

Elena: My name is Elena Gorfinkel. I am an associate professor in the department of art history and film studies, at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. It's Thursday, March 31st, in 2016, and I'm here in the city of Atlanta, at the Hilton Atlanta, as we interview Professor Constance Penley, who works in the department of Film and Media Studies, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is the founding director of the Carsey-Wolf Center at UCSB. Professor Penley is well known for her publications, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America*, and the forthcoming, *Teaching Pornography*, which we're all looking forward to. She's editor of numerous influential collections, including *Feminism and Film Theory*, *Male Trouble*, *Technoculture*, *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*, and *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, with Tristan Taormino, Mireille Miller-Young, and Celine Parrenas Shimizu. She is also significantly a founding editor of the feminist film and media studies journal, *Camera Obscura*.

Elena: So Connie, I want to ask you a kind of a foundational question, which is, what drew you to the study of film, in particular, because I know it wasn't necessarily a direct route, from what I understand. What were the formative films, books, and articles, that enlivened your interest in film?

Constance: Thank you for that question, Elena, and I'm so glad to be doing an interview with you, because I feel such a connection with your work, and your interest, and this is perfect. I grew up in rural Florida, and I didn't see a lot of movies, except for the Saturday afternoon matinees. For some reason, my mother decided that the films all my girl cousins liked, *Gigi*, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, would be bad for me, and so she had no problem, though, with my going to Saturday matinee horror films, so *The Blob*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, so those were really the first films that I saw. I must say, I never saw *The Blob* all the way through, because that scene in the trailer, of the blob oozing through the projection booth window, toward the unexpected audience members, so traumatized me, that I didn't see *The Blob* until I was an adult. And I think maybe that's where my interest in the unconscious in cinema came from.

Constance: I also saw films like *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and that ... those early experiences really shaped me. I mean, with *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, for example, and the underwater scenes were filmed in Florida, and I actually tell this story in my seminar, *Theory and Practice in Popular Culture*, because it says a lot about what people can think with popular culture. So I, and my siblings, and all the neighbor kids, we live on this little lake, we went to the Saturday afternoon matinee of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. The rule had been, that we weren't allowed to go in the lake more than four times a day, because otherwise, we would have just lived in the lake, and grown gills, so we had to come out at least four times a day.

Constance: So, my siblings, the neighbor kids, we all went to see the matinee of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. We did not go in the lake for the next three weeks, and then ... yes, and then, without talking about it. It must have been completely tacit, just all of a sudden, we went back in the lake, and here's how we did it. We divided up the lake, into our own lagoons, and we were each the creature of our own Black Lagoon, and that's how we managed it. So we're using our trauma, from this film, to ... and again, as I said, we

never talked about it, but we just figured out how to master the trauma, and be able to get back in the lake.

Elena: To reoccupy that space.

Constance: To be able to reoccupy that space, as our own.

Elena: But also, in a sense, occupying the film as well.

Constance: So I didn't see films until I was off at college, at the University of Florida. And there I had probably the most formative experience of film, that I had. Went to the student union, to see this film, there at the University of Florida, to see this film called *Pierrot le Fou*, by some guy named Godard. And I knew it was a film, because it was advertised as a film. I went to see it, on a screen, in a theater, but I just remember stumbling out of the theater in to the warm, humid Florida night. I was baffled. I had no idea how what I'd seen was a film. And of course, later, I would come to learn so much about Godard. We did a triple issue on Godard, of *Camera Obscura*. And so, I knew things, like his saying, when asked, do you think a film should have a beginning, a middle, and an end? And what was his reply? Yes, but not necessarily in that order. So I learned all that later, but trying to understand how that thing that I had just seen up there on the screen was a film, trying to answer that question. And, by the way, I'm still trying to answer it today, completely shaped me. That's one of the things I know about myself, that if I come up against something that completely baffles me, that's where I go. I have to figure it out.

Elena: That's a very encouraging, for everyone, that we return to the same formative questions. I wanted to move to asking about your formal education. You've mentioned going to University of Florida, and because this is about-

Constance: Home of the Fighting Gators.

Elena: Yes, go Gators, right? And so, I'm curious about your movement from going to Florida, and going and getting an MA in rhetoric at UC Berkeley, and then going to France and Paris, and studying with Christian Metz, and Thierry Kuntzel, and then coming back.

Constance: And Raymond Bellour.

Elena: And Raymond Bellour, of course. You've done so much amazing work, and curated his work. And so I'm wondering, in that trajectory, and kind of what motivated you to go to Berkeley first. I mean, I know, the politically, it must have been a draw to go there, but I'm curious about that trajectory. Could you talk about that a bit?

Constance: Yes. I was supposed to be a Florida high school teacher, an English teacher. That's what I trained in, but I knew that I had to get the hell out of the south, and that's what I wanted to do. A lot of people think that I went to Berkeley to go to graduate school, but I didn't. I went there to live, because I wanted to go to the most radical place, the farthest away I could get. You know, it was Berkeley. And so, with ... I'm not making this up, I had Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*, and I ... he gave three ways for how you

could stow away on an airplane, and so, with a girlfriend named, I'm not kidding, Thelma, I stowed away on an airplane, to Los Angeles, and then we hitched up to Berkeley, and there I did every job under the sun, I hung out at the Pacific Film Archive, I sat in on every lecture I could possible sit in on, especially any lecture on structuralism or semiotics, which I'd actually started learning about, back at the University of Florida.

