

The Gothic: From the Sublime to the Uncanny in Literature and Architecture
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Spring 2019
Arch4915/CPLSU4720
Class meeting: Wed. 4:00-6:00, room 300S Buell Hall

Bulletin Description

This team-taught course explores parallel literary, architectural, and theoretical explorations of the “Gothic” from the mid-18th century to the present, focusing on the “darker” psychological undercurrents of the Gothic and their relationship to modern conceptions of the self. Among the writers, architects, and theorists that the class will examine are: Edmund Burke, Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis, and Etienne-Louis Boullée in the eighteenth century; Jane Austen, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Victor Hugo, and John Ruskin in the nineteenth century; and Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Worringer, Hans Poelzig, Elfriede Jelinek, Julia Kristeva, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, and W.G. Sebald in the twentieth century.

Rationale

The seminar should be of interest to a wide range of advanced undergraduate and graduate students in the humanities and visual arts. For literature students, the course has an obvious value in its presentation of a genre that has been a staple of modern Western narrative for over two centuries. Because of the importance of Gothic for early cinema and recent theories of female spectatorship, it should also attract a variety of students interested in cultural studies, film studies, psychoanalysis, etc. In addition, the class should appeal to architectural historians, art historians, and architecture students interested in aesthetic theory. For the past decade, there has been a renewed interest in the psychology of aesthetic response, while issues of the sublime, uncanny, and sensational effect have become a central focus in debates in architecture and art circles. The course offers a historical and theoretical underpinning for these discussions, as well as extends ideas surrounding the Gothic, the sublime, and the uncanny beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries.

Course Description

Since the mid-eighteenth century, an unusual collaboration between literature and architecture has sought to establish links between an external world of spatial form and an interior realm of sensation and emotion. Developing out of philosophical speculations emphasizing sensory experience as a basis of understanding (John Locke) or taste (Edmund Burke), a new literature and a new architecture challenged classical notions of beauty, harmony, regularity, and proportion by asking, in their different ways, what happens to the nature of aesthetic perception when the “reasonable subject” of that perception is beset by awe, fear, sadness, terror, mourning and similar states of mind. The first Gothic novelists, Horace Walpole and William Beckford, built renowned medieval mansions or castles (Strawberry Hill, Fonthill Abbey) that would be conducive to an appropriately Gothic sensibility. Gothic writers from Ann Radcliffe and “Monk” Lewis to E.T.A. Hoffmann, Victor Hugo, Bram Stoker, or even--to cite only one of

many contemporary authors--Steven King, have relied on the literary representation of a Gothic church or castle or "haunted house" as a means of eliciting a certain kind of sensation and emotional response in their readers. Similarly, certain "Gothic" architects have explored themes and forms that counteract conventional notions of form and program by privileging an architecture of emotional affect, often evoking through scale, plays of light and shadow, and unconventional form a "darker" response in the occupant. In the eighteenth century, this sensibility might be linked to architects such as Etienne-Louis Boullée, Jean-Jacques Lequeu, and Friedrich Gilly; in the twentieth century, to Expressionist architects such as Bruno Taut and Hans Poelzig and contemporary practitioners such as Peter Eisenman and Daniel Libeskind (even when their designs may not seem overtly Gothic). Given this focus on "Gothic" as a psychological response, important nineteenth-century Gothic revivalists emphasizing the moral, communitarian, and rational dimensions of the Gothic such as Augustus Welby Pugin, John Ruskin, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, and William Morris will only be considered briefly, primarily for purposes of comparison.

This team-taught course will not only look at parallel literary and architectural explorations of the "Gothic uncanny" from the mid-18th century to the present, but also examine these explorations in relationship to emerging modern concepts of the self. While Burke's theory had its origins in traditional ideas of the deity and nature (vastness, incomprehensibility, and the infinite), his psychological analysis involving the complex interplay between pain and pleasure foreshadows later literary and psychoanalytic insights. In the nineteenth-century the darker, psychological aspects of Burke's sublime--and the Gothic--were often seen in a variety of other structures and spaces from industrial and engineering works and the new spaces of urban development to bourgeois domestic interiors, where terror was no longer a question of vastness but of claustrophobia or inexplicably strange everyday events. Jane Austen's celebrated satire of the Gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey* as well as Victor Hugo's Romantic celebration of medieval Gothic in *Notre Dame de Paris*, both reveal a darker underside: the terror of English domesticity in one case, and of the monstrous outsider in the other. This psychological understanding culminates in Freud's essay on the uncanny, stimulated by his reading of Hoffmann's "The Sandman." By the 1980s and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, we have almost a complete reversal of Burke's sublime--the unbounded vastness and power of nature, captured in architecture's "artificial infinite," is now replaced with the fluidity and terror of our own internal, preverbal psyche.

This chronological itinerary, which the course loosely adopts, should not be seen as teleological; the texts and buildings selected will be read as an ongoing, unfinished response to the problems, challenges, and traumas of modernity. The Gothic here will not be treated as a fixed aesthetic category or unchanging historical phenomenon, but rather as a fluid form of invention that sometimes unites notions of horror and fear with ideas of transcendence and utopian aspiration (the Gothic sublime) or of the everyday and familiar (the Gothic uncanny). In fact, it is this ambiguity and mobility of the Gothic that has allowed it to inspire such a broad range of modern writers, thinkers, and builders.

