M		Opening lecture and seminar	
2/9	2	M		Seminar	
2/17	3	T		Wunsch Lab Workshop	
2/23	4	M		Beaver Press Workshop	
3/2	5	M		Venus Labs Riso Workshop	
3/9	6	M	W?	Seminar <i>Mini-assignment begins</i>	Font-drawing lab
3/16	7	M	W?	Guest visit (SHIRT) and seminar	Font-drawing lab
3/23	Spring Break				
3/30	8	M		Guest visit (Chris Lee) and seminar <i>Mini-assignment due</i>	
4/6	9	M	W?	Presentation of Proposals	Documentation workshop
4/13	10	M	W?	Progress/updates	Harvard Art Museum Publications Dept field trip
4/20	11	🇺🇸	office hours		
4/27	12	M	office hours	Progress/updates	
5/4	13	M	office hours	Presentation of Final Translation	
5/11	14	M		Presentation of Final Document	

Full Class Schedule

Week 1: Mon 2/2

Introduction & Overview: What is Translation?

Course scope, communication channels, and assignment introduced. We will establish key concepts and relationships, identify motivations, and define stakes. We will end class by reviewing some texts and previewing excerpts of the Week 2 readings, to be discussed next class.

For next class:

- With our framework of translation in mind, offer a method of “translating” yourself—a capture, a reproduction, etc—that you think would be an interesting contribution to the discussion. Upload the translation to the blog. Be prepared to talk about the method and why it interests you.
- Please prepare the readings, of which there are many.

Week 2: Mon 2/9

The Task of the Translator

Reading Discussion:

- Roman Jakobson, “[On Linguistic Aspects of Translation](#),” in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).
- Walter Benjamin, “[The Task of the Translator](#),” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) — *take special care to focus on the metaphors in the last few pages*
- Walter Benjamin, [Sections I–V from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”](#) in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969)

We review each other’s translations and go over the readings, discussing how the task of translation has been interpreted in theory and consider what that means in practice.

Prompt for next class:

- To offer one more translation of yourself with the readings in mind. Upload to the blog.

Week 3: Tue 2/17

The Codex, The Copy

Location: MIT Wunsch Conservation Laboratory at [Hayden Library](#), Basement Level (Building 14, 14-0513)*

Can be a bit hard to find, please factor into travel time

We will be hosted by the MIT Wunsch Conservation Laboratory, whose teaching facilities support the hands-on reconstruction of bookmaking practices. Resources include papermaking, bookbinding (sewing structures), and marbling.

For next class:

- Read Willem Frijhoff, “[The Printing Revolution](#)” from *The Triumph of Typography* (Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, 2015) and upload a few sentences of reflection on the class blog.
- Review Stephan Füssel’s History of Johannes Gutenberg, videos [1 2 3 4 5 6 7](#) (optional)
- Come prepared with the [line of type](#) that you will compose with your partner, which we will assemble together and print as a 11 x 15” poster.

Week 4: Mon 2/23

The Ditto Machine: The Printing Press

Location: Beaver Press at Barker Library, 8th Floor ([Building 10](#), 10-810)*

Can be a bit hard to find, please factor into travel time

Dr. Erica Zimmer of the MIT Beaver Press will conduct a letterpress workshop in conversation with the early history of the printed book.

For next class:

- Read Hito Steyerl, "[In Defense of the Poor Image](#)," *e-flux* journal 10, November 2009. Then, submit a visual response as a two-page PDF, sized 11 × 8.5 inches (landscape). Each PDF will be printed double-sided on the risograph and folded in half, becoming a four-page signature that will be interleaved with others. (This will produce different reading sequences in the final binding.)

Please upload your file to this Dropbox folder by Friday at 6PM.

Week 5: Mon 3/2

The Ditto Machine 2: The Risograph

Location: Venus Print Labs

We will hold a portion of class in seminar discussing Hito Steyerl's essay. We will then travel to Venus Print Labs, where Gearoid Dolan will instruct us on how to use the risograph. We will use your response to the readings as material to riso-print and [create a zine together](#), which will be done in your own time before next class.

(The Brooklyn-based riso printers TXTbooks has a super helpful guide for risograph printing, accessible [here](#).)

For next class:

- Print 12 copies of your four-page signature (1 double-sided sheet, folded in half), which we will bind at the beginning of next class.