Constance: So, I was just living there, and then interning at the Pacific Film Archive, so I could get in to see free movies. Tom Luddy, who was the then the director of the Pacific Film Archive, new that Siew Hwa Beh and Sunni Salyer had just brought *Women and Film* up from Los Angeles, and he'd given them a little office in the Pacific Film Archive, and so, four of us, who were all working at the archive, he put us together. And so, that's when we started working on *Women and Film*, and then the four of us who started, Sandy Flitterman and Jan Bergstrom and Liz Lyon and I, we eventually spun off *Camera Obscura* from *Women and Film*, but the excitement of that, I mean, it was like, well one friend of mine, Steve Fagin, said, you grew up in Berkeley, and it was like, I got to do it all over again, to grow up in the most radical place, the farthest away I could get.

Elena: I wanted to ask you about the relationship, in terms of the fields, between the development of feminist film theory and film studies, academic film studies, 'cause you were very much in the mix in that moment. And you have said, in another interview, that no other humanity's discipline has been as shaped by feminism, than film studies, and that's a very powerful statement, that I think we should pause on it. I want you to elaborate on this, and to think about that particular moment, perhaps recollecting on what was that moment like, in the intersection of early feminist work, and then early film, the development of early film studies.

Constance: Okay, time travel, going back, going back in time. I love it when young scholars, young women, come up to me and ask, where did you go to school to study feminist film theory? And I have to say, it didn't exist. We had to make it up. And we had to ... I mean, how do you create a field? And by the way, you don't even know you're creating a field at the time, you're just doing what you're feeling passionate about, but you create it by, you have to start the journals, you have to organize film festivals, and conferences, and you just have to get the conversation going. I think one of the reasons why I went into film, was because it was so new, in the academy. And also, I should have ... in graduate school, I should have gone into English, but because that's what I've been trained to do, but I was much more interested in film because so many more people saw films, where I felt ... there was this kind of very populist moment for me. I saw film as having an ability to get across feminists, and so many other ideas, just as a larger, more popular medium, than literature.

Constance: And so, that was one of the reasons why. I also think that one of the reasons why I wanted to go into it, is because it was such a new field, so that meant that you could help create it, and also it wasn't automatically male dominated, so this new field. And so, that was kind of the way it came together, for me, because I wanted to be involved in a medium that was going to be really open to feminism, and I thought should be influenced by feminism. I mean, if I have one project, I want to make feminism popular, and so that was one of the reasons for going into film, and into coming into film, through developing a feminist analysis of it.

Elena: So, I wanted to talk about some of that work that you were doing, and you mentioned both *Women and Film* and the beginnings of *Camera Obscura*, and so, this year, not coincidentally, is the 40 year anniversary of the journal, and of which you were a founding member, and so I wanted you to tell us about the beginnings of the journal, and its relationship to the other kind of journal out of which you came, when you were working as an associate editor, which was *Women and Film*, and can you speak about, also, the collective process that was involved in, but what were the motivating questions that led you to form the journal with your collaborators?

Constance: I think when I'm about 80, if I get there, I think then I might be able to write the story, of what it was like to be able to form a collective, a feminist collective, work together in that way, at a time when we had no models, of how you could possibly do work across activism and academia, so it was all a grand experiment. I think it says a lot that the 40th anniversary issue of *Camera Obscura*, two issues in fact, are around the theme of collectivity. And that, today, that is still a formative notion behind what we do. The idea, and maybe especially now, when we live in this neo-liberal world, that's all about individuals, and you can't even ... and calling of social or socialist, democratic, kind of organizing is poo pooded, although I'm hoping that that's changing, now that it's possible to say the S word again, socialism, now that it's possible to say, maybe capitalism isn't such a great thing. I mean, it's pretty amazing. So that has been a thread running through all of it, how do you organize yourselves in democratic, collaborative ways.

Elena: So was there particular break with *Women and Film*, in terms of just the kinds of questions that *Women and Film* was asking, and that *Camera Obscura* wanted to ask, or was there-

Constance: Everybody think there's a really juicy story there. I mean, of course we've never seen any kind of political project schism, and split up and go many different ways. And the answer to your question is, both juicier and less juicy than you might think. *Women and Film* was very much devoted to doing an archeology of women in film, like how do we discover our history, and our history as filmmakers, but also our history in writing about and organizing around film, and that was such a vital project. And so, when the four of us were brought on board as associate editors, of *Women and Film*, we did that for two years. The reason ... and this has been written about as the *Camera Obscura* editors left *Women and Film*, and when they did it, it killed the journal, and they went on to do this elitist, high theory project, and killed, did I say, *Women and Film*. And that's not at all what happened. *Women and Film* did end, but that ... you know. What we wanted, and we're not finding, with *Women and Film*, was that, yes, we were as interested in women in film in doing that archeology of women in cinema, but we were all influenced by ... we were all fascinated with continental theory.

