

RTF 331R unique # 07455, 07875  
An ACTLab New Media course



# DEATH

## REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

[www.actlab.utexas.edu/death](http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/death)

Instructor: Sandy Stone ([sandy@actlab.utexas.edu](mailto:sandy@actlab.utexas.edu), phone: home: 302-9933 cell: 695-6732)  
Office: The ACTLab, Little City, Spider House. Office hours by appointment  
Teaching Assistant: Joseph Lopez ([ludwigvan968@actlab.utexas.edu](mailto:ludwigvan968@actlab.utexas.edu)), phone: cell: 413-7832  
Guest lecturer: Brandon Wiley ([blanu@actlab.utexas.edu](mailto:blanu@actlab.utexas.edu))  
Class meets in the ACTLab Tue 2:00-5:00

IN HIS BRIEF DISCOURSE 'OF FALSE REVENANTS', PUBLISHED IN 1657, FRANCOIS RICHARD ARGUES THAT THE BODIES OF THE DEAD CAN AND DO 'WALK' AMONG THE LIVING. ACCORDING TO RICHARD'S INTERPRETATION OF THE EXISTENCE OF THESE REVENANTS, UNTIL THE HUMAN CORPSE LOSES ITS FLESHY MATERIALITY AND IS REDUCED TO BARE BONES BY THE PROCESSES OF DECOMPOSITION, THE BODY RETAINS A POTENTIAL FOR ACTIVITY AND THUS IS VULNERABLE TO REANIMATION BY A WITCH OR DEMON SEEKING A MEANS TO PLAGUE THE LIVING. IN FRAMING THIS ARGUMENT RICHARD DRAWS ON CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, NATURAL PHILOSOPHY AND FOLKLORE TALES OF THE WANDERING DEAD TO PROPOSE THAT THE EXISTENCE OF THESE REANIMATED CORPSES REPRESENTS PROOF OF THE SUPERNATURAL FORCES AT WORK IN THIS WORLD AND BEYOND THE GRAVE.

**Summary:** This is a course about change, transition, breakage, and rupture, in which death means not necessarily finality but rather process. We will examine the peculiar and powerful place of death and its accompanying corruption in Western culture, but a great deal of our focus will be on death in the broad sense as a transformative idea, source of spiritual and aesthetic power, topic of narrative fascination, means of control, and all-purpose (ethnic) cleanser. Further, we'll expand the definition to include the undead, the brain-dead, the nearly dead, the apparently dead, the walking dead, the extremely dead, and the (your term here) dead.

As with all ACTLab New Media courses, the main thrust of the course is **making**. There are no written exams. Instead you will produce two mini-projects and one substantial final project during the semester, based loosely on the theme of Death. All our classwork has the goal of providing ideas and methods for these projects. You will start with simple projects and move to more complex ones, using humor, irony, uncommon approaches, and bizarre techniques. Projects may be in any form, such as 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.

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.

### **The Secret Sauce: How the course works**

Using the term "points" metaphorically:

You get **no points** for repeating back to me anything I've said or that you've read in connection with the course.

You get **points** for expressing *your own* reasoned ideas about things I've said or that you've read in connection with the course.

You get **big points** for making stuff, with your own ideas, that relates in some way to things that came up during class discussions.

**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/death/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 Death mailing list [death@actlab.utexas.edu](mailto:death@actlab.utexas.edu) .

**Mailing list:** Outside of class time we keep in touch via the Death 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 not meant 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:** When we do the appropriate in-class exercises, bring anything you stumble on or think might be useful to make evocative objects about Death. 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.

**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 out-of-class prep.

**Experienced Labbies say:** One of the worst mistakes you can make is to leave the web 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.

**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.
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. 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%

**You are responsible for the following:**

**Attendance.** We take attendance at each class, initially by calling your name and later, when we're familiar with everyone, without announcing that we're doing so. Failure to attend a class without an excuse will lower your grade. Specifically note that **on project days you must stay for the entire class time.** A project day is a lecture day, and the guest lecturers are you and your classmates. Listen critically to what other people are saying and doing. Be respectful and attentive as you would be to a guest professor talking about his or her research. Besides being a courtesy to your classmates, your thoughts, critiques and suggestions on everyone's projects are part of your individual coursework and of the group process which is integral to the ACTLab philosophy. When it's your turn to present, *you* are the guest lecturer, and you are taking up your classmates' time. Make it a tight, interesting show.

