

The Architects of the Sublime: Trajectories of an Aesthetic

3-Credit Special Topics (Elective) Course

Instructor:	Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Ralph Stern RA, MAA ralph.stern@umanitoba.ca
Credit:	3 Graduate Credits (History / Theory)
Semester:	Fall Semester 2018
Format:	Seminar
Number:	ARCG 7070
Time:	Wednesday Evenings; 5:30 – 8:15 PM; 1st class September 5th
Room:	JAR 209
Pre-Requisites:	Graduate Standing

The function of the sublime is to persuade us to end the slavery of pleasure.

Harold Bloom in: The Daemon Knows (2015)

The purpose of this course is threefold: (1) First, this course will assist students at the graduate level in refining and further developing their knowledge of theory, and the role of theory, in the production of architectural knowledge. We will quickly review major trajectories of architectural theory of the last decades, including trends in semiotics, phenomenology, structuralism, and post-structuralism along with issues related to gender and post-colonial studies. The thought of Michel Foucault will figure prominently in this review, in particular the construction (and deconstruction) of power



relationships as modes of spatial creation and control. (2) Second, this course assists graduate students in preparing for their Thesis (GRAD 7090), in particular that component requiring students to “... structure their method of study, (and) establish the work in a theoretical context ...” (DoA Supplemental Regulations). As a Departmental requirement, a successful Thesis should demonstrate a coherent methodological approach and command of a theoretical position. (3) Third, this course introduces graduate students to the aesthetics of the sublime in its historical diversity and theoretical significance.

The material covered in this course may thus serve as fertile ground for the development of further, and interdisciplinary, research topics intersecting landscape architecture, environmentalism, technology, and Indigeneity as well as modes of representation ranging from drawings and literature to photography and film. Introduced into aesthetic discourse at the beginning of the ‘long’ eighteenth century, the sublime had a revolutionary impact on the relationship of human to nature and, through this, the relationship of human to architecture. Sweeping aside classical canon and the attributes of the ‘beautiful’—symmetry, harmony, and proportion—the sublime opened possibilities for new aesthetic horizons; possibilities that were transformative for the work of architects such as Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) and Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799).



The importance of the sublime as a versatile aesthetic of discovery continued to prove invaluable for following generations of architects, landscape architects, painters, European Romanticism and, ultimately, the utopian modernism of German Expressionism and the dystopian futurism of cyberpunk. The sublime also carried into the New World in a manner that still resonates today in concepts such as “wilderness”. Indeed, in addition to the recent analyses of the sublime by philosophers and cultural critics such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard,

and Fredric Jameson, the environmental historian Richard White locates the origins of the ecology movement within Romanticism and the sublime.

Using both primary and secondary sources, this course will address important questions about the sublime; questions revolving around the relationship of subject and object (perceiver and perceived), man and nature, poetic origins and technological futures, Western culture and the Other. Running for the duration of the semester, this course requires weekly readings and intermittent presentations as well as a final paper. Students will choose from a broad range of topics for their paper, with topics to be determined in consultation with the instructor. Together, we will approach the sublime not as an abstract philosophical deliberation with arcane application, but as a dynamic conceptual tool that can be mobilized for addressing the design challenges of today.

The pedagogical structure of this course is the seminar format in which student discussion and participation are of central importance. Collectively we will establish a baseline of the course participants’ understanding of history / theory topics and will go from there. Students are not expected to have a great deal of prior knowledge in the fields addressed and they should not feel in any way intimidated by the intellectual challenges of “theory”; we are all here to learn. Curiosity, however, is absolutely essential. Any questions can be sent to the email address indicated at the top of the first page.

Professor Stern joined the Department of Architecture in 2010. He has taught a series of successful interdisciplinary and cross-listed courses with students from Landscape Architecture, Interior Design, Film Studies, and Native Studies. As Dean of the Faculty of Architecture (2010-2015) he was an ardent champion of student initiatives such as creating the FabLab, of preserving the legacy of John A. Russell and the significance of architectural education in Manitoba, of University initiatives such as the Visionary (re)Generation Campus Master Plan Competition, and of Indigenous Initiatives internal and external to the University. Since 2011 he has been a member of MAA Council. In 2016 he was a Visiting Fellow at the Bauhaus University Weimar and in 2017-2018 Special Advisor on Internationalization for the Faculty.

Professor Stern has lectured on the sublime in various venues including the universities of M.I.T., Harvard, Columbia, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Heidelberg, and Charles (Prague) as well as the Architectural Association London. Prior to coming to Manitoba he taught architectural history and theory, among other venues, in Berlin (the Technical University and the University of the Arts) and in the US (Columbia University and M.I.T.) and was a Visiting Research Associate at the University of Cambridge.