Constance: We would all go on to study in the Paris film program, but we wanted to do something, a more theoretical project, but we also wanted to work together collectively. And, oh, here's a pretty juicy part of the story. So, when the split happened, when we knew that we were unhappy, and we wanted to do something, we went into mediation. This is so Berkeley. We found someone who is considered the best mediator, a nun, who had mediated, I mean, all kinds of labor issues, and labor management issues, but also mediating between nuns and priests, so we all went to these mediation sessions. And

the conclusion of the mediation session, was that *Women and Film* was organized, basically, just like Exxon, or any other corporate entity, and we weren't, in fact, going to be able, ever, to work collectively. And so, that's how we ended up leaving *Women and Film*, and going off to start *Camera Obscura*.

Elena: That's fantastic. That's interesting. It becomes a labor issue, in a way-

Constance: Over ... I want to say something about that. When there have been splits in *Camera Obscura*, a lot of people might think that they were ideological splits. And they weren't. And almost always, it was around labor issues, and because we're a collective, and how are you going to make it possible to get everything done, while still having that collaborative focus, and so that's always been a big struggle.

Elena: As it still is for us, in our field-

Constance: As it still is for us in all of our fields, but again, we didn't have any models for how to do this, because it had never been done. And when you think back, I mean, in my entire graduate career, for example, I had half a woman professor. She was half in one department, and half in my department, so there were so many obstacles to even thinking about how you could work together, collaboratively. And again, across activism and academia, we really had no models for that.

Elena: Could you talk a bit about, you've talked a bit about the moment of kind of semiotics and psychoanalysis and structuralism being a very strong draw, but you make this move in your study, from moving from thinking about the avant garde, and the film language, and going to more popular cultural forms, and studying television, looking at the cultural production of fans, and moving to talk about slash and science fiction, and popular science. And so I'm wondering, how you think about that transition, or just the kind of moving from what seemed to be very different bodies of knowledge and methods and objects. I'm curious if you wanted to talk about, in terms of your own work, how you ... what objects fascinated you, and how that shift occurred, not that it was a dramatic kind of one, necessarily, but there's obviously a continuum, but I'm curious to hear about ...

Constance: For me, the continuum, is that I think have been so lucky in my career. I have managed to get away with just following my fascinations, and I never even thought of it as a research trajectory. And sometimes I felt as if I'm a little puppy out on a walk, and it's like, sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff, and it's just like, oh, this looks good, I'm gonna go find out what that ... what's going on there. And so, and somehow, as I say, I've been able to get away with it. So the, I think, one of the threads has been, well, working on the avant garde was so critical to our early thinking in *Camera Obscura*, because I remember Umberto Eco saying once, if you want to change an object, you better know everything about how it's constituted, and how it works.

Constance: And so, we set about ... it was a kind of simultaneous study of the avant garde and Hollywood, and the avant garde in classical cinema, and so we knew we wanted to change Hollywood, we knew we wanted to change classical cinema. And so, we knew we had to know everything about classical cinema, but we also had to be able to look

toward women who were experimenting with film, so our early issues, on Jackie Raynal, and Yvonne Rainer, just trying to ... and we weren't ever looking for an essence of feminism in film, or a feminist film aesthetic, but it was always how can we, as feminists, experiment, through film, through writing, to try to change things, to try to come up with new kinds of cinema.

Elena: It's so interesting, the connections between the practices of writing, the idea of experimenting both at the level of the scholarship, because we often think in such ... we can get kind of clouded by a sense of, we must be very objective, and that moment of looking really closely at the text, and the political stakes of close analysis, I think, get lost sometimes, and certain narrations of this moment, and I think the political stakes of looking very closely at the text are really important, but also, I think it's so interesting to look back at that moment in writing, and think about it through the question of the creative labor of scholarship too, and I think your comments kind of speak to that.

Elena: So it's interesting then to say then, okay, there's the question of, female made films, and the kind of the avant garde, and the kind of thinking of a new language, and we know that the call that Mulvey makes, and her essay for kind of seeking another kind of cinema, but I think there's also this way that, you're moved to thinking about slash and fan cultures, is really another way of engaging with female spectatorship and desire, obviously, and so I'm curious if you wanted to say that, so from moving from that moment to kind of what was it that, in the sniffing walk, that fascinated you about fan culture, and what was the encounter that led you to slash in particular.

Constance: Whoa. There's so many ways I could answer that. Let me try it this way, and then maybe I can try it some other ways, but in my cultural chain of being, now, I think of film, Hollywood film, but also international film, and in many ways, what's called independent film. I think of that as elite popular culture. I think about television, which became so huge in our field, that was like ... if we want to look at society for cinema and media studies, but also our field, that interruption, that television, and the feminist study of television, brought to our field, with *Console-ing Passions*, the organization of *Console-ing Passions*, trying to find a place in our field to be able to work on feminism and television and video, so that was very important. So film, elite popular culture. Television, popular culture. Pornography, very popular popular culture.

Constance: I see my work, now, as I've become so much more interested in television, and of course feminist television viewers, which led to my work on female media of fan culture, and pornography. And I find, in television and pornography, I find so many more of the issues and constituents that I care about, than in film. So I guess, once again, I just see this populist streak in my work. And, by the way, even going back to when *Camera Obscura* split off from *Women and Film*, and we were kind of portrayed as elitist high theory, but think about what I was saying about our desire, yes, to do something more theoretical, but to do it in a collective manner, so we wanted to try to democratize our work, our approach, and so that was one of our impulses there too.

