Translating Knowledge Alphabets Across Media
Spring 2021
Thursdays 9:30am - 12:15pm EST
Location: online
Professors Emily Apter and Alexander R. Galloway
TAs Nicole Grimaldi (Comp Lit) and Nabil Hassein (MCC)
Cross-listed as COLIT-UA.801.001 and MCC-UE 1003

How does translation work today? What effect do machines have on the delicate art form of translation? Co-taught by Professors Emily Apter (French & Comp Lit) and Alexander R. Galloway (MCC), this undergraduate course will focus on the problem of translation in natural and digital languages. We aim to redefine translation theory today in the light of new developments in artificial intelligence (AI), machine translation, biotranslation, aesthetic practices and forms of knowledge production that are translation-based. We will investigate what a "knowledge alphabet" is today and how it is related (or not) to its particular medium, whether phoneme, script, algorithm, bitmap, pixel, or RNA molecule. With an eye to the sciences, we will gain understanding of the complexities of translation as interpretation, code, natural language, morphing intelligence and biotechnological reproduction. Drawing from the arts and humanities, we will gain experience in thinking about translation as a medium, as border checkpoint, and political cartography.

Course readings will include texts by Walter Benjamin, Lydia Liu, Catherine Malabou, Eyal Weizman, and others.

Curriculum for this course was developed in the "Knowledge Alphabets" working group, a Bennett-Polonsky Humanities Lab sponsored by the NYU Center for the Humanities.

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Schedule

January 28 -- Course Overview

February 4 -- An Introduction to Natural and Artificial Languages -- What is the unit of translatability? Natural and artificial languages, monads and symbols, translation studies in an expanded field, challenges posed by AI and machine learning.
- Reading: Irène Rosier-Catach, et al., "Language," *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 541-550.
- Reading: Clara Auvray-Assayas, et al., "To Translate," *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 1139-1155.

- Optional reference: Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, particularly part 1 on language (*langue*) and speech.

February 11 -- What Is the Task of the Translator?
- Reading: Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator."
- Reading: Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation."

- Optional reference: Anthony Pym, *Exploring Translation Theories*, excerpts on "equivalence"
- Optional reference: the "Prismatic Translation" project founded by Matthew Reynolds at Oxford University: https://www.creativeml.ox.ac.uk/research/prismatic-translation

February 18 -- No class (classes will meet according to a Monday schedule).

February 25 -- Speech, Language, Letter
- Reading: Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language*, chapters I-X and XXI ("Babel").

March 4 -- Cybernetics and Structuralism, Digital vs. Analog, Stochastic Processes
- Lydia Liu, "The Invention of Printed English," in *The Freudian Robot.*
- Guest Instructor: Claire Song

- Optional reference: Yuen Ren Chao, "Meaning in Language and How it is Acquired" (Macy conferences, 1953); Yuen Ren Chao's translation of Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky."
- Optional reference: Jacques Lacan, "Psychoanalysis and cybernetics, or on the nature of language," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*.
- Optional reference: Lydia H. Liu, "The Cybernetic Unconscious: Rethinking Lacan, Poe, and French Theory."

March 11 -- Punctuation, Point, Hole
- Reading: Peter Szendy, *Of Stigmatology. Punctuation as Experience* (skipping chapters 3, 4, 11, 12).

- Optional reference: Sowon Park, "Transnational Scriptworld" in Park, Sowon S. ed., *The Chinese Scriptworld and World Literature*, a special issue of *The Journal of World Literature* vol.1 no 2 (June 2016).

March 18 -- Neural Nets, Synapses, Brain Plasticity
- Reading: Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*

- Optional reference: "Neural Machine Translation Tutorial," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8g-PNT2W2Q.

March 25 -- Digital Units, Clusters, Algorithms, Data
- Luciano Floridi, "Against Digital Ontology."
- Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Queerying Homophily."
- Guest Instructor: Nabil Hassein

April 1 -- Emoji
- Lisa Gitelman, "*Emoji Dick* and the Eponymous Whale, An Essay in Four Parts."

- Artwork reference: Fred Benenson, *Emoji Dick*, http://www.emojidick.com/
- Optional reference: Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism*

April 8 -- Pixels, Bitmap, Optics, Visibility, Invisibility
- Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image."
- Eyal Weizman, "At the Threshold of Detectability," in *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, 13-33.
- Trevor Paglen "Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)," https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/.

- Optional reference: Hito Steyerl, "A Sea of Data: Pattern Recognition and Corporate Animism (Forked Version)" in Chun et al., *Pattern Discrimination*.
- Optional artwork: Rosa Menkman, *The Collapse of PAL* (2011).
- Optional artworks: Thomas Hirschhorn, "Self-pixel" (2016), http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/self-pixel/; "De-Pixelation" (2018), https://www.gladstonegallery.com/exhibition/283/de-pixelation/info; Sandra Vieira Jürgens, "Thomas Hirschhorn: Pixel-Collage," http://wrongwrong.net/article/thomas-hirschhorn-pixel-collage.

April 15 -- Memes, Logos, Icons, Slogans, Caricatures
- Reading: Emily Apter, "Alphabetic Memes: Caricature, Satire, and Political literacy in the Age of Trump."
- Reading: Aria Dean, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme," http://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/.
- Guest Instructor: Nicole Grimaldi

- Optional reference: Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*.

April 22 -- Line as Language
- Rosalind Krauss, "Line as Language."
- Renée Gladman and Fred Moten, *One Long Black Sentence*.
- Guest Instructor: Amanda Parmer

- Optional reference: Website for Pippy Houndsworth Gallery online exhibition Lines of Thought an exhibition exploring the poetics and politics of language, mark-making, and seriality. The exhibition includes works by artists of different generations – Kenturah Davis and Mary Kelly, as well as Agnes Martin whose practice has been an inspiration to

both. https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/lines-of-thought/
- Optional Reference: Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness."

April 29 -- The Simulation Paradigm and the Transvestism of Machinery
- Reading: Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason*, xv-xxvii, 3-11, 67-69.
- Reading: Severo Sarduy, *The Simulation*, included in *Written on a Body*, 93-115.
- Reading: Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy" in *The Logic of Sense*, 253-266.
- Guest Instructor: Iván Hofman

- Optional reading: John Seabrook, "The Next Word. Where Will Predictive Text Take Us?" https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/10/14/can-a-machine-learn-to-write-for-the-new-yorker
- Optional reading: Severo Sarduy, "Writing/Transvestism", in Ilan Stavans (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Latin American Essays*, 435-439.

May 6 -- Final session TBA
- Guest Professor: Nina Katchadourian

Monday, May 10, 5pm -- Final paper due

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Required Assignments
- Each student will pick one of the weekly themes (forming pairs or groups of three) and analyze the theme via the question "is there a limit to a unit of translatability?"
- A research paper will be due at the end of the term.

Grade Formula
- 30% class participation
- 30% first assignment
- 40% final paper / research dossier

Student Resources
- NYU Office of Equal Opportunity
  https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/equal-opportunity.html