

# Theatre and Emerging Technologies

## Winter 2021

DRM3907HS

Mondays, 4:00p-7:00p, EST

Synchronous Zoom : <https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/81541479641>

Session ID: 815 4147 9641

### Teaching Team

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## Course Description

This interdisciplinary graduate course explores the collision between the performing arts and recent developments in computational media. Students will be introduced to the activity of BMO Lab, a home for collaborative creative research across the arts and sciences, through workshops emphasizing practical engagement with in-progress tools and ideas, as well as seminar discussions of theoretical and historical writing that inform the Lab's work. Central themes of investigation will include machine learning, machine vision, artificial intelligence, motion capture, and theatrical control.

In the past, this course has been structured around the Lab as a physical space, and has taken up many technologies that rely on shared copresence. COVID-19 has necessarily shifted the nature of this course: presumably for the full term, students will participate in the course over Zoom. Though we will accordingly discuss Zoom in class, this is not a class in so-called Zoom theatre. Rather, we will work with and against Zoom to pursue performance experiments whose ultimate concern is the material stage, not the LCD screen. There are some technological-performative concepts that we will have to talk about and simulate, but cannot fully execute in a distanced course session; many readings are intended to open up those conversations. That said, this course remains a *studio* class, and creative participation from all will be central to our success.

BMO Lab and Canadian Stage are currently sponsoring a group of professional theatre artists to pursue experimental performance research and development. From their work this past fall, they are beginning to devise a theatre piece tentatively titled *The Father*, which will recur as a reference point throughout this class. These artists will be participating in the course; only students will produce writing for assessment.

## Writing

Each class will include time both for seminar-style conversation of assigned reading, and time for creative workshop development exploring a tool related to the reading. In addition to contributing fully to the workshop portions of the class, and completing all assigned reading, students will be asked to write a short reflection essay each week. These essays will consider the material read, discussed, and workshopped in the *prior* course session, and will be due 24 hours before the next session begins – so, **Sundays at 4p EST**. As the first and last two weeks are excepted, you will write **nine** essays.

Each essay should be **one single-spaced Word document page**, with no introductory matter (no title, no author/date, etc.) The page should be full, and must not exceed one page in length. A brief title, your last name, and date will be given **in the document title**. In these essays, you may respond to the readings, our conversation, or our workshop explorations, but ideally your response will touch on all three. We expect not a summary of the last week's discussion, but a focused intervention and/or extension of the ideas already pursued there.

Completed essays will be uploaded to the course's Google Drive. Your writing will be available to all course participants to read. Reading your colleagues' writing is not required.

## **Presentations**

After our first meeting, students will be put into two pairs to make two collaborative presentations about a reading of their choice. (You will partner with one student to present on one reading, and another student to present on another reading.) A sign-up sheet will be posted online to facilitate this.

Presentations are expected to include a substantial explication and elaboration on the argument of a given essay, with references to artworks and case studies not mentioned in the text itself, introductions to the author and the original context of the piece, and explanations of how its ideas relate to our course conversation so far. These should take up about 15-20 minutes each, and be rehearsed, considered expansions on material that you should expect each of us to have read. Students should also include a couple questions to kick off our conversation after their formal presentation.

## **Assessment**

Students will be assessed on the following rubric:

Presentation 1: 10%

Presentation 2: 10%

Nine Essays: 45%

Participation: 35% (breakdown):

    Creative Engagement in Workshop Activities: 15%

    Critical Participation in Course Dialogue: 10%

    Proactive Contributions to Course Life: 10%

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## **Schedule**

*All readings will be supplied through Google Drive, either as PDF's or through links.*

### **Jan 11 – Course Introduction**

#### **Readings:**

none

## Jan 18 – Zoom

**Workshops:** Real-time Zoom manipulation

**Readings:**

Shane Denson. “‘Thus isolation is a project.’ Notes toward a Phenomenology of Screen-Mediated Life.”

Guilherme da Silva Machado. “Zoom in on the Face: The Close up at Work.”

Both in *Pandemic Media*, ed. Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini. Goethe University Frankfurt, 2020.

## Jan 25 – What Can a Machine Learn?

**Workshop:** Performing a neural net

**Readings:**

James Bridle. “Cognition.” *New Dark Age*.

N. Katherine Hayles. “Nonconscious Cognitions: Humans and Others.” *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Unconscious*.