Elena: So, I'm curious about the way that, you've mentioned that your work has shifted, and that the material that now really fascinates you is pornography, and so can you talk about that particular moment, and kind of how you moved ... kind of the moment of the

late 80s and the early 90s, in the context of the sex wars, because your work has been very much at the center of the emergence of porn studies, which being now called Porn Studies as a field, so I'm curious about that moment of urgency for you, in engaging and taking pornography seriously. I wonder if you could talk about what the particular events were, things that might encapsulate that encounter.

Constance: I can answer that in a way that takes me back to the work on television, and back to the work on female media fandom, and so my work on television, that was an important move for me. I just was telling you about the importance of Console-ing Passions, and that moment of interruption in our field, with feminists wanting to work on television, and my first essay on television, was for the *Camera Obscura* "Male Trouble" issue, that I edited with Sharon Willis, and it went on to become the *Male Trouble* book, and I did a piece called "The Cabinet of Dr. Pee Wee: Consumerism and Sexual Terror".

Elena: I remember the cover-

Constance: The cover and the entire, yeah, and we had, inside of that, we had an entire dossier on *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. And what that move did for me, was to force me to get out of the text, if you will, although I'd never been completely involved in the text, just as I think semiotic and psychoanalytic accounts of texts are never just ... of course about the text, whatever that might be. And so, to be able to work on Saturday morning's children's television, so to work on *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, I had to respond to Raymond Williams' call for people who study television, to not just look at individual programs, but to look at the televisual flow. This is something that's gonna be so ... you know this so well, to look at the televisual flow, and to look at that program's interactions with all other programs like it, that program's interaction with everything on that network, that program's interaction with the ads around it, and so I ended up doing research in *Advertising Age*, and *Broadcasting Cable*, and looking at the way, to be able to understand the way *Pee Wee's Playhouse* came in as a way to interact with precisely that universe of Saturday morning children's television, and the highly gendered advertising, for girl product and boy product.

Constance: And so, that very much forced me to look at ... already, I was getting into more kind of media industry, industry kind of studies, as well, so that ... So working on television, and working on, shall we say, audiences, rather than the spectator, one of the best issues that we ever did of *Camera Obscura*, 1989, "The Spectatrix", edited by Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, and in that issue, there was 60 contributors, and four scholars, who contributed national surveys. And everyone was asked, what did you think about female spectatorship then, and what do you think now? That question was so productive to everyone, but here's how it's productive for me. I realized that I had never worked on anything like the female spectator, and here, and of course this was my psychoanalytic thinking, I never thought of the male spectator either, but just through the psychoanalytic emphasis on the work of fantasy, and plus all the insights of psychoanalysis about the splitting of the subject, and this extraordinary fluidity and difficulty of desire. I'd never focused on either the male spectator or the female spectator.

Constance: So here, I just discovered these just astonishingly interesting women, who were women who were homemakers and librarians and intensive care nurses and cops, who appropriated and rewrote these mass culture texts, these popular television shows, that featured two men. And we wrote them, we wrote those stories, into pornographic, homoerotic stories, that really took these mass cultural productions, and turned it into work that meant something to their own sexual and social desiring ends, so I just thought this was the most transgressive thing I'd ever seen. So, in my contribution to the "Spectatrix" issue, I said, oh, I found myself not working on the female spectator, but on female television viewers, actual female television viewers. So, with the slash fans, I was so impressed with what they were doing with appropriating and remaking mass produced culture, for their own sexual and social desiring ends. I was also interested in what they were doing as pornography. I hadn't, growing up, I had just never had much exposure to pornography, and *Camera Obscura*, early on, I mean we had never written anything about pornography, I think because we found the debates around it just so low level, and as scholars, there was just so little scholarship on the form out there.

Constance: So we just never covered it. So I have to say, I thought that this was pretty hot stuff. And so, as I hung out with them, and I could never have worked, done ... I mean, we could call it ethnography, I could never have done this if the people I was working with, and eventually writing about, if they didn't ask all the questions that I, as a scholar, would ask. They asked those questions of themselves, like why are we doing what we're doing? What kind of ... why are we producing all these stories, and what are our ethics around producing all these stories, and forming a community of women, to produce these stories? And why in the world did we write these stories, these totally hot stories, with these two guys, Kirk and Spock, at the beginning? Why did we do this? So, in hanging out with them, and then eventually writing feminism psychoanalysis, and the study of popular culture, and then for *Technoculture*, that I did with Andrew Ross, "Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology", and then writing about slash fandom, in my *NASA/TREK* book, one of the things I discovered, was that not one of the women in fandom would call herself a feminist.

Constance: And so, I set about trying to find out why that was the case, because when I read their stories, when I looked at their practice, the transgressive practice, of women rewriting male dominated mass culture, when I hear them talking about their mundane lives, their live outside of fandom, the fans were down the line equality and justice feminists. So here's what I concluded, during, you will remember, well maybe not quite as far back as me, but during the 70s, 80s, the 90s, the aughts, the popular perception of feminism was that it was one in the same with anti-pornography, and I'm astonished to so many degrees, it's still the same today. There's still so many people who think that. And that's, in part, fostered by a media that would much rather write the juicy story of feminism, once again degenerating into a moral decency or public hygiene movement, than writing about the actual complexity of feminist thought around sexual expression.

