

an ACTLab New Media course - RTF331R unique# 08310 RTF390N unique# 08770

# The Uncanny

<http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/uncanny>

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Class meets in the ACTLab Wednesday 1:00-4:00pm

**Course description:** Suddenly, unaccountably, you feel the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Something creepy is happening, but you can't explain it. Ernst Jentsch and, later, Sigmund Freud defined uncanny as the feeling evoked by being in the presence of something simultaneously familiar and strange. For instance, animators working on characters for the film Final Fantasy were able to make them look astonishingly human -- but screen tests unexpectedly revealed that audiences were creeped out by nearly unnoticeable differences between the synthetic characters and actual humans. Researcher Masahiro Mori pointed out that as a robot is made more humanlike a human's emotional response to the robot will become increasingly empathic, until the robot's humanlikeness reaches a point beyond which the human's response suddenly switches to alarm and repulsion. But as the robot continues to become more humanlike, the human's emotional response becomes positive again and approaches human-to-human empathy levels. Mori called the space of repulsion between the two experiences of empathy the Uncanny Valley.

What makes something uncanny? How can an experience of the uncanny be evoked? In this course we'll treat the experience of the uncanny as a resource for creativity, a springboard for theory, and a challenge to cultural conceptions of "normal" in race, gender, and ethnicity. Participants in the course may be students with no particular experience in intermodal art/tech, but some are programmers, DJs, photographers, animators, artists, performers, musicians, activists, podcasters, and people with other interests. We'll supply readings, films, videos and other resources. You'll add your own resources to the mix; in fact, actively searching for and exploiting new resources is a course requirement.

We will explore the uncanny in human psychology, sociology, and storytelling, with attention to the inflection of the uncanny on the cultural Other and possible interpretations of the posthuman. Evoking Nineteenth Century fascination with spirit communication, and technology in science fiction/fictions of science, we'll study and practice making things that evoke that sense of something hovering just beyond comprehension. There are no written exams, but in return we ask for more than you might do for a standard final exam: you will use the theories and tools you acquire during the semester to **MAKE STUFF** about some aspect of the uncanny. What you make can be in any form: sound, installation, video, computer animation, collage, sculpture, assemblage, performance. You will do this in stages, starting with simple projects and moving to more complex ones, using humor, irony, and unusual approaches and techniques. We encourage your own interpretation and voice.

If there is enough interest, we'll schedule separate time for grad students to meet for advanced study of theoretical inflections of the uncanny. Class is in studio and discussion format. This means that your active participation is a course requirement. During the semester we expect you to contribute your own ideas and arguments to the discussions, and to be willing to take the risks such contributions imply. 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 semester!

**Readings and Resources:** Class readings will be available on the course webpage, <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/uncanny.shtml> . 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 Cuil or Clusty

are your best tools. Experiment with keywords and see what happens. When you find something interesting, share it, either in person or via the mailing list [uncanny@actlab.utexas.edu](mailto:uncanny@actlab.utexas.edu) .

**Other ACTLabbies are your greatest resource.** A number of people in this class have taken ACTLab New Media classes before, and understand the way we do things. (We call them repeat offenders.) They can be your best resource for how to approach and complete your projects and documentation (see the documentation requirement below).

## Critical information

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

### Grading:

Participation in discussion	25%
First project	5%
Second project	20%
Final project	25%
Documentation (Web site)	25%
Total	100%

### Documentation requirement:

You must provide complete documentation of your work in the form of a web site. A web site consists of a home page that says something about you, and additional pages for each project as necessary.

Documentation means a description of each project, how it was made, its relationship to the readings and discussions (i.e., its theoretical grounding), your thoughts about the project, etc., together with sound recordings, video, and/or still photos of the work in progress and the completed project.

You will make the web site in four stages. Each stage consists of documentation of one of the three projects, plus a fourth stage consisting of the homepage with your bio, external links, and whatever additional information you think is relevant. Stages one and two are due in class the week following project presentations one and two. Stages three and four are due no later than 5:00 p.m. December 15.

Your web site and all its content must be on the actlab server, nowhere else. No links to your own content on other servers are allowed, although you may provide "for further information" links to other web sites. Absolutely no links to UT Webspaces are allowed, because Webspaces are ephemeral and will break your actlab site later.

Each web page must have navigation controls. All sound files, videos, links, etc., must

work, and video and audio must stream. Videos should be in QuickTime format using Sorensen3 compression hinted for streaming.

