SEMinar aims and expectations

Rules of the road, "Seminar on Metalepsis," WAAC, Fall 2013

The seminar statement:

Critical questions are those that must be continually reconceived within new methods and vocabularies. This seminar looks at films, short readings, and urban spaces where the consensus of ideology gives way to the dissensus of exception. Metalepsis, the presence of framing elements within the mimesis/representation of reality, shows how historically well-established cultural practices (the uncanny, rituals, myths, storytelling, ideological formations, etc.) have involved a "virtuality of detachment." Theories about architecture and landscape,* in moving from interpretive to active modes, may use the visual calculus of metalepsis to recast theory as primarily experimental, pro-active, and provocative. What remains the same is the gap, which we must learn to interrogate, and through such interrogation to "tarry with the negative" that is subjectivity’s essential nature.

The narrative/visual figure of metalepsis explains the architecture of “sites of exception.” At the same time it establishes that part of architecture that is architecture — i.e. its root relationship to venustas. Metalepsis materializes framing elements as phenomenal/material qualities that create an uncanny disturbance within ordinary architectural conditions.

The seminar involves readings, films, and staged interventions, i.e. both theory and practice. Members respond with short writings, drawings, jokes, installations, performances, skits, and video collages. phd/masters/undergraduates from all majors welcome. 15 limit.

The goals of the seminar follow in the tradition of speculative awareness, begun with the tradition of the Platonic dialogs, of individuation, critical confrontation, personal initiation, and open-ended pursuit of ____. This goal cannot be named, since for each it has a different name, and one purpose of the seminar is to reflect on that name as well as its absence. As discussion evolves around readings, presentations, and the viewing of films, members are expected to develop a disciplined but free “art of topical thinking” — an ability to connect ideas that have little or no outward similarities — in a way that accumulates insights and raises them to the level of interrogation, testing, rejection, and substitution. While no “answer” is final, none is without its contribution to the process of dialectic destruction. While the utopian aim of an ultimate “absolute knowledge” must be renounced, the absolute may be found in the process of renunciation. Because everyone who makes an effort comes upon this conclusion in a different way, there can be no single standard or outward measure of evaluation; but “effort,” whose outward signs are almost always in terms of negation, can be made public, evident, and integral to the collective dialog. The main dimension of effort shall be conviviality; not the desire to agree or appeal but restraint, timing, and generosity even in acts of privacy and silence. Progress will be measured in terms of gradual sophistication of idiosyncratic positions as well as the public value of the frames created to make such positions intelligible.

Midterm evaluations will be made on present progress and future plans, final evaluations will be made in light of the “contract” made at midterm.

* "Architecture" and "landscape" are used in the broadest possible sense to indicate the aspects of the environment that correlate to human subjectivity, as the general idea of place v. space scientifically or abstractly conceived. Place is the space of human experience, inseparable from the subjectivity shaped by desire and the conception of loss that this seminar will treat as critically related to the Freudian death drive — not as it has been misunderstood as a desire for death but, rather, the sum total of behaviors and psychic constructions assembled to resist death. Thus "architecture" and "landscape" include the professions designated by those names but is not exclusively concerned with the practices as such.
Dimensions of Evaluation

- Grasp of key terms and methods

There are many technical terms, ideas, concepts, methods, and references in the seminar. Members must be able to recognize, define, and understand the relations of these. Multiple overlapping references and varied sources are given to establish the integrity (i.e. the non-arbitrariness) of terms and ideas.

- Presence and attentiveness

Physical and mental attention requires punctual presence at all seminar events, although some absences cannot be avoided. These will be excused if sufficient notice is given. Each member is disallowed the alibi of confusion, which is the natural state of theoretical inquiry.

- Initiative

Initiative need not be frenetic but simply thoughtful — an extension of personal activity based on discussions, presentations, or writings encountered in the seminar. Initiative is the expected antidote to periodic momentary confusion. Thought is always confusing itself and inventing escapes, but the best kind of thought pauses for a moment within confusion to understand its negative nature.

- Eccentricity

Personalizing the materials of the seminar does not aim at any single model. Rather, each member’s peculiar qualities cannot be avoided but must also be consciously involved in recognition of unique duties to learning. Eccentricity as a goal does not rule out group efforts or conviviality.

- Publicity

Personal performance takes into account the potential and varied audiences of performance and allows the audience its traditional rights of silence, judgment, and freedom to look away without blame. Projects, whether writings, demonstrations, or artworks must be presented within a neutral space of performance constructed by the author, a space that allows autonomy of the creator, the created, and the audience. There are no uniform requirements for “products,” and although each member is expected to have some kind of product, there is no common gauge of scale, scope, or quantity. Products may range from notebooks and micro-investigations (cf. Francis Alÿss) to formal essays to constructions, installations, or large-scale experiments. The choice must fulfill the requirements of the member’s eccentric position and be true to its aims.

The seminar may elect to create a collective product, by which the accomplishments of the whole will evidence the contributions of whole.

- Anticipated Outcomes

Members of the seminar should, following a reasonable effort: (1) be able to use and explain the importance of the “clinical” (Freudian-Lacanian) model of subjectivity on the use and comprehension of architecture and the landscape; (2) understand in detail the implications of metalepsis as an internal logic of this subjectivity and be able to deploy it in the analysis and understandings of works of art; architecture, and the landscape; (3) understand the significance of idiosyncrasy in merging projects of subjectivity with aspects and elements of the environment; and (4) discover new modes of autonomy in exploring critical theory’s relevance to the production, use, and understanding of architecture and the landscape. They should, additionally, have acquired the means of resisting stupid ideas about theory.

- Grading

Grades will be assigned to work in keeping with the public policies of Virginia Tech. and WAAC. In general, A indicates significant achievement, B equals satisfactory but less informative achievement, C is given where there are missing elements that hinder performance, and D is reserved for failure to connect to the materials of the seminar and physical absence. F indicates a breakdown in the intention to learn. Where unanticipated events interrupt attendance or completion of projects, there will be accommodation within limits of university policy.