“Who Am I?"

The Question of the Self in Art, Literature, Religion, and Philosophy

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 3:00-5:00

Or by appointment
In 2013, the Oxford English Dictionary declared “selfie” to be the word of the year, as researchers revealed that usage of the term had increased 17,000% since the previous year. By 2014, the New York Times, following on the heels of a study conducted by the Pew Research Foundation dubbed millennials the “selfie generation.” And today, identity politics have moved to the forefront of public discussion in unprecedented ways. It seems that everyone is talking about the self—but what or, better yet, who is this mysterious entity we speak for each time we use the first person pronoun?

This seminar engages the question of the self through the exploration of art, literature, religion, philosophy, and pop culture. Through close, guided readings and analysis of classic, contemporary, and popular materials, we will attempt to understand and complicate the notion of the self and inquire into the personal, social, and political relationships that define its contours and boundaries.

Course content will be drawn from a diverse but complementary range of thinkers including: Plato, Plotinus, Ibn al-Arabi, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, William Blake, Guy Debord, Cormac McCarthy, and Friedrich Nietzsche. We will also interrogate what films such as Christopher Noland’s Memento, images such as Manet’s “Bar at the Folies Bergère,” and countercultural musical movements such as punk rock and black metal have to add to our inquiry. Short lectures will contextualize the topics treated, but the main focus will be on fostering robust and substantive discussion while developing the philosophical skills needed to think through and debate the notion of the self and its attendant issues in a reflective and nuanced manner.

By drawing from different eras and cultural contexts, we will gain a new appreciation for the historical background of the existential questions that concern us today, while confronting the radical diversity of possible responses. However, since the question of the self must necessarily be raised in the first person—you will be the most important subject of this course. In this spirit, the seminar’s ultimate aim is to engage with multimedia materials that help you develop, articulate, and ultimately live out your own personal response to a very pressing question: “Who am I?”
***Syllabus subject to change! Please treat this as a DRAFT.

Weekly Readings, Viewings, & Auditions (will frequently be supplemented by handouts and media)

All readings will be supplied via Coursework, organized in folders by session under “materials.” You must have access (virtual or physical) to the reading in class to reference. Readings have been purposely kept brief. The material we are covering can be dense at times; accordingly, we’ll aim for depth over breadth.

Films and any other visual materials will either be placed on reserve at the Media and Microtext Center in Green Library (https://library.stanford.edu/libraries/green/media-microtext-center) or linked to our Coursework site. The same goes for the musical/audio materials.

Writing Assignments

All assignments will be posted on Coursework. Please make sure that your writing assignments: (i) are typed in 12 point font; (ii) double-spaced; (iii) contain page numbers in the upper right hand corner; (iv) contain your full name as a header; and (v) are spell/grammar checked.

Aside from these assignments, participation in discussion is paramount. This course is about communicating our selves to ourselves as well as to other selves—as such active participation and attendance is very important and will be considered in the final grade. If you must miss a session, please get in touch with me as soon as you are able to do so.
Week One (maps)

6/22
Welcome!
Introduction to the Question of the Self, Part 1

Assignments: (i) Read Jonathan Nolan’s Memento Mori; (ii) begin brief autobiographical statement (due 6/30)

6/24
Introduction to the Question of the Self, Part 2

Assignments: Plato, “the Allegory of the Cave”; (ii) Plotinus, Selections from The Enneads

+ Supplementary pages on history of philosophy

Week Two (soul into self)

6/29
The One & One’s Own: Plato, Plotinus, & Neoplatonism

Assignments: (i) finish reading Plotinus; (ii) Descartes, First and Second Meditations

7/1
From Soul to Mind: Plotinus’ Self-Seeking versus Descartes’ Philosophy of Doubt

+ we will also inquire into the whether or not different subjectivities can become manifest through music by comparing Byzantine Chant with the Enlightenment-influenced music of Christoph Willibald Gluck

Week Three (masks & fragments)

***Note: Self-Analysis due by 7/13***

7/6

Necessary Misunderstandings: Nietzsche, Nihilism, & the Fragmented Self

Assignments: Sigmund Freud, “A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis” & Chapters VI, VII, VIII from Civilization & Its Discontents

7/8

Into the Depths: Freud & the Unconscious

Assignments: (i) Jacob Böhme, excerpts from Aurora, Sex Puncta Theosophica, and a secondary source (TBD)

Week Four: (groundless/boundless)

***Midterm meetings to be scheduled between weeks 4-5.***

7/13

Lecture: Imaginal Renaissance: Böhme, Ungrund, & Self-Birth

Assignments: (i) William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven & Hell, (ii) watch Jim Jarmusch, Dead Man (DVD on reserve at Green Library)

7/15

The Human Form Divine: Blake & the Dynamics of the Creative Imagination

Assignments: (i) Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics” + handout
Week Five: (...[ ]...)  

7/20
The Importance of Nothing: Heidegger & the Experience of Abgrund

Assignments: Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”

7/22
Virtual Spaces, Virtual Bodies—Virtual Selves?

Assignments: Gaston Bachelard, Introduction to Poetics of Space (xv-xxxix) and “The Dialectics of Inside and Outside” (211-231); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwinning—The Chiasm” (130-155).

Week Six (imaginal intersections)

***note: Third writing assignment due on the 30th

7/27
Self as/in Space & Place: Bachelard’s Material Imagination

Assignments: begin Cornelius Castoriadis, “Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads”

7/29
Self as Imagining Image: the Social Imaginary vs. the Radical Imagination

Assignments: Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (excerpt); Theodore Roszack The Making of the Counterculture (excerpt)

Week Seven: (specters & spectators)

8/3
Self against Society: Counterculture and Identity
Assignments: Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (excerpts)

***note: Fourth writing assignment due on 8/8***

8/5

Closing the Eyes to See: Debord, Spectacle, Submission, & Resistance (?)

Assignment: determine contemporary discussion topic for next session

Week Eight (returning again)

8/10

No lecture

We will return to the contemporary issues of self and identity raised in the first week of class, now armed with the knowledge we’ve acquired—discussion topic(s) will be chosen together in the prior session.

Assignment: Please prepare a *précis* of your final project to present to class.

8/12

No lecture

Presentations & discussion

***The final project is due 8/15, via Coursework.***