Adventures in Existentialism

How do we find meaning in a world where, as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put it, God is dead? How do we decide on our life’s purpose, when we receive mixed messages about what that purpose should be? Such questions motivated the existentialist philosophy that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, flourished in European literature after World War I, and continues to influence novelists and filmmakers today. This reading salon will take up these questions, and investigate the individual’s place in a world where religious and other institutional authorities have been displaced or are no longer present—a world that seems absurd at best, and cruel and inhumane at worst. We’ll consider how various heroes over the past century have grappled with mortality and the inevitability of suffering, and with the distinctly modern experiences of anxiety, dread, boredom, and loneliness.

But while existentialism may seem to espouse a dark worldview, it also implies that we are free and able to make the most important life decisions on our own, as individuals. Our readings and films emphasize and offer models of freedom, independence, commitment, courage, and taking responsibility for not only oneself but also the world. In this way they will provoke us to discuss how best to live our lives, how to decide on what constitutes a good life, and how to distinguish between right and wrong in a world where this distinction is constantly being contested.

CORE 200 lasts for twelve weeks (instead of the usual fifteen) and meets once each week for two hours in a seminar setting. The Salon encourages the sharing of ideas and thoughts, highlights common themes and interdisciplinary connections as they emerge from discussion. Discussions that grow out of reading groups can become the starting point for future research. The two-unit Salon is an integral part of the Thematic Approaches to Humanities and Society minor. A special feature of the Reading Salon is that some of the books to be read by the participants will be selected by the students. The course is graded Credit/No Credit.

Proposed Readings
Albert Camus, The Stranger
Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway
Joan Didion, The White Album
Chuck Palahniuk, Fight Club
Haruki Murakami, Kafka on the Shore
Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian

Proposed films
Mike Nichols, dir. The Graduate
Paul Thomas Anderson, dir. Magnolia
Harold Ramis, dir. Groundhog Day