

RTF 331R (07305)/390N (07715)

An ACTLab New Media course

BLACKBOX

(a.k.a. TRANSMUTATION)

www.actlab.utexas.edu/blackboxInstructor: Sandy Stone (sandy@actlab.utexas.edu, phone: 302-9933 cell: 695-6732)

Office: The ACTLab. Office hours by appointment

Teaching Assistant: Joseph Lopez

Class meets in the ACTLab Mon 12:00-3:00

This class is about how and why **representation machines**, such as cameras, paintbrushes, recorders Photoshop, Final Cut -- **concepts**, such as freedom, knowledge, education -- and **sentiments** such as love, superstition, and belief -- become concretized or "**blackboxed**" into "tools", "skills", "nations", or "religions". To do this, we study parts of the uneasy and frequently incendiary relationship between humans and symbols, using the provisional definition of a symbol as anything that stands in for something else. We'll trace the development of symbol formation from the prelinguistic (human and animal) on through sociocultural language production with particular attention to the development of powerful technologies which are themselves symbols (the cross, AIDS) and others which mediate the exchange of powerful symbols (bodies, television, the Internet) and on to the ways in which market, social, and pedagogical pressures force representation machines into the form of physical or conceptual tools (blackboxing), and what is gained and lost when the black box is closed. We'll look at what's being blackboxed now, what will be blackboxed in the future, and open a few blackboxed things and examine their guts. From a theoretical perspective we'll use semiotics and psychology (and a touch of linguistics for flavor), but no prior knowledge of these is required.



Blackboxed autonomous rover built for an ACTLab *Weird Science* class. Batteries and motors provide muscle while a trained tarantula (peering out of conning tower at right) provides decision power for the system

As with all ACTLab New Media courses, the main thrust is **making**. There are no written exams.

Instead you will produce two mini-projects and one substantial final project during the semester. All our classwork has the goal of providing ideas and methods for those projects.

Class is in studio and discussion format. This means that your active participation is a requirement of the course. During the semester I expect you to contribute your own ideas and arguments to the discussions, and to be willing to take the risks such contributions imply.

You will use the theories and conceptual tools you acquire during the semester to **make stuff** about some aspect of blackboxing. You will do this in stages, starting with simple projects and moving to more complex ones, using humor, irony, uncommon approaches, and bizarre techniques. Projects may be in any form -- film, video, sound, performance, computer animation, collage, sculpture, assemblage, or any other media or combinations of media -- but they must incorporate the theoretical and methodological work of the semester.

Take risks! Amaze us! In ACTLab courses we assume a high level of motivation on your part and your willingness to self-start, set your own goals, think independently, collaborate with others, seek help when you need it, and take risks. Let's make it an interesting time!

Readings and Resources: All class readings are available on the Resource webpage, <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/blackbox/resources.html> . Some of the resources are there for you to browse as you feel the urge. Also, remember your best resource is always your own curiosity, and Google or Dogpile or AltaVista are your best tools. Experiment with keywords and see what happens. When you find something interesting, share it, either in person or via the blackbox mailing list blackbox@actlab.utexas.edu .

Mailing list: Outside of class time we keep in touch via the blackbox class mailing list. Use it to swap ideas, ask questions, get and give alerts of schedule changes, share weird urls, and whatever else you can think of. Most of you have already been subscribed to the list, but we didn't have email addresses for a few. Be sure to give us your email address the first day of class.

Things we supply: Among other things, we have digital video cameras for you to check out. These cameras are meant for the special purposes of ACTLab projects: they are small, light, quick to set up and shoot, and they plug right into the ACTLab computers so you can download and edit quickly and easily, but they are meant to capture raw video for extensive manipulation. They aren't for full-bore production video work and don't provide that kind of image quality. In addition to the video and sound equipment, the ACTLab New Media digital equipment (in cmb 4.110) is there for you to use, play with, and experiment with. A lot of it is state-of-the-art. Don't waste the opportunity to stretch your creative skills in the digital domain. We have computers, DJ turntables, quadraphonic sound system, and other stuff. We'll try to help you locate odd and exotic items you may think of during the semester that you'd like to use. We also have some gear that we've never used yet, and we invite you to play with it and see what you can make it do.