Constance: But this is what the slash fans thought, and they also, I think, perceived that all feminism was anti-porn, and I think they also thought that feminism worked largely for white professional women. I concluded that the slash fans were rejecting feminism, before feminism had a chance to reject them, because think about the slash fans. They were

pornographers, and they loved sex, they really loved men, so if feminism was against all those things, then they couldn't possibly be feminist. So that was one of the things I set about doing. Remember I said earlier, that if I had a project in my life, I wanted to make feminism popular? It was the slash fans, again, I'd had very little exposure to pornography, and it was the slash fans that inspired me. I saw what they, and so many other people, thought about feminism, that it was one in the same with the anti-porn movement. I knew that wasn't the case. I knew that there were many more feminists in academia like me. I mean, we could say, pro-sex, anti-censorship feminists. So, I thought, how can I get another image of a feminist out there circulating? What if I were to teach a course on pornography? I bet it would get a lot of attention, and it did.

Constance: So, in 1993, at UC Santa Barbara, I started teaching a course on pornography, and when I was first at UC Santa Barbara, I was in half in women's studies, and half in film studies, and I had to decide where I was going to teach the course, and I knew that, if I wanted to teach it, just like any other film and media studies course, if I wanted students to address it as a film in popular culture, as a genre in an industry, I would have to do it in film and media studies, so that's where I did it. And that whole project was, what happens if we don't start by asking, is it art or not, is it deviance or not, or is it feminist or not. But just ask all the questions of it, that we would ask of any other instance of film in popular culture, any other genre, any other media industry. That, it kind of worked, 23 years later, so that was ... Here's what would happen. Reporters would come to me. They always had the same first question. What do feminists think about your course?

Elena: You're talking to one.

Constance: That's what I said. I said, well, I am a feminist. And I would tell them about *Camera Obscura*, the longest running feminist media journal in English, and I would say, oh, and I'm also a women's studies professor here, and so I am a feminist. And they would go, oh, okay, well what did other feminist think about your course? I replied, I got nothing but interest and support from feminists on my own campus, and from around the country. The reporters would go off and write, Penley's course was massively protested by feminists. Yes. I mean, they just couldn't take it in.

Elena: So, in the interim, what has changed? You're still teaching this class, right, and so I'm wondering how have you ... what are the challenges of teaching porn today, versus the challenges then? Obviously the industry has changed so much, but I'm curious, yeah, both in terms of students too, like what ... now we have these concerns about the sensitivity of sexual images, and the trigger warning, kind of anxieties about trigger warnings, and are we ... do you think there's a certain return to a discourse of the vulnerable spectator? Did we never really leave it? Yeah, so I'm curious, like what has remained from that moment of the sex wars, and what are the new challenges that we're facing, when we teach sexual images in the classroom?

Constance: Elena, there's a good reason why I'm writing this book, *Teaching Pornography*. I got so tired of going to dinner parties, and just as I was getting ready to life the first delicious forkful to my mouth, someone at the table would say, oh, Constance, tell everybody about your porn class. And it would be, you teach a porn class? Why? Well, what is there to teach? What was the response to your class? Was it protested? What goes on

in your class? And so, two hours later, I would finally get to put that forkful in my mouth, so my book, *Teaching Pornography*, is just telling that story, to answer all those questions, so that I can get through a dinner party and eat dinner. And I can say that the book is going to be ... here's the structure of it. The structure of it is, detailing the litany of surprises that I and my students got, when we decided to study pornography the way we would study any other genre, any other instance of film in popular culture, any other industry. And I would say that some of the biggest surprises, first of all, how important humor is in the history of pornography as a form.

Constance: That was a real discovery, to learn that it was ... and this isn't accidentally, this is deliberately, it's a comedic form, so that already, that was the first completely counter-intuitive thing, that we came up with. And then, having the chance to be able to look at films, and even though pre-cinematic history of pornography, to be able to trace it out, and see that there is a minuscule amount of violence in porn, historically, and now, compared to, for one thing, earlier, like exploitation film, but also Hollywood film and television. So, yet again, this is a form. And I think that one of the other surprises, or discoveries, is women's involvement in porn, where they were, in fact, in the audiences, early on, where we didn't know where they were, but certainly now, where there's now something called a feminist porn movement. How did we get there? But, to me, it's so important that this trajectory from the coming out of the work I did on female media fan culture, and slash, right on through that inspiration of being out there, of feminist studying, and now they're doing pornography.

Elena: This links to a question that I have. We talked a bit about your pedagogy, which is so an important part of your work, but I also want to talk about your activism, and your involvement in policy, and how it's interwoven in with your research, or how it informs your research. You've worked really closely with the producers in the porn industry, both bringing them into your classes, but also you've been an advocate in other ways, in really demystifying the adult film industry, and so, for example, you testified in the recent California OSHA hearings, in which a measure was proposed to require the porn industry to ... the compulsory use of condoms, goggles, and rubber gloves in films, which is obviously an attempt to regulate the industry. And you've also been an expert witness in another case, a federal obscenity case against John Stagliano. So I'm curious about, what have these experiences ... like what do they provide in your understanding of our commitments and obligations, as scholars, but I also want you to speak to those experiences themselves, and how they are really informing your understanding of pornography as a cultural form, and its perception in culture. So, I guess it's a two-part question.