Week 6A: Mon 3/9

Pure Language, Your Language, and Afterlives

Reading discussion:

- Alex Waterman, "[Res Facta](#)," *dot dot dot*, issue 12, October 1 2006.
- Rahel Aima, "[Definition Not Found](#)," *Real Life Mag*, September 16, 2016.
- Nat Pyper, "Introduction," in *A Queer Year of Love Letters* (Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2025)

We will begin class by collating and binding our group zine. The rest of the session will be devoted to discussing the readings, each of which adds a new dimension to our working definition of translation. We will end with an introduction to the mini-assignment.

Mini-assignment (DUE MON MARCH 30)

Your Font

'Digitize' yourself by turning your handwriting into a font. What you choose to digitize – in other words, what you consider to be "language" when translating your hand into the digital world – is up to you. This includes which alphabet you design, how marks correspond to keystrokes, and how your system behaves as a typeface.

Deliverables are:

- One digital font package (.OTF file)
- A printed and bound booklet showing the full alphabet

- A short written description explaining how your alphabet works, including process documentation
- Two printed copies + one digital PDF are due Monday 3/30.

For next [A] class:

- Please prepare the readings for Week 7.

***Week 6B: Wed(?) 3/11(?)**

Mini-assignment Lab

I will lead a tutorial on how to create a digital .OTF file using the help of Fontself (\$25). Please bring your handwriting progress to class. The second half of the session will cover the technical process of turning your file into a folded, two-up, saddle-stitched booklet.

Week 7A: Mon 3/16

Bootlegging as Creative Practice

Guest: SHIRT

Readings:

- Byung-Chul Han, "Zhen Ji: Original," "Xian zhan: Seals of Leisure," "Fuzhi: Copy," "Shanzhai: Fake," from [Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese](#) (2011).
- TBA
- Don Mee Choi, [Translation is a Mode=Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode](#) (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020) (optional)

We will spend the first half of class with SHIRT, an artist working across writing, rap music, performance, video, photography, painting, and sculpture. Using a bricolage of language, sound and object, he considers ways of unlearning as a means of creating a more expansive readership. His work was recently published in *Unlicensed*, a volume on bootlegging as creative practice.

The second half of class will be dedicated to readings and breaking down the concept of a bootleg.

For next [A] class:

- Please prepare the readings for Week 8.

***Week 7B: Wed(?) 3/18(?)**

Mini-assignment Tutorial and Lab

First draft review and feedback. The mini-assignment is due Mon 3/30.

SPRING BREAK

Week 8: Mon 3/30

New Forms for “Foreign”

Guest: Chris Lee

Readings:

- Kamau Brathwaite, [History Of The Voice](#) (London: New Beacon Books, 1984) — note that page 51 through 87 is bibliography
- Axxenne & Camille Circlude of Bye Bye Binary, “[Hidden in Plain Sight](#)”, in *Gender*Language*.
- TBA

We will spend the first half of class with Chris Lee, a graphic designer and educator. His research/studio practice explores graphic design's entanglement with capitalism and colonialism/ity through the banal genre of the document. He is currently developing a typographical project that narrates the oscillating status of Asians between the "model minority" and "yellow peril" as a function of the consolidation of Euro-American settler identity.

The second half of class will be dedicated to the readings and reviewing the mini-assignment.

For next class:

- Prepare proposal presentations. Please bring a robust set of reference texts, media, etc to explain the original source material to be translated **and** the translation mode that you will be undertaking. It must be clear *why* you are undertaking that mode—what you hope to learn and achieve, both about the source material and about the mode—and *how* you will spend the next four weeks generating that translation. Each person will have roughly **13 minutes, including feedback**, to present their idea in whatever format is appropriate.

Week 9A: Mon 4/6

Proposals for final translations

***Week 9B: Wed(?) 4/8(?)**

On Documentation

We will look at how to structure, organize, and design the publications you'll be making as you work through your translation project. This will involve setting up a workflow for collecting material.

Week 10A: Mon 4/13

Project progress check-ins

***Week 10B: Wed(?) 4/15(?)**

Visit to the Harvard Art Museum Publications Department

Week 11: NO CLASS + OH

NO CLASS ON 4/20, but I will hold office hours on **TK** for progress check-ins with the booklet.

Week 12: Mon 4/27 + OH

Project check-ins. I will hold office hours on [TK](#) for progress check-ins with the booklet. By this time, I should have seen drafts/sketches of every person's booklet.

Week 13: Mon 5/4 + OH

Presentation of Translations

For next class:

Finalize your translation document. Office hours will be held at [TK](#) in-person in my office, **5-418F**.

Week 14: 5/11

Presentation of Documents

Sharing and reading of your translation documents.