

**Course title and number:**

Female Icons in Contemporary U.S. Culture  
WS 208 3 Credits

**Course Description:**

This course examines female icons in a variety of contexts, focusing on popular culture and media representations. Analyzing the relationship between female icons and ideologies about women in the United States, the course considers how different images of women – from heroes to sex objects – challenge and/or reinforce dominant gender norms. American representations are contextualized within global flows of culture and media.

**Course Prerequisites**

None

**Course Objectives****The course will:**

1. Examine female icons in relation to cultural, historical, and political systems of meaning.
2. Critically consider the connections between female icons and (1) gender ideologies and (2) the material conditions of women's lives.
3. Analyze the intersections of gender with categories such as race, class, and sexuality.
4. Investigate the technologies of representation and commodification that characterize the production of female icons.
5. Encourage students to work collaboratively with others.

**Student Learning Outcomes:****Students will:**

1. Learn how to analyze female icons in relation to cultural, historical, and political systems of meaning through completing the course reading and participating in class discussion.
2. Discuss and demonstrate the connections between female icons, gender ideologies, and women's lives through writing essays and giving in-class presentations.
3. Understand the intersections of gender with race, class and sexuality.
4. Demonstrate their understanding of technologies of representation and commodification by analyzing in writing an icon as the final project.
5. Rehearse group interaction skills by working with others.

**Topical Outline of the Course Content****a. Introduction to gender and theories of representation**

Topics include:

- Concepts of gender and patriarchy
- Methods for analyzing media representations
- Overview of dominant representations of women in mass media

**b. Sexuality and the Female Body**

Topics include:

- Representations of female sexuality in advertising and other mass media

- Feminist debates on pornography
- Lesbian sexuality and heterosexism

c. Icons of Female ‘Beauty’

Topics include:

- Commodification of female beauty in beauty pageants
- Race and representations of beauty
- Female body image and constructions of beauty

d. Iconography of Female Athletes and Warriors:

Topics include:

- Female athletes and athleticism
- Iconography of female strength
- Representations of the ‘woman warrior’ in popular culture

e. Women and Icons of Motherhood

Topics include:

- Representations of mothers and mothering in contemporary culture
- Feminism and motherhood

f. Icons of the ‘Third World Woman’

Topics include:

- Images of ‘Third World’ women vis-à-vis the West
- Orientalism, exoticism, and female sexuality

g. Feminism and the Female Icon

Topics include:

- The social, political, and ideological context of female icons
- Feminist challenges to dominant representations of women

### **Teaching Methods and Student Learning Activities**

- Lectures
- Small group discussions
- Plenary discussions
- In-class presentations
- Essays (responses to the reading)
- Final project

### **Student Assessment**

Students will be evaluated based upon the following:

- Attendance in class
- Participation in discussion
- Oral presentations on reading and research
- Written assignments (essays and final project)

### **Suggested Reading and Texts**

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity*. University of California Press, 1999.

Douglas, Susan. *Where the Girls Are: Growing up female with the mass media*, Times Books, 1995.

Edut, Ophira, ed. *Adios Barbie: Young Women Write about Body Image and Identity*, Seal Press, 1998.

Kilbourne, Jean. *Deadly Persuasions: Why women and girls must fight the addictive power of advertising*, Free Press, 1999.

### **Additional Bibliography**

Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Brumberg, Joan Jacobs, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, Vintage, 1998.

Brunsdon, Charlotte, ed. et al., *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*. Oxford: OUP, 1997.

Cahn, Susan, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Women's Sport*. Belknap Press, 1995.

Chase, Susan E. and Mary F. Rogers. *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Cohen, Colleen Ballerina et al., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests and Power*. Routledge, 1995.

Cornell, Drucilla, ed. *Feminism and Pornography*. Oxford: OUP, 2000.

Dines, Gail and Jean Humez, *Gender, Race and Class in the Media: A Text Reader*. Sage Publications, 2002.

Dow, Bonnie. *Prime-Time Feminism: TV, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

Green, Rayna. "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, edited by Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Griffin, Pat. *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*. Human Kinetics Publications, 1998.

- Guilbert, Georges Claude. *Madonna as Postmodern Myth*. McFarland, 2002.
- Hesse-Biber. *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity*. Oxford: OUP, 1997.
- Kaplan, E. Ann, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Lutz, Catherine A. and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Ragone, Helena and France Winddance Twine, ed. *Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood: Race, Class, Sexuality, Nationalism*. Routledge, 2000.
- Sochen, June. *From Mae to Madonna: Women Entertainers in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*. University Press of Kentucky, 1999.
- Steinem, Gloria, "Sex, Lies and Advertising." In *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, edited by Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, Bedford Press, 2000.
- Tempest, Rone. "Barbie and the World Economy," in *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World*, edited by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002.
- Walters, Suzanne Danuta, *Lives Together/ Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Weitz, Rose, ed. *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Yegenoglu, Meyda. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

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Original Department Approval Date: January 23, 2003

Reviser's name and date: Dr. Arlene Holpp Scala

Departmental revision approval date: December 1, 2004