Constance: Oh, it's like a 14-part question. As I was saying, my interest in working on pornography was inspired by the slash fans, and by their exuberant writing of pornography, and oh vidding too, and art, just wanting to be out there doing that. And one of the ... there are many inspirations that I got from the slash fans, about the importance of, and influence of their activity. Now slash is a verb. We all know what that is, what kind of transgression that is supposed to represent. What I came to realize, though, was that slash fandom was, among other things, social media before its time, when people first started going onto the internet, and had to figure out how to collaborate, how to create, collaborate, constructively critique, and they didn't know

how to do that, without flaming, and everything else. Well Henry Jenkins called that the fanification of the internet, because fans, that's what they had been doing with their zine production, their vids, their formation as a community, like how do you create a safe space for women creating, and being able to figure out ways to work together. So social media before its time. I also understood that slash fan culture was feminist porn before its time, so that too, was that inspiration that got me to porn.

Constance: In the way that I structure my class, it was able to get me and my students into understanding that what we're doing in media studies, it's not just analyzing texts, and reading off ideological meanings, all from them, and ideological meanings off, this is what these works mean for spectators, for viewers, but you have to go and look at the entire productive process, you have to look at everything else. Because I was teaching my course at UC Santa Barbara, I am so close to the adult industry, right there in the San Fernando Valley, North Hollywood, so I've been able to invite, as guest lecturers in my class, all of the leading lights and working stiffs of the adult film industry. And my students interact with them, can understand everything about it, not only from all the films we watch, beginning in 1907, which is the earliest one I have, but also being able to understand every aspect of this media, of this media industry.

Constance: What I also learned, again, going back to the slash fans, was their tactics. When I was honored, three years ago, by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, every year they choose a scholar and a writer, and so I was the scholar who was honored that year, and Neil Gaiman was the writer. The theme of the conference that year was adaptations, and appropriations, and so that was why they asked me. And I saw this as a wonderful opportunity to give a talk on everything that I had learned from slash tactics. So I was able to present, certainly my work on pornography, and teaching pornography, which had been inspired by the fans. But also, I looked at the way slash tactics had allowed me to get my way into all kinds of other institutional contexts. The very first one that I talked about, was a project, a large public art project, that I think I'm more proud of than almost anything I've done in my life, which is a primetime art, by the GALA Committee, as seen on *Melrose Place*.

Constance: And starting in 1995, crazy, crazy project, where nearly 100 artists, mostly students, by the way, started off as a minor hat, and then we were able to collaborate with television cast and crew of *Melrose Place*, to ... and you can imagine, from a fan perspective, to be able to go into the belly of the beast, so artists, collaborating with the producers of Aaron Spelling's primetime soap opera *Melrose Place*, to be able to ... we were given the scripts of *Melrose Place*, we were given our own characters, story arcs. We ended up creating nearly 200 art pieces, and objects, that appeared in 45 episodes of *Melrose Place*. This is now written up in the art history books, as a major collaboration between artist and television producers. And what we were trying to do there, we get written about as guerrillas, but really, what were trying to do was, we wanted to figure out ways to use art to make better television, but also to use television to make better art.

Constance: And so, this huge collaborative project, and we're gonna be having a reunion of this, coming up next September. So the idea that you could go inside a television program, and rewrite it from the inside, to fit your own sexual and social desiring ends, was just remarkable. There too, that was slash tactics. So, when I am giving my keynote at the

International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, I talked about pornography, I talked about the Melrose Place project, big public art project, and I also talked about the way I've been able to take slash tactics to popular science. The under title of my *NASA/TREK* book, or *NASA slash Trek*, is *Popular Science and Sex in America*. And that has continued to be the two tracks of my work, popular science, which I'll talk about in a second, and popular sex, and of course that's pornography. So I was able to talk about this project called DigitalOcean: Sampling the Sea. I got a very large MacArthur Digital Media and Learning grant, to do this project, which was about seeding the ocean with social media, for research, education, and civic engagement.

Constance: This project, I was the lead principle investigator of the project, and the co-principle investigators were the dean of the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management, and the director of the Marine Science Institute, and the professor of communication, all at UCSB. So, pretty good for a humanities scholar.

Elena: Right, you're making those connections that we see, happening rather early, between the kind of technologization and science, that you see this in your work, that you were kind of always ahead of the curve-

Constance: *Technoculture*.

Elena: The cyborg, the Haraway work, you brought that to kind of a public place.

Constance: So you can imagine my delight, when I got all of these scientists running around saying, yes, we're creating a fan base for the world's ocean.

Elena: That's fantastic. What a great convergence, of all the kind of areas of your research, and it kind of scaled out on to a kind of climatological horizon, or ecological horizon.

