OLLI at Illinois

“Mind Science and Modern Cultural Response”

Olli Classroom, Champaign

Mondays, 11:30am-1:00pm

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We will discuss together the cultural impact of philosophical, scientific, and pseudo-scientific descriptions of consciousness, the brain, and the mind. Our focus will be on cultural *response*: we will review influential pronouncements about consciousness and the self since c.1800, and consider how they and why they have taken hold in realms beyond the scholastic library, the labs, and the campus quads -- not only in novels and short stories, in poetry and plays, in the fine arts, and in movies and TV shows, but also in daily life.

What we can center on, and have fun with, is how seductive ideas about the mind and the nature of the self get picked up and spread -- how they can come at us from many directions, and regardless of whether or not they are grounded in fact.

After we review (and complicate) a few keywords – *mind, brain, personality, identity*, *self* -- we will look at assertions about consciousness and identity that still seem to carry cultural weight, though some of them have changed markedly under the pressure of more recent thinking. We will also sample a handful of 19th and 20th century literary works that resonate with these formulations.

Later, we will rove into wilder territory, exploring broad-public writings by contemporary researchers at the heart of the neuroscience revolution; at responses by humanists and culture-critics who feel the challenge of these new concepts; and at mass-culture entertainments that explore -- or exploit -- these new ways of representing the motions of the mind.

Some recurring questions that we can think about together:

* When scientific or philosophical descriptions of consciousness, thinking, and the self catch the attention of writers and artists -- what happens?
* How might our awareness of prevailing (or subversive) descriptions of personality, thinking, and the mind enrich our response to literary works from the same era in the past?
* Conversely: when a body of thought about the nature and the structure of the mind loses preeminence or credibility, what are, or what should be, the consequences for understanding art produced under the influence of that thinking? In other words, how can we now engage compelling art indebted to obsolete ideas, or to downright bad ones?
* When researchers in the neurosciences try reach a broader audience, how do they do it? How do their ideas about what the self really is, and what thinking really is, inform their own style and voice? What can we say about this kind of writing as a presence in our literary culture?
* As AI, Virtual Reality, and other cyber-models, constructions, and disruptions of consciousness sweep through our culture, and as hopes and nightmares disseminate about technical and pharmacological transformations of personal identity -- how are we to respond?

Other questions, and better ones, will take shape as we move along. That’s a benefit of real-live, bio-hazardous conversation.

**WEEK ONE**

Part one:

Hors d’oeuvres: wandering today’s wonderlands of brain and mind.

Keywords for our conversations.

Part two:

Influential ideas about consciousness and the mind, c.1800-1870: Fichte and the German Idealists; Coleridge, Emerson, and the Romantics; the drastic rebellion of Marx and Engels.

**WEEK TWO**:

Part one:

William James (1842-1910) and the birth of modern psychology.

From William James: “The Stream of Consciousness,” “Imagination,” and “The Self” (From *Psychology, The Briefer Course,* 1892).

Part two:

William’s younger brother Henry; experiments in Psychological Realism.

Henry James, Excerpts from “The Turn of the Screw” (1898), “The Beast in the Jungle,” (1903), and “The Jolly Corner” (1908).

Robert Louis Stevenson, from “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (1886).

Stream of Consciousness as a Literary trope: excerpts from early and final chapters of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925).

**WEEK THREE:**

Gilded Age Mind-science; Quackery; and Resistance from American Women and Minority Perspectives.

Part One:

S. Weir Mitchell’s “Rest Cure” and George Miller Beard’s *American Nervousness.*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Gilded Age patent remedies for ‘nervous’ women.

Part Two:

Women and minority voices:

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening.*

W. E. B. Dubois, from *The Souls of Black Folk.*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “The Solitude of Self.”

**WEEK FOUR:**

After Darwin: Eugenics, “Degeneration,” and the Legacy of Literary Naturalism

Part One:

Caesare Lombroso, Max Nordau, Francis Galton, Emile Zola.

American Naturalism’s first wave: Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Frank Norris -- excerpts from “Maggie, a Girl of the Streets,” *The Call of the Wild,* and *McTeague.*

Second wave: Upton Sinclair, Ole Rolvaag, Theodore Dreiser: *The Jungle, Giants in the Earth,* and *Sister Carrie.*

Part Two:

John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Joyce Carol Oates, *film noir.*

What about Arthur Conan Doyle?

And Robert Frost?

Francois Truffaut, Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola -- and HBO?

**WEEK FIVE**

The Long Shadow of Sigmund Freud

Part One:

Key moments from Freud on the structure of the unconscious.

*The Interpretation of Dreams.*

Freud in 20th century culture -- after WWI:

D H Lawrence, Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O’Neill; Surrealism in the arts.

Part two

Freud after-shocks in the later 20th century:

J D Salinger, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin

Sylvia Plath, The Beats, Philip Roth, Ken Kesey ...

Rebellions against Freud -- and Freud as rock-star?

**WEEK SIX**

Mind-science Goes Direct to the Public

Part One:

Oliver Sacks, Daniel Dennett, and Antonio Damasio

Part Two:

The aftermath of Julian Jaynes; the rich darkness of Paul Broks -- and Steven Pinker as Professor of Everything.

**WEEK SEVEN**

Consciousness and the Mind in Contemporary Fiction and Drama:

Part One:

Selections from Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, Ian McEwan, Don DeLillo, Mark Haddon, Richard Powers.

Drama: moments from Tom Stoppard, August Wilson, David Lodge.

**WEEK EIGHT**

Hollywood Riffs on the Brain -- and a Freewheeling Wrap-up?

Part One:

[depending on class choices] moments from *Memento,* *Inception, Ex Machina, Blade Runner, Inside Out, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Yesterday.*

Part Two:

Tirades from Jean Baudrillard; other possibilities include *Westworld, Mr. Robot, Caprica, Black Mirror, Upload,* and *Humans.*

At our closing discussion, we will also gather and circulate suggestions for further reading, viewing, and discussion.