Department of Women's Studies  
Summer 2001 (01-2)

W.S. 205-3: Women and Popular Culture  
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What role do the institutions of mass culture play in the construction of women's identities and subjectivities? What are the mechanisms by which they transmit their effects? Are women spectators, as some have argued, necessarily the dupes of mass culture's ideological messages? Must they be "saved" by the critic who has demystified and thus escaped mass culture's power? Or have women historically used popular culture selectively and for their own ends? What are the pleasures women derive from popular culture?

This course will examine contemporary instances of mass or popular culture (as it is more positively defined) at the same time as it looks at the work of scholars who have attempted to define its effects. The course will favour a feminist Cultural Studies approach that sees popular culture as a site where conflicts between dominant and subordinant groups are played out and where cultural perspectives are continuously constructed and deconstructed. The feminist position, however, will be decentralised to include the perspectives of race, class, age, and sexuality in addition to gender. We will also endeavor to always account for differences of time and place.

The course will examine how scholarship can be brought to impact on the images themselves. We 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. 2) Simultaneously, we will begin to examine a wide selection of Western society's popular culture products. (Examples may include magazines and advertisements, fairy tales, films, TV sitcoms, police dramas, the music industry, and web-based slash fiction). In particular, we will search out 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.

Although depictions of women generally will be considered in the course, one focus this semester will be on how the women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside are depicted in film and the media.

A number of film and video presentations will form part of the curriculum. It is advised that students have access to television and a VCR for their research.

Required Readings:


A reading package.

Course Requirements:
Midterm (in class) exam........................................30%
Group presentation.............................................25%
Term project (8-10 pages)..................................30%
Tutorial participation*.........................................15%

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