Constance: This comes back to Society for Cinema Media Studies. Imagine my delight, two years ago, when we were able to announce the two newest scholarly interest groups, Environmental Media, and Adult Film History. I thought, my work is done. I mean, they were not fields, and now they are, now they are. So, with my porn class, teaching that is such a lesson for me and my students, about everything that a media scholar has to do these days. What teaching pornography has taught me, is all of the ways that media scholars can and should be out there, in the world, of the larger media industries, but also the world of policy. I've had chances to do that. One of the ways in which I was able to do that was, I was asked to be an expert witness in the largest federal obscenity trial that had gone on in Washington DC in at least two decades, and that was when the artist, filmmaker, studio head, John Stagliano, of Evil Angel, was charged on seven counts, for videos that he hadn't produced himself, but that were produced by the star directors in his studio. I was called in to do this, because there have been so few scholars who could contribute to anything like, any kind of expert testimony, but also, friend of the court briefs.

Constance: I've been part of friends of the court briefs for children's media, violence on television, but we have not had, up until now, any kind of critical mass of scholarship, that could

allow us to be experts, to inform debate, to inform legislation, to inform policy, so that's one of the things that teaching pornography has allowed me to do, and of course, now, it's something that there are many more of us, who are going to be able to do, in the scholarly interest group, in adult film history, that represents a great deal of that activity. So, what does it mean to be a scholar, to come in and be able to testify in the defense of adult materials, to be able to say how, and whether these materials are not lacking in literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. That was what I was able to do, in this case, and I do think that ... which, by the way, collapsed ignominiously. The government just did not know what it was doing. And this was such a superb learning moment for me, because the attorneys who were working on *United States vs. John Stagliano*, the attorneys for the defense were two of Larry Flynt's attorney, the attorney who got the posthumous pardon for Lenny Bruce, the attorney who successfully defended Dennis Barry, the director of the Cincinnati Museum, in the Mapplethorpe Case.

Constance: And so, I was able to learn so much from them, and I hope they were able to learn something about how scholarship on porn can be able to contribute. There was this wonderful moment, when my students took on the project of transcribing *Storm Squirters 2: Target Practice*, *Milk Nymphs*, and *Fetish Fanatics 5*, the charged videos, which were all kind of women's play parties, of female ejaculation, which the government had decided was the worst thing in the land, then they should send this man to prison for 36 years, and charge him a seven million dollar fine, and confiscate his entire business. And yeah. So my students transcribed all the videos for me, to help me with my testimony, and to help the attorneys, and so, for that moment, my class turned into the innocence project for porn, and I am now incorporating that into my classes, where my students are involved in looking at and interacting with the people who are taking on all the ways in which porn is being censored, is being regulated out of existence, so that has changed my pedagogy, because my students are so active now, in whatever it is I'm doing.

Elena: And it's interesting, in that case, because it's the legal concerns, in so many ways, the limit and prescribed ... the incapacity to even see the text. There's a certain unwillingness to even look at the object, and so that it's an interesting way to return, also, to what we've been talking about, about thinking of being close to the text, and kind of knowing it, in that way. And your using your space of pedagogy to also do this work, in defense of a cultural industry that is quite important.

Constance: Yes.

Elena: I had a question that came up for me, also, just relating to pornography in a way, about class, and you've written a lot about class, and it's a thread that you ... it came up for me, that it's this really interesting place, that maybe class and taste, and in your essay, the "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn", it's fair, but I think, in the way that you have been narrating your interest in ... the emergent interest in pornography through slash fandom, but also the kind of ways in which sexual pleasure, in some ways, gets classed, vis-a-vis what are conceived of male or female popular cultural modes, but that's really also a really important thread, I think, in your work, that

I am interested in thinking about with you. I don't know if you have any thoughts about it.

Constance: Yes. Issues of class, taste, and humor, have become important to me. I don't want to say have become important to me. A better way to say it would be, I just had to recognize that these were such vital features of the work and constituencies I was looking at, that was just not acknowledged anywhere else. So in the "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn" piece, which is a little autobiographical, I mean I do, you probably saw that I, in a tiny cheek manor, but also completely seriously, do work in my white trash cracker background. Like, for example, claiming that there's no other ... there's no more important training for understanding semiosis, and the work of distinction, than growing up white trash, so really, how do we deploy our class position, for resistance, but also as another way in to knowledge. So in that essay, I've been so gratified and fascinated by how people have responded to it. And I didn't realize that I was kind of introducing class into contemporary porn studios, and kind of into media studies in some ways too, and feminist media studies. So, in that essay, I wanted to look at the importance of class, taste, and humor, in porn, as a genre. And I wanted to look at something that had surprised me in looking at porn historically, because I kept coming across all these films, where the men in the film were completely mocked and derided and sent up-

Elena: *Getting His Goat.*

Constance: *Getting His Goat.* *Getting His Goat* is a great example of that, where men are sent up for their sexual and social ignorance, and often at the hands of these trickster women, who know exactly what they want. And so, I kept seeing this over and over again, and I also kept seeing this male production, masculine production, of things for men, everything from the stag films, right on through ... I looked at Howard Stern, and "Beavis and Butthead", and I just went into why is it that we seem to have, in our culture, quite a few instances of men critiquing masculinity, even in the heart of that most reviled form, that is pornography. So here's where I think I, I'll just say it this way, took off my film scholar hat, and put on my popular culture, my cultural studies hat, and if those of us who study popular culture, we know that, for something to be popular, to appeal, that it has to appeal, not only to our desires, but to our anxieties, not only to our pleasure, but to our cognition.

