WS 205-3 Women and Popular Culture

Jacqueline Levitin
levitin@sfu.ca

How do the institutions of mass culture construct the identities and subjectivities of women? How does popular culture's image of "woman" relate to real "women," who may differ in race, class, sexual orientation or physical appearance and ability? Where is power exercised and how open are the institutions of mass culture to ideological challenges? Are spectators necessarily the dupes of mass culture's proposed ideology? What are the means for women both as spectators and producers of images to resist the images that define them? We will attempt to answer these questions by studying a variety of representations of women in popular culture and the ways that feminist theorists, critics and researchers have responded to these representations.

Cultural studies is a vibrant field of study in which feminist approaches have had an impact. 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 threefold: 1) In the first part of the course, we will gather the theoretical tools to analyse 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 our criticism. Examples may include fairy tales/children's books, fashion, music videos, sports, popular fiction and documentary films, soaps and sitcoms, and web sites. In particular, we will examine historical and contemporary examples of resistance by women; 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 methods 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, it is advised that students have access to a television and a VCR for their research.

Required readings:


A packet of reading materials available after week one.

Course requirements and Grading Structure:
30% - Midterm (in class)
25% - Group presentation
30% - Term project (8-10 pages)
15% - Tutorial participation*

*Note: 3 or more unexcused absences may result in a failing grade in the course.

Prerequisites: WS 101 or WS 102 – may be taken concurrently