**ACTLab server account.** You are required to have an account on the ACTLab server. This is a completely separate system from the UT webspace and requires you to set a separate password. We'll set your account up as part of the first class day activities.

**Back up your stuff.** Nothing left on a hard drive in the studio is safe. If you intend to do video, buy a USB drive and take all your work with you. We are not responsible for lost work. You have been warned.

## Course Schedule:

**Jan 17** Biz, intro to each other and the course, intro to the ACTLab course style, what we expect of you, what you can expect of us. Short presentation (gaah...PowerPoint!) of previous Labbies' work. For next week bring examples of *representations* of death and dying (we'll explain in more detail what we expect). A word about projects as pitching.

**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 Death list maintenance page, <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/mailman/admin/db/death>

**Jan 24** Loosening up. In-class exercises in presentational improv. Your basic tools and a drill in using them. More examples of previous Labbies' work. Discussion: Representations of death and dying, real and imaginary. Lab time: Developing a timeline. Working on the timeline in relation to your own project and its documentation. What's important to those folks out there in industry, and how (and why) to think about what they think when they see your work.

**In-class film:** Interview on the concept and production of *The Crow*.

**For next week** read excerpts from the Tibetan Book of the Dead (online at the Resources page).

**Jan 31** Discussion: Experiencing one's own death: comparative accounts. Tibetan Book of the Dead. Death clubs. In-class exercise: Representing self-annihilation in image, sound, and performance.

Discussion: What we expect from your first presentation.

**Equipment needs:** If you need special equipment such as video cameras, lights or mics to help prepare your first presentation on February 14, be sure to talk to Joe or me today and familiarize yourself with the Equipment Checkout online procedures.

**Feb 7** Discussion: The process of dying. Hospice discourse. Medical discourse. When are you dead? Flatlining, "gorking", the twilight zone. Discussion of your first mini-project: What to do and how to do it, sorta.

**Feb 14 First mini-project presentations.** Sign up for the order in which we present (Joe and I present too, if time allows).

**Feb 21** Discussion: Mass death. Representations of Total Holocaust, e.g., Terminator, Shoah. Genocide. Representations of the Bomb in American and Japanese media. In-class film clips.

**Feb 28** Discussion: Plague and plague narratives. Representations of bioterrorism. Goth. Neil Gaiman's approach to representing death. Vampirism imaginary and real. Role of sadomasochism in representations of annihilation.

**Mar 7** Field Trip: The Morgue. Meet outside the Travis County Morgue at 2:30 p.m.

**Second project equipment requests:** If you need special equipment such as video cameras, lights or mics to help prepare your second presentation on March 28, be sure to talk to Joe or me today and familiarize yourself with the Equipment Checkout online procedures.

**Mar 14: Spring Break: No Class.**

**Mar 21** Discussion: The Morgue. Organ donation and other uses for fresh corpses.

**Mar 28 Second Mini-project presentations.**

**Apr 4** Near-death and other quasi-spiritual death experiences. Representing liminality. It's time to get in shape for the long pull. When we did time budgeting, you most likely found that you can't finish your project using only class hours. For the last few days before due date, most Labbies work around the clock. Remember to take breaks and keep hydrated. Drink lots of water or fruit juice. Soda tastes great but doesn't do much for your electrolyte balance. And remember the floor is cement and there are only two couches, so it's a good idea to bring some kind of bedroll for that 3 a.m. nap.

**Final Presentation equipment requests:** If you need special equipment for your final presentation, make sure you coordinate with Joe or me no later than April 11.

**Apr 11** Communicating with the dead: Edison and the phonograph. Seance. Raudive voices and Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP). In-class sound clips for examples.

**Apr 18** Death and ritual, real and invented. Dia de los Muertos. Samhain. Halloween. Build-your-own ritual of the dead. Studio time.

**Apr 25** Studio time.

**May 2: FINAL PRESENTATIONS.** Wrap-up. Bring friends and family. Refreshments provided. Wrap-up, farewells. Have a great, great summer!

**May 18: DROP DEAD DATE FOR DOCUMENTATION WEB PAGES.**

**May 19, 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.