

Sex, Gender, and Popular Culture



Course Objectives:

This course examines the “making” of masculinities and femininities (and everything else in between) within popular culture. Through a variety of theoretical perspectives (but primarily through feminist cultural studies) we will explore representations of gender and sexuality in American film, television, and other cultural forms. We will study the work of media scholars in various genres to see what media production and reception can tell us about cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. The goal is for you to learn a different way of “seeing” popular culture and your own relationship to it. Using feminist film theory and the subject of “the gaze” as our starting point, you will gain a better understanding of how a range of media construct, maintain, and challenge gender and sexuality norms.

Over the past several generations, the mass media have become central to our understanding of the meaning of the categories of “woman” and “man” in American life and internationally. In fact, many argue that the mass media have become central to the reproduction of the “sex-gender system” within which we all live, and under whose influence we form our sexed and gendered identities in this culture. In this course, we will examine the ways in which popular culture broadly defined helps to shape our cultural ideas about gender differences.

Through taking this course, you’ll be able to identify the common themes regarding the representation of gender and sexuality (identity/desire/preferences) in popular culture, and how your exposure to these themes through the years of your life may have influenced your thinking about these issues. We’ll accomplish this through examining a variety of cultural objects (focusing on film and TV), ranging historically but paying particular attention to the present. Topics include the way women and men are visually depicted; the kinds of narratives that most often feature women as central characters; the way women and men’s relationship to work and family are treated (the treatment of the domestic sphere); the issue of romance; female sexuality; and the way sexual difference is portrayed and contained.

We will draw on several theoretical perspectives, and you do not have to agree with any or all of them. However, for the purposes of this course we are defining gender as a set of culturally (not biologically) constructed behaviors that are deemed appropriate for men and women. We will frequently use the terms masculine and feminine, not to refer to individual men or women, but rather to refer to cultural ideals for the performance of gender roles. Gender is not fixed but is contextual, deeply impacted by history, race, and class.

NOTE: Occasionally you will see images in this class that are sexually explicit and language that is considered “vulgar.” If you have any issues with such matters, I strongly suggest you consider withdrawing from the class.

Required Texts:

Jennifer Pozner, *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasures on TV*
All additional readings are available on our Blackboard site.

(All viewings done independently by students with materials linked on Blackboard, or on reserve in the library or available through Netflix. We will, in addition, regularly view images during class)

Course Requirements:

1) Attendance and Participation (10% of grade)

You are expected to attend and actively participate in each class. Participation includes reading assigned material prior to class, asking questions, taking notes, contributing to discussions when possible. Remember that quality of comment is more important than quantity. If you are reading and preparing for class this should not be a problem.

Your attendance and punctuality are necessary for your success in this course. More than two absences will affect the quality of your work as well as your grade. I urge you not to miss class. I understand that you may need to miss class occasionally for excusable reasons. You will not be penalized IF you let me know via email or in person PRIOR to the class (and provide appropriate medical documentation). It is your responsibility to make up any work you may have missed as a result of your absence. Please arrive on time; three “lates” will count as an absence. Because the syllabus may be modified periodically, it is important that you attend class.

ATTENDANCE WILL BE TAKEN IN EACH CLASS.

2) Reflection Papers (each paper is 15% of grade for a total of 30%)

A total of 2 reflection papers will be due throughout the semester. The reflection paper is due on the day listed in the syllabus, before class period, and may not be turned in after class. It must be submitted on Blackboard prior to the class period, through Blackboard’s assignment portal/link. The reflection paper should be no more than 3-5 pages in length, in 12-point font, double-spaced and with one-inch margins. Citations should follow ASA style. The prompt for each paper will

be posted in advance on Blackboard but, generally, I will be asking you to use several of the readings for the week to address a particular question or issue. The papers will be graded based on the following criteria: ability to thoroughly address the prompt; detailed and diligent use of class readings; writing coherency and grammatical fluency. **NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.** Papers should be submitted via Blackboard to my Teaching Assistant by the beginning of class or earlier on the day it is due.

4) Exam (30% of grade)

The mid-term exam will give you the opportunity to address the main points, issues, and information from the first 1/3 of the semester, covering core concepts and theoretical frameworks engaged in the class. It will be held in class and include short answers, essay questions, match-ups, true/false, etc.

5) Final Essay (30% of grade)

The final essay (8-10 pages) is due **NO LATER THAN NOON (12PM)**. This should also be submitted on Blackboard. You will be given a choice between several options but all options will require you to use the readings and theoretical frameworks discussed throughout the semester.

6) In-Class Laptop/Cellphone Policy and Expectations

There will be no laptops or cellphones or other devices turned on or used in class. If you violate this rule you will be asked to leave for that day and will be considered absent for the day. You'll be expected to listen to others, and to me, during class, to be attentive, and to participate. If you have a problem with class participation (e.g. if you are just too shy to speak up), please do see me outside class so we can discuss an alternate way to evaluate your participation.

7) Academic Honesty

Students are expected to abide by NU's honor code. Any forms of cheating or plagiarism are taken very seriously and will result in the failure of this course. In addition, the instructor will take all the necessary steps to follow through with Northeastern University's formal procedures for documenting and disciplining students who submit work that does not meet standards of academic integrity: <http://www.northeastern.edu/osccr/academichonesty.html>

Unit I: Core Concepts and Key Debates

Class 1

Introduction to the Course

Introductions to each other and to the course, syllabus, and requirements.
What do we want to see in the media? What is feminist media studies? What perspectives does it embody?

