WS 205-3: Women and Popular Culture

Professor Elizabeth (Beth) Seaton

Course Description:
Firmly situated within economic, social and cultural life, popular culture plays an important role in shaping society’s symbolic and ideological contents. The shows we watch on television, the music we listen to in the car and the cacophony of advertisements that greet us on our daily routines all present us with images of ‘who’ and ‘what’ we (and others) are meant to be. This capacity to reproduce and reinforce the meaning and value of gender, sexuality, class and race is especially pertinent for girls and women, whose representation in mass-mediated culture is as pronounced as it is contradictory.

This course investigates what is at stake in the relation between “women and popular culture” from a number of perspectives: the historical development of popular culture and women’s relations to it; the political economy of consumer society; popular culture’s key role in ideological reproduction; the signification of the feminine in popular culture; and women’s position as audiences, fans and producers of popular culture. In this respect, students are presented not only with a variety of media form, but with a number of important theoretical approaches and modes of critical analysis used by feminist media and cultural studies.

Required Readings:
A custom reading package comprises readings for this course, which includes: Charles Acland, Angela McRobbie, Judith Williamson, Tania Modleski, Lynn Spigel, Mimi White, Janice Radway, Valerie Walkerdine, Susan Murray and others. Available at the university bookstore.

Course Requirements and Grading Structure:
25% - Oral Seminar Presentation: An oral seminar presentation will be required, based upon the week’s topic of discussion. The subject will be chosen in conjunction with the professor and undertaken by one or two students per topic. Texts used for the presentation should be in addition to the week’s required readings. Presentations are 15-20 minutes in length. An outline of the presentation and a bibliography of the works consulted must be submitted to the professor at the beginning of the class on the day of the presentation.
25% - In-Class Mid-Term Exam, Nov. 1.
35% - Term Paper: This is a research paper, and as such will include scholarly research, critical analysis of the topic and/or the existing research on the topic, and be written with clarity of expression and thought (due Nov. 29).
15% - Class Participation: Includes regular class attendance, reading the required texts, and posing critical questions of the readings.

In addition to the above: the participation mark is based upon an on-going assignment, in which each alternating week, one-half of the class is required to write a short response to the assigned readings. This could be written in point form and include arguments you didn’t understand, points you feel are important to discuss, arguments you disagree with, etc. The point of this exercise is to be able to stimulate discussion about the readings.

Prerequisites
Ws 101 or WS 102 (may be taken concurrently)

The Department of Women’s Studies encourages clarity of thought and expression and good writing. Students will be evaluated on these skills in all courses given by the Department.