WS 205-3  Women and Popular Culture

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This course will survey debates surrounding the ways in which we look at and receive representations of women in popular culture. This will be done through an examination of contemporary instances of popular culture, integrating into our examination the work of scholars who have attempted to define audience motivations, uses and effects. The course will favour a feminist Cultural Studies approach, whereby popular culture will be seen as a site where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out and where cultural perspectives are continuously being constructed and deconstructed. We will be cognizant of the need to pay attention to the context in which representations were both produced and consumed, stressing the importance of time and place in the audience negotiation of cultural meaning.

Specifically, the organization of the course will be as follows. In the first part of the course we will gather the theoretical framework useful for analyzing popular culture and women’s relations to it. Concurrently, we will examine a wide array of Western society’s popular culture products. Beginning with fairy tales, cartoons, toys and children’s literature, we will move from the pink land of Barbie to the powerful heroine of Pippi Longstocking. With the teen girl, appropriate role models again loom large, and we can examine women in the music industry, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and a vast offering of television and filmic images. The tragic decline in self esteem that appears to parallel the coming of adolescence can be examined through the teen magazine, examining both the mainstream fare in addition to teen magazines created specifically in order to empower adolescent girls. For the adult woman we will examine various television genres and film representations of women, detailing how the construction of gender meaning is accomplished through these cultural products and the sense that audiences make of these representations, particularly in terms of resistance and subversion. In the final weeks of the course, groups of students who have been researching specific areas of popular culture will share the results and methods of their research with the rest of the class.

Required readings:

Course requirements and Grading Structure:
30% - Midterm (in class) exam
30% - Research paper (8-10 pages)
25% - Group presentation
15% - Participation/attendance

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.