Class 2

Studying Popular Culture/Studying Gender and Sexuality

Judith Lorber, “Night to His Day: the social construction of gender” and “Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology”

Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”

Ann Fausto Sterling, excerpt from *Sexing the Body*

The Bechdel test: <http://bechdeltest.com>

Mary Kearney, “Feminist Media Manifesto,” 2012

<http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2012/12/11/feminist-media-criticism-is-part-2/>

Class 3

Studying Popular Culture/Studying Gender and Sexuality

Liesbet Van Zoonen, “Feminist Perspectives on the Media”

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”

Class 4

Core Concepts: representation, culture, power, hegemony

Stuart Hall, “Representation, meaning and language”

Raymond Williams, excerpts from *Keywords*

In class viewing: “Representation and the Media”

Class 5

Core Concepts: the male gaze

John Berger, excerpts from “Ways of Seeing”

Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”

Mary Anne Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: theorizing the female spectator”

Jane Gaines, “Women and Representation”

Deidre Pribram, “Introduction,” in E. Deidre Pribram, ed., *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*

Class 6

Core Concepts: more gender and “the gaze”

bell hooks, “Oppositional Gaze”

Suzanna Walters, excerpts from *Material Girls* (Chapter Two, “Visual Pressures: On Gender and Looking,” and Chapter Four, “You Looking at Me? Seeing Beyond the ‘Gaze’”)

E. Ann Kaplan, “Is the Gaze Male?”

Class 7

Whose Gaze is it Anyway? Rethinking spectatorship

Alexander Doty, “Everyone’s Here for Love: Bisexuality and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*”

Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca “Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*”

Alexander Doty, excerpts from *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Introduction, “What Makes Queerness Most?” Chapter One, “There’s Something Queer Here,” and Chapter Two, “Whose Text is it Anyway? Queer Cultures, Queer Auteurs, and Queer Authorship,”)

At Home Viewing: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (available on Netflix)

Class 8

Exam

Unit II: Your body is a battleground

Class 9

Picturing the Body: Femininities

Jean Kilbourne, “The More You Subtract, the More You Add”

Susan Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity” and “Never Just Pictures”

In-Class Viewing: *Killing Us Softly 4*

Class 10

Picturing the Body: more femininities

Hunter & Soto, “Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze”

Aisha Durham “CHECK ON IT” Beyonce’, Southern booty, and Black femininities in music video”

Tricia Rose, “There are Bitches and Hos”

Class 11

Picturing the Body: Masculinities

Susan Bordo, “Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body”

Jackson Katz “Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity”

Amanda Lotz, excerpt from *Cable Guys*

In-Class Viewing: *The Bro Code*

Class 12

Still objects after all?

Ros Gill, “From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualization of Women’s Bodies in the Media”

Excerpts from Susan Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*

Kent Ono and Derek Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas: Unpackaging the

commodification of a native American woman”

Other readings TBA

In Class Viewing: *Dreamworlds 3*

Class 13 **Makeover Culture: Realness, reality, and the problem of authenticity**

Reflection Paper #1 DUE BEFORE CLASS

Pozner, Introduction and chapters 1-4

Josh Gamson, excerpts from *Freaks Talk Back*

In Class Viewing: horrible makeover tv examples

Class 14 **Makeover Culture: Realness, reality, and the problem of authenticity**

Pozner, Chapters 5-9

At home viewing: *Miss Representation* (available on Netflix)

Unit III: gender and genre/containment and resistance

Class 15 **Against the Grain (sex, text, context, fans)**

Janice Radway, “Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context”

Henry Jenkins, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten”

Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess”

Other readings TBA

Class 16 **Romance and femininity against the grain**

dossier on *Girls*; watch episodes at home

In-Class Viewing: *Girls* (HBO)

Class 17 **Romance overturned?** (must see kind-of-TV)

dossier on *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix original series); watch episodes at home

In Class Viewing: *Orange is the New Black*

Class 18 **The Chick Flick**

Alison Winch, “We Can Have it All: The Girlfriend Flick”

Diane Negra, “Structural Integrity, Historical Reversion, and the Post 9/11 Chick Flick”

Class 19 **The Bro-mance**

Reflection paper #2 due before class

Tania Modleski, “An Affair to Forget: Melancholia in Bromantic Comedy”

Other readings TBA

Class 20 **Narrative television and sexual difference**

Martha Gever, “Visibility Now! The sexual politics of seeing”

Larry Gross, excerpts from *Up from Invisibility*

Suzanna Walters, excerpts from *All the rage: the story of gay visibility in America*

In-Class Viewing: “Further off the Straight and Narrow”

Class 21 **Narrative Television and Sexual Difference**

Battles & Hilton-Morrow, “Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces”

Jason Jacobs, “Raising Gays: On Glee, Queer Kids, and the limits of the family”

In class viewing: *Glee*, *Modern Family*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, etc

Class 22 **Social media, gender, and sexuality**

Excerpts from the “Gamergate” controversy

http://mdcramer.com/downloads/MoralPanic_DML.pdf

Rosalind Hanmer, “Internet Fandom, Queer Discourse, and Identities”

Other readings TBA

Class 23 **21st century misogyny (where is the post in postfeminism?)**

Angela McRobbie “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture”

Susan Douglas, excerpts from *Enlightened Sexism*

Ros Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility”

Feminist Frequency, “Retro Sexism and Uber Ironic Advertising”

Outside viewing: *Juno* (2007)

Class 24 **Conclusion, Reflections, Review**

Pozner chapters 10-11