## Feb 1 – Computational Writing (I)

**Workshop:** GPT-2-produced plays

**Readings:**

Annie Dorsen. “On Algorithmic Theatre.” *Theater*, 42.2, 2012.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. “The Book of the Future: Alison Knowles’s *The House of Dust*.”

*Mainframe Experimentalism*, ed. Hannah B. Higgins & Douglas Kahn, UC Press, 2012.

Roger Caillois. “Letter to André Breton.” “Pythian Heritage (On the Nature of Poetic

Inspiration).” *The Edge of Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Claudine Frank. Duke UP, 2003.

## Feb 8 – Computational Writing (II)

**Workshop:** GPT-2 in performance

**Readings:**

August Strindberg. “The New Arts! The Role of Chance in Artistic Creation.” *Strindberg:*

*Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Michael Robinson. Cambridge UP, 1996 [1894].

John Cage. “Experimental Music.” *Silence*, ed. Kyle Gann. Wesleyan UP, 2011 [1957/61].

George Bataille. “The Attraction of Gambling.” *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall. SUNY Press, 2011 [1944].

[Reading week]

## Feb 22 – Interfacing (I)

**Workshop:** Spatial Cueing

**Readings:**

Walter Benjamin. “Theater and Radio: The Mutual Control of their Educational Program.”  
*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol 2, part 2*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Harvard  
UP, 1999 [1932].

Samuel Weber. “Theatrocracy; or, Surviving the Break.” *Theatricality as Medium*, Fordham UP,  
2004.

Nick Hunt. “Lighting on the hyperbolic plane: Towards a new approach to controlling light  
on the theatre stage.” *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 7.2,  
2011.

## Mar 1 – Interfacing (II)

**Workshop:** Zoom triggers

**Readings:**

Peggy Phelan. “The Ontology of Performance.” *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*.  
Routledge, 1993.

Ramon Amaro. “As if.” *e-flux*. February 14, 2019.

## Mar 8 – Motion Capture

**Workshop:** Motion-capture – suits and depth cameras

**Readings:**

Sally Jane Norman. “Oskar Schlemmer’s Programmatic Gesture Research.” *Digital Movement:  
Essays in Motion Technology and Performance*. Ed. Nicolás Salazar Sutil & Sita Popat.  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Danielle Goldman. “Ghostcatching: An Intersection of Technology, Labor, and Race.”  
*Dance Research Journal*, 35.2, 2004.

## Mar 15 – Robots/Actors

**Workshop:** Acting as robots

**Readings:**

Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan. “Orientalism and Informatics: Alterity from the Chess-  
Playing Turk to Amazon’s Mechanical Turk.” *Ex-position*, 43, 2020.

Oriza Hirata. “I, Worker.” Trans. Joanna Kriese. “Sayonara.” Trans. Bryerly Long and

Hiroko Matsuda. *Citizens of Tokyo*, ed. M. Cody Poulton. Seagull, 2019.

## Mar 22 – AI as Scene Partner

**Workshop:** Text generation as dialogue

### **Readings:**

Lawrence Switzky. “ELIZA Effects: *Pygmalion* and the Early Development of Artificial Intelligence,” *SHAW*, 40.1, 2020.

Matthew Seiji Burns. “When You Say One Thing but Mean Your Motherboard.” *Logic*, 11, 2020.

Matthew Seiji Burns. *ELIZA*. Videogame, playable on Windows & Macintosh laptops.

## Mar 29 – Conclusion (I)

## Apr 5 – Conclusion (II)

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### **Participation**

We expect every student to attend every session of the course. Issues of health, technological access, or familial crises can secure excused absences if communicated to the teaching team.

### **Office Hours Visits**

The teaching team highly encourages outreach to any one of us for additional conversation, as class sessions will be dense. Office hours will be by appointment.

### **Zoom Policies**

Because of the nature of the course, video and microphone participation will be required for each session.

Please don't privately chat with each other during the class. If you do, it's not private – instructors have full access to such messages.

**Note on Recordings:** We would like to record class sessions, but will ask permission of each participant before doing so. Course participation is *not* conditional on consenting to class recording.

### **Course Policies**

Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The University of Toronto's

Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome. Please approach us if you have any requests of how we could make this class more accessible to you; additionally, the University's Accessibility Services office, which has scaled up specifically to serve students through the unique difficulties of the pandemic period, can serve you directly.

(<https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/department/accessibility-services/>)

If you wish to share your preferred pronouns in class discussion, or over a private conversation with the teaching team, or not at all, you are welcome to do whatever serves you best.