Things you'll need: Scissors, glue, construction paper or board (for class date TBA). Anything else you stumble on or think might be useful to make evocative objects about blackbox. Loose clothing that you can get dirty. If we do narrative or sound work in the dark, remember the floor is hard; so if you decide to listen while lying down on the floor, bring something soft to lie on.

What I expect you to do for a reading assignment:

1. Do the reading!
2. When you come to something that intrigues or excites you, make a note about it.
3. When you come to something that puzzles you, make a note about it.
4. When you come to something that drives you up the wall, make a note about it.

After the first class meeting: If you've been admitted but haven't received any mail from the class mailing list, sign up by surfing to the blackbox list maintenance page, <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/mailman/admindb/blackbox>

Here's what I expect from you during discussion::

1. Ask or talk about the parts of the text that you made notes about.
2. Participate. Talk. Ask. Argue. Laugh. (some of the readings are ludicrous.) None of this stuff is holy, none of the opinions are cast in concrete.
3. Bring in stuff -- maybe text, maybe just stuff -- that you feel relates to the reading. Throw it on the table, say why it's there, and see what happens.

4. My main job during discussion is to listen. My role is to make an opening or framing statement to start from. I'll guide when necessary, and clarify tough points. Discussion time gives me my best sense of how you're thinking about the theoretical part of our work together.

Participation is one of the keys to success in this class. You can't participate in discussion in a real way unless you've done the reading. Consequently Rule Number One is: Do The Reading!

Experienced Labbies say: One of the worst mistakes you can make is to leave the documentation for the last minute! Start thinking about your web site from the very first class day. Keep notes about your ideas for it, so you'll have a good supply as you build the page.

Films: We see films and excerpts from films in class, but only a few are scheduled here. We'll choose the rest in class, based on what we think would be useful or interesting or fun or all of the above.

Extra Credit items: There are two. One is the class web page; the other is the final presentation poster. You can volunteer to do these, on a first-come-first-served basis. If successfully completed, each one raises your final grade by one half a grade, i.e., a B+ to an A. If you volunteer and fail to complete what you said you'd do, it will lower your final grade by one half a grade.

The following six things are required for you to receive a grade:

1. Attendance at all classes.
2. Reading all assignments and coming to class prepared.
3. Participation in discussion.
4. Successful completion of two mini-projects and one final project.

Projects must be designed with this course as their primary purpose.
No project may be submitted to more than one university course
without express permission of the instructor.

5. Successful completion of documentation webpage.

Your webpage must be on the ACTLab server, nowhere else. All
links, rollovers, animations, streaming video/audio, etc., must work.

6. Full cleanup of the ACTLab following final presentations. Leave it the way you found it -- no better, no worse.

Grading:

Participation in discussion 15%

First mini-project 15%

Second mini-project 20%

Final project 25%

Documentation 25%

Total 100%

How to get an A: Shortly there will be a link from the Resources page called How to get an A. It spells out, as clearly as I could manage, what the ACTLab emphasis is, because what I expect of you may be different from what you're used to having professors want you to do. Re-read "How to get an A" as often as you need to.

Course Schedule:

Aug 30 Introductions, discussion of syllabus. How the project system works and what we expect from you for your first project (THIS IS AN IMPORTANT DISCUSSION -- because of Labor Day you have only one full class session before your first mini-project is due).

Sep 6 Labor day, no class.

First project equipment requests: If you need equipment, make sure you coordinate with Joe no later than Sep 10.

