Course concepts: English 381 studies film and media as aesthetic objects that engage with communities defined by class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. This term we will emphasize communities identified by gender—specifically girls and women—but we will also consider how those communities are further shaped by sexuality, race and ethnicity, class and other identity categories.

One of the most challenging questions regarding identity and representation concerns “positive” or “negative” images. This course is organized around the issue of making positive and negative images more textured and complex. Many of you will have already studied course material related to gender. You are probably able to spot demeaning images of women when you come across them. However, viewers may disagree about which images are demeaning, even while watching the same film or TV show. For example, when you watch television, ask which roles and shows offer “positive” depictions of women. When thinking about women in film and television, we often find that an image or plot may be both positive and negative at the same time.

We will also deal with another important contradiction related to this issue. Members of groups under-represented in a culture often seek as a goal more positive images of themselves as they intervene politically to influence their representation and participation in mass media. But positive images themselves can also be stereotypical and lifeless, and perhaps even feed into limiting attitudes toward the group. An example would be a film about Stephen Hawking as a genius who is severely disabled. Although Hawking is indisputably admirable, the film might imply that we should respect and take seriously disabled people who are exceptionally talented. But what about ordinary people who happen to be disabled? And what kind of gender issues might people with disabilities commonly face? Interlocking forms of oppression can make women under-represented and invisible to the mainstream eye in many ways.

We will contrast how mainstream media and media made independently treat themes that become evident when we pay attention to women in film. While our emphasis will be on film, the concepts we study will also be applicable to television and other forms of media. We will conclude with a look toward the ways women have made careers in media-making, distribution and criticism.

Procedures: Each week we will see a film on Monday and discuss it on Wednesday. For the first three weeks, I will lead our Wednesday discussions, then beginning in Week 4, a student panel will lead a 30-45-minute discussion of the film and related issues.

Evaluation: Grades will be based on a midterm (20 percent); final (30 percent); paper (30 percent); and panel presentation and participation (20 percent). The final will be a take-home essay due at noon on Friday March 16.

Texts: The primary texts are the films shown in class and articles from Issues in Feminist Film Criticism, an early collection of feminist film criticism edited by Patricia Erens, and from Film Fatales, a recent collection of short essays about women filmmakers by Judith Redding and Victoria Brownworth. Additional readings will be available on Blackboard.
Attendance, late work and other policies: If you are absent from class, you will need to make your own arrangements for locating and watching the material you have missed. Three absences will affect your grade, without notice. Four absences will result in failure for the course. Show up punctually. If you arrive late, it is your responsibility to see me after class or you will be marked absent. Chronic lateness will constitute absences, at my discretion.

If you have special needs, please see me outside class to discuss them. No incompletes will be given and no late papers accepted unless you contact me in advance about a serious illness or other emergency. Hard copies of assignments are due at the beginning of class on the day listed. I do not accept e-mailed work.

Please maintain professional etiquette in your communication with me. For e-mails, put the course title in the subject line of e-mails and address me as “Dear Professor Karlyn.” If you have a serious matter to discuss with me, arrange to meet me in my office.

Classroom Standards: Take active responsibility for creating a respectful learning environment within the classroom. Pay full attention to whoever has the floor. Refrain from side-conversations. Turn all laptops and cell phones off (not to “vibrate”). Don’t eat. Do your best to avoid leaving and re-entering the classroom during screenings, lectures or discussions. Be prepared to engage with controversial subjects in a thoughtful manner. Disagreements are certain to arise, but it is imperative that the classroom remain a place for inquisitive thought and respectful debate. Think before you speak.

Writing Standards: All written work must use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and all assignments must adhere to standards of academic honesty outlined in the Student Handbook. Do not turn in work prepared for other classes. Document all sources consulted in preparing your work, including websites and other material obtained on the Internet. If in doubt, document. Plagiarism will result in failure for the course and additional sanctions determined by the director of Student Judicial Affairs.

Evaluation: Grades will be based on a midterm (20 percent); a take-home final (30 percent); term paper (30 percent); group presentation (10 percent); and class participation (10 percent).

Finally… This course may screen films that contain violence, explicit sex and “adult” themes and/or situations. If such subject matter makes you unduly uncomfortable, please let me know early in the term. You should also consider whether or not this course is an appropriate choice for you.

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1. Women Watching Women: Positive Images vs. Subversive Pleasures
   1/09    Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Howard Hawks, 1953)

2. Sacrifice and Tears: The Women’s Film
   1/16    Martin Luther King Day
   10/7    Stella Dallas (King Vidor, 1937)
            Readings: Erens, 126-162; handout on history of feminism

3. Women’s Autobiography: Our Mothers, Ourselves
   1/23    Discuss Stella Dallas
   1/25    Daughter Rite (Michelle Citron, 1978); discuss
Readings: Redding 3-22; Rich 212-219 (BB) and Juhasz 137-51 (BB)
Term paper assigned

4. Strong Women, Gal Pals and the “Gaze”
   1/30 Thelma and Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991)
   Readings Erens 28-40; Dargis in Cook 86-92 (BB)
   2/01 Discuss Thelma and Louise
      Panel 1

5. Women and Violence: Fantasy and Rage
   2/06 A Question of Silence (Marleen Gorris, Dutch, 1982)
   Readings: Redding, 173-78; Erens 330-36, 395-404; Rich on Question of Silence (BB)
   2/08 Discuss Question of Silence
      Panel 2 and midterm questions distributed

6. Sex and Sexualities on the Screen
   2/13 Assorted short films and videos
   2/15 Discuss shorts
      Panel 3

7. Documentary: Women’s Health and Disability
   2/20 Dialogues with Madwomen (Allie Light, 1993); In Plain English (Julia Lesage, 1992)—on reserve at Knight Library
   Readings: Redding 37-44; Erens 222-36
   2/22 Discuss Dialogues with Madwomen
      Panel 4

8. Race and Ethnicity,
   2/27 Real Women Have Curves (Patricia Cardosa, 2002)
   Readings: Myra Mendible (BB)
   2/29 Discuss Real Women Have Curves
      Panel 5

9. Postfeminism and Genre: Comedy
   3/05 Legally Blonde, Devil Wears Prada, Bridget Jones’ Diary
   Readings: Angela McRobbie on postfeminism (BB)
   3/07 Discuss film
      Panel 6

10. Girl Power and Beyond
    3/12 Thirteen (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003)
    3/14 Readings: Mary Celeste Kearney (BB); Karlyn on Thirteen (BB)
      Panel 7