This ambiguity, however, also poses a series of questions that the seminar hopes to address: What are the political and social implications of the Gothic? What does it mean to aestheticize horror? How has the Gothic traversed traditional high/low distinctions in art, and what social

implications has that had at different historical moments? When does the Gothic serve a constructive role, allowing us to discover new forms of creative possibilities in the face of trauma and anxiety? Alternately, when does the Gothic risk being a means of escape and a refusal of responsibility or action? Does an aesthetics of horror normalize horror and desensitize the spectator?

Class format: Like a reading group, the seminar participants will analyze closely the assigned readings, taking turns leading the discussion. All readings are to be completed before the class meeting.

Readings: Almost all the assigned readings will be primary texts. A bibliography of secondary literature will be provided for students who wish to supplement these readings. Doctoral students are expected to complete the additional readings listed for each section meeting.

Requirements: Students will be asked to write three short essays on three of the four themes discussed in class, focusing on one or two readings; graduate students have the option of writing a research paper in lieu of the last two papers. Each student will also be asked to make several brief presentations to introduce the discussion of the readings. All students should do the first week's required readings before the first class meeting. Each paper will count for 25% of the grade; class participation and the class presentation will count for the remaining 25%.

Class enrollment: Limited to 25 students.

Syllabus

Week 1 Gothic Sublime

Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, parts 2, 4.

Horace Walpole, The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story

Additional Readings:

Kenneth Clark, The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste, pp. 29-65.

Horace Walpole, Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole . . . at Strawberry Hill near Twickenham, Middlesex . . ., passim (for images only).

Week 2 Sublimity and Death

Etienne-Louis Boullée, Architecture: Essay on the Art.

Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

For images of Boullée's (also Ledoux's and Lequeu's) funerary monuments, see Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, Etienne-Louis Boullée 1728-1799.

Additional Readings:

Richard Etlin, "The Sublime (1785)," in The Architecture of Death, pp. 100-146.

Week 3 Gothic Sublime, cont.

Matthew Lewis, The Monk

Johann Goethe, "On German Architecture"

Week 4 Gothic Domesticity

Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

James Wyatt and William Beckford, Fonthill Abbey.

For images of Fonthill Abbey, John Rutter, Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey and J. Britton, Illustrations, Graphic and Literary of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire.

Additional Reading:

For those pursuing research on Beckford, see Derek E. Ostergard, ed. William Beckford, 1760-1844: An Eye for the Magnificent

Week 5 The Uncanny

E.T.A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman," and "Rath Krespel"

Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny"

Additional Reading:

Anthony Vidler, "Introduction" and "Unhomely Homes," in The Architectural Uncanny.

Week 6 Gothic Monsters and Social Collectivity

Victor Hugo, Notre Dame de Paris

John Ruskin, "The Grotesque," from The Stones of Venice

Week 7 Gothic and Moral Reform

A.W. Pugin, Contrasts: Or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day, Showing the Present Decay of Taste, please study plates, text can be skimmed.

John Ruskin, "The Nature of the Gothic," in The Stones of Venice

Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1790-1950, pp. 85-98; recommended 137-61.

Additional Reading:

A.W. Pugin, The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture, Oxford, 1969 (orig. 1841), pp. 1-11, 36-43, 55-56.

Week 8 German Expressionism and Abstraction

Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy, chaps. 1 and 5

Paul Wegener, "The Golem," 1920 (film)

Additional Readings:

Lotte H. Eisner, The Haunted Screen, chaps. 1 and 3.

Julius Poesner, Hans Poelzig: Reflections on His Life and Work, section on Poelzig's Grosses Schauspielhaus (for Max Reinhart), Berlin.

Week 9 The Abject

Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection, chap. 1.

Elfriede Jelinek, Rechnitz and the Merchant's Contracts (In Performance), trans. Gitta Honegger; read the Introduction as well

Additional Reading:

Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions, pp. 70-78.

Week 10 Jewish Ghosts and Berlin

Daniel Libeskind, The Jewish Museum, Berlin

Daniel Libeskind, "Symbol and Interpretation," in Radix-Matrix: Architecture and Writings.

Andreas Huyssen, "The Voids of Berlin," Critical Inquiry, no. 24.

Noah Isenberg, "Reading 'Between the Lines': Daniel Libeskind's Berlin Jewish Museum and the Shattered Symbiosis."

Peter Eisenman, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin

Additional Reading:

Anthony Vidler, "Shifting Ground," in The Architectural Uncanny.

Week 11 Pop Gothic and Visual Art

Mike Kelly, "Playing with Dead Things," also images in his catalog *The Uncanny*, Tate Liverpool, 2004

The Shining (film)

Additional Reading:

Anthony Vidler, Mike Kelly

Week 12 Forms of Disaster

W.G. Sebald, Austerlitz (excerpts on Theresienstadt)

Week 13 Conclusion