Interdisciplinary Seminar:

What is it Like? Consciousness, Expression and the Inner Life

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Course Description:

Today, when scientific advancements are the most visible markers of the progress of knowledge, we seem to be increasingly attuned to objective, third-person descriptions of our world and suspicious of first-person accounts, which we see as “just subjective.” But one aspect of our everyday lives seems to elude such scientific explanation: our individual conscious experience or “inner life.” In this seminar, we will examine literary, philosophical, and cinematic attempts to address the first-person character of consciousness. Are there ways of getting at the “what it is like” of our first-person experience, or are notions like “consciousness” and “the inner life” just outdated fictions of a pre-scientific age? We begin by discussing one classic attempt to portray the inner life: Mrs. Dalloway, by the modernist master of stream-of-consciousness writing Virginia Woolf, supplementing our reading of the novel with some short essays at the intersection of literary criticism and contemporary philosophy of mind. To better understand the theoretical questions at issue, we then turn to some philosophical background on consciousness through historical and contemporary readings in the philosophy of mind, and to the philosophical debate surrounding Thomas Nagel’s influential essay, “What is it like to Be a Bat?” Finally, we seek to weigh these philosophical accounts against the portrayals in Woolf’s novel and in some recent films (Waking Life, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind). In a final research project, students will develop an original position on a question related to the course theme using sources they select from a disciplinary perspective of their choosing.

Texts:
Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway
Lehrer, “Virginia Woolf: The Emergent Self” (from Proust was a Neuroscientist)
Lodge, “Consciousness and the Novel” (selections)
Chalmers (ed.), Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings (selections)
Nagel, “What is it Like to Be a Bat?”
Hacker, “Is there Anything it is Like to be a Bat?”
Frith and Rees, “A Brief History of the Scientific Approach to the Study of Consciousness”
Linklater, Waking Life (film)
Gondry, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (film)