Sep 13 Mime, Marey, Muybridge: Film as mirror of nature. Roughly, there are (or were) two kinds of representation machines. One kind purposely adds its distortion (we call it interpretation) into the process. The other kind is meant to be a neutral conduit through which nature itself could make its hidden workings visible. In the late XXth Century the two types became confused, or maybe they always were... Blackboxing reality, tickling our fancy: Early cinema and the boundaries between documentation and dream. Discussion of first mini-project.

Sep 20 First mini-project presentations. Sign up for the order in which we present (Joe and I present too, if time allows).

Reading for Sep 27: Bruno Latour, Science In Action (in packet).

Sep 27 Blackboxing knowledge: Boyle. Pasteur. James Clifford, Hayden White, Donna Haraway. Bruno Latour and the Strong Programme.

Reading for Oct 4: Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (in packet).

Oct 4 Aura and Presence: Walter Benjamin. Phantasmatic space, charisma.

Oct 11 The Aura of Place. How do places create a certain discourse of use, i.e., computer labs, churches, bathrooms. Virtual environments.

Second project equipment requests: If you need equipment, make sure you coordinate with Joe no later than Oct 8.

Oct 18 Social practice solutions- look at social practices that haven't been implemented or thought of by the mainstream. (i.e. understanding social class and what it means to you.)

Oct 25 Second Mini-project presentations.

Nov 1 Representing the Unrepresentable: Mapping. Models of physics. The two-slit problem: In-class demonstrations.

Final Presentation equipment requests: If you need equipment for your final presentation, make sure you coordinate with Joe no later than Nov 5.

Nov 8 Reverse engineering God: Physics and philosophy. Genomics. Cyborgs.

Nov 15 Analog vs. digital. How analog devices operate, such as electrical, hydro and wind operated creations; how digital computers operate; hardware and software; Where analog and digital meet.

Nov 22 Studio time.

Nov 29 Studio time.

Sunday, Dec 5, noon: FINAL PRESENTATIONS. Wrap-up. Bring friends and family. Refreshments provided.

Dec 12: DROP DEAD DATE FOR DOCUMENTATION WEB PAGES.

Dec 14, 9:00 a.m: Drop-Dead Date for professors to submit grades. You know what that means.

The Fine Print:

This syllabus is V.1.0. May be updated as necessary.

Regarding Scholastic Dishonesty: The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process. Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor. By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them. Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student's learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. For more information on scholastic dishonesty, please visit the Student Judicial services Web site at <http://www.utexas.edu/depts/dos/sjs/>.

About services for students with disabilities: The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact the Office of the Dean of Students at 471-6259, 471-4641 TTY.

About the Undergraduate Writing Center: The Undergraduate Writing Center, located in the FAC 211, phone 471-6222, offers individualized assistance to students who want to improve their writing skills. There is no charge, and students may come in on a drop-in or appointment basis.

Warning: This class may contain explicit descriptions of, or may advocate simulations of, one or more of the following: Nudity, satanism, suicide, sodomy, incest, bestiality, sadomasochism, adultery, murder, morbid violence, paedophilia, bad grammar, deviate sexual conduct in a violent context, the use of illegal drugs or alcohol, or offensive behavior. But then again, it may not. Should your sensibilities be offended at any time, you are free to leave the classroom without penalty provided that you notify either the instructor or teaching assistant when you do so.

Fragile: Do not bend, fold, spindle or mutilate. May be hazardous to your health. Not recommended for children. Do not purchase if seal has been tampered with. Not responsible for direct, indirect, incidental or consequential damages resulting from any defect, error or failure to perform. May be too intense for some viewers. Batteries not included. For recreational use. An equal opportunity employer. Some settling of contents may occur during shipping. Use only as directed. No other warranty expressed or implied. No postage necessary if mailed in the United States. Substantial penalty for early withdrawal. Slightly higher in California. Keep away from fire or flame. Any rebroadcast, reproduction, or other use of this game without the express written consent of Major League Baseball is prohibited. Please keep your hands and arms inside the car while ride is in motion. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Contestants have been briefed before the show. Do not write below this line.