W.S. 205-3 Women and Popular Culture

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How do the institutions of mass culture construct our identities and subjectivities as women, and how does the cultural industry represent feminism itself? How does popular culture’s idea of “woman” relate to real “women”, who may differ by race, class, sexual orientation, or physical appearance and ability? Where is power exercised and are spectators necessarily the dupes of ideology? What are the means for women both as spectators and as producers of images to resist the images that define us? We will try to answer these questions by studying a variety of representations of women in popular culture and the ways that feminist critics and researchers have responded to them.

Cultural studies is now a vibrant field of study, and feminist approaches are beginning to have an impact on academia. But how can this scholarship be brought to impact on the images themselves? The course will attempt to elaborate a model of knowledge capable of moving from, and back to, the larger community of women. Specifically, the organization of the course will be three-fold: 1.) in the first part of the course, we will gather the theoretical tools to analyze popular culture and its appeal for women, and to elaborate a framework for resistance; 2.) Simultaneously, we will begin to examine a wide selection of Western society’s popular culture products aimed particularly at women as case studies for feminist criticism (examples will include fairy tales, fashion, music videos, films, soaps and sitcoms), searching out, in particular historical and contemporary examples of resistance by women; and 3.) In the final weeks of the course, groups of students who have been researching specific areas of popular culture will share the results and the method of their research with the rest of the class. At all points in our study we will attempt to explore issues from positions of difference.

A number of film and video presentations will form part of the curriculum. However students will hopefully have access to a television and VCR for their research.

Required Readings:


Additional readings will consist of a binder of articles placed on reserve in the library.

Course Requirements:

- Tutorial Presentation and Participation* 20%
- Midterm (in class) 30%
- Term Project/Journal (8-10 pages) 30%
- Final Exam (Take-home aprox. 6-8 pages) 20%

* 3 or more unexcused absences may result in failure of the course.

Prerequisite: WS 101 or 102 (may be taken concurrently)