We suggest you look at other actlab students' websites, such as <http://home.actlab.utexas.edu/~samanthap02> or <http://home.actlab.utexas.edu/~mckibben>, to see what they did.

## End of critical information

### Course Schedule

**August 27:** First class day

Purpose of course & place in curriculum (powerpoint chart), outline of the semester's work, journaling, schedule in-class reports on readings/films/guest lectures, tutorial schedule, explanation of grading, assigning accounts & passwords, readings.

**September 3:** In-class website building workshop (Joey & Sandy)

Criteria for webpages that will be due October 1

**Reading assignments for discussion on September 10:** Freud: The Uncanny. Your own suggestions for readings and viewings go here.

**September 10:** Overview of historical creepiness past and present

Discussion of overview and readings

Preparation for first project presentations

**September 17:** First Project Presentations, Day One

**September 24:** First Project Presentations, Day Two

**October 1:** Website Stage One due by 12:00 noon

Schedule office hours to critique webpages and first project

Webpage discussion

Guest lecturer: TBA

**October 8:** Films/videos: Selections from the work of the Brothers Quay

Discussion of what we've just seen

**October 15:** Guest lecture: David Lynch

Film: Clips from "Dead Of Night"

Discussion of film and readings

Workshop: Make something tactile

Prepare for second projects

**October 22:** Second Project Presentations, Day One

**October 29:** Second Project Presentations, Day Two

**November 5:** Website Stage Two due by 12:00 noon

Discussion of website materials

Guest lecture: Ritual, superstition, and awe

Discussion of lecture

**November 12:** Guest lecture: Ghost stories, narrative, and the production of dread

Discussion & workshop

**Reading assignments for discussion on November 19** to be decided in class

**November 19:** Guest lecture: Science, Technology, and Fear  
Discussion & workshop  
Studio session

**November 26:** Studio session; discussion; wrap up loose ends

**Sunday, December 14, 12:00 noon to 6:00 p.m.: Final Presentations**

**December 15, 5:00 PM: Completed Web Site due**

Have a wonderful holiday break!

## The Fine Print:

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

### COPYRIGHT AND FAIR USE

You may find the need to use copyrighted material this semester: music, photographs, movie clips, or any other expression. For many of your uses, you need to find the copyright holder and negotiate a license. You own the copyright to the work you produce in this class. As a copyright holder yourself, you understand the importance of copyright ownership. It is your responsibility to secure music and archival footage licenses as well as artwork, location and personal releases. You will find release templates on the RTF website. Add here if your class will have an end-of-semester screening: Your work will not screen at the end-of-semester screening if you fail to submit all licenses, releases and clearances.

For some uses, however, neither you nor anyone else needs to license copyrighted material. This is because copyright law exists to encourage and support creativity. Copyright law recognizes that creativity doesn't arise in a vacuum. As creators, we all stand on the shoulders of giants. New works of art (such as films, books, poems, paintings) all make use of what has gone before. Thus, copyright law not only protects authors with a copyright that lets them decide who can use their works, but also offers exemptions from the author's control. For filmmakers, the most important exemption is the doctrine of fair use. You can rely on fair use, where appropriate, in the film and video projects you undertake for this course. If you are making a documentary film, consult the influential Documentary Filmmakers Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use ([http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/fair\\_use\\_final.pdf](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/fair_use_final.pdf)), which was created by a group of national filmmaker organizations, has been endorsed by the University Film and Video Association, and is now relied on by film festivals, insurers, cablecasters, distributors and public broadcasters. Fair use also applies in the fiction film environment, but not necessarily to the same extent or in the same way. As always, the central question is whether the new use is "transformative" -- i.e., whether it adds significant value by modifying or recontextualizing the original. For more understanding, including information on when you can use works for free ([http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/free\\_use.pdf](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/free_use.pdf)) without even using fair use, why you (mostly) don't need to worry about trademarks ([http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/free\\_use.pdf](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/free_use.pdf)), what is in the public domain (<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/rock/backgrounddocs/copyrightterm.pdf>), how fair use lawsuits ([http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/videos/sets/fair\\_use\\_case\\_studies/](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/videos/sets/fair_use_case_studies/)) have been settled, and on how fair use has been employed successfully ([http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/videos/sets/fair\\_use\\_case\\_studies/](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/videos/sets/fair_use_case_studies/)) in documentary film, visit [centerforsocialmedia.org/fairuse](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/fairuse).

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: As part of the normal process of teaching and/or discussing media and narrative, 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.