Constance: And also, it has to have some kind of utopian element there, because each and every one of us wish that we lived in a different and better world. And so, this helped me answer, so men are drawn to porn, not for their desires, their pleasures, but what if, just as we acknowledge that people think with their popular culture, why can't we acknowledge that maybe men think with their porn. And what's going on here, why would men make these films, that are supposed to be for the pleasure of other men, and they're like completely making fun of masculine pretension, and privilege, and hypocrisy. I thought this was pretty great. So, but you have to come at that, so you have to be able to look at how the films were distributed and consumed. The stag films which were silent, but they're shown in all these men's venues, the back of barbershops, and fraternal lodges, and fraternity houses, and so what I discovered, was that there is a critical conversation about masculinity, going on in porn.

Constance: And first of all, if it's a conversation that's speech, and should be protected, but also, that should be a great interest to feminists, that there is this critical conversation about masculinity, going on in porn. And so, that's one of the reasons why we should be interested in it, and why would we not think that that wouldn't be the case. That's a double negative, but you get what I mean.

Elena: And it's such a critical point, I think, that sometimes one dances around it, but this is ... it took knowledge in a certain way, that pornography has long been ... it's not owned, necessarily, by masculinity, but it is a form made for and by men, and so that, at the same time, what's fascinating about it, I think, to both of us, is that element of reflexivity, that is bound up in it, about that kind of male anxiety about their own pleasure, that gets manifested throughout the mode, but I think it's important to acknowledge it as a locus for, and to take it seriously, and I think so much of your work is so much about taking pleasure seriously, whomever it may be, but to take it seriously, and to have these high bound distinctions between this kind of false binaries and oppositions in place.

Constance: And all the ways in which lewd humor is important to that cultural work, and why I have ... and again, this is the class issue, the way in which Larry Flynt and "Hustler" have always insisted on that class dimension, and on our ability to deploy lewd humor against all forms of hypocrisies and pretensions, social, political, moral, so I keep rediscovering my populism, don't I?

Elena: It's important. I think the question of populism leads me to thinking about kind of where you feel kind of the future of university level film media study might be headed. Why is it important to study film media? I think you've already given a great précis, but I think your status, so you're very invested in publicness, and that connection with the urgency of that kind of enacting that populism through the work that is not just about being in the classroom, not just doing the research, but engaging with the public. So I'm wondering whether ... is that an important element of what you think film and media, and moving image, is so pervasive now? I'm curious what you think about the field, as it's changed, or where you think it's going, what are its most pressing concerns going forward.

Constance: An example of where the field can go, what we can do as scholars, I'll just give one example, of something that I tried to do. With my colleague, Jennifer Holt, who heads up The Media Industries Project, in the Carsey-Wolf Center, we ... she wrote the book *Media Industries*. She's been the person. She also wrote *Empires of Entertainment*. Everything that happened in the media industries, but also in our culture, since the Reagan era deregulation, so we're friends, we're always talking. All of her work is around indecency. All of my work is around obscenity, a great deal. So when we're talking to each other ... and we realized that no one ever puts the two of them together. Even though, in all legal cases, most have concluded that both obscenity law and indecency law is arbitrary and capricious, and of course completely politicized, and all about moralizing. And so, we decided that we wanted to put on a conference. We called it "Dirty Sexy Policy", and it was ... and we wanted to look at, you know, okay, where are we now, with the contents and the conduits? Where are we with our media industries

infrastructures now, and all the policy that is being devised around the content and the conduits?

Constance: And so, we brought together all the leading people who are working on broadband infrastructure issues. We brought in former FCC commissioner. We brought in the leaders of the Free Speech Coalition, from the adult industry. We brought in the chief technology writer for "XBIZ World". And so, it was journalists, policy makers, scholars, and this was ... we were certainly talking about the kind of ... the media texts, but it is the conduits and the contents, where are we now with this. And the only way we could approach this, was to bring the two together, and bring together the scholars, and the policy makers, and the pornographers, to be able to do it.

Elena: To have a big tent model, that includes all the stakeholders.

Constance: Yes. That was a good way of saying it. How do you do media studies, and bring in all the stakeholders?

Elena: What would your advice be to budding film and media scholars, and particularly feminist media scholars, just starting in the field?

Constance: When Dana Poland was at USC, he taught a grad seminar on professionalization, where he would bring in noted scholars, to be able to talk about their intellectual trajectory, and how they'd fashioned a career for themselves. And Dana asked me. I said, Dana, I am the worst person to kind of give anybody advice, because I didn't do it the way anybody else did it. I never even planned to go to graduate school. I just, I moved to Berkeley, stowed away on an airplane to go to Berkeley, to live there, not to go to graduate school. And every single thing I've done, it was I was following out a political fascination, or a personal fascination, and I said I never published my dissertation, for example, because my committee thought it was very good and very publishable, but it was completely formalistic, the word feminism was nowhere mentioned in it, it was the one time I had to do something completely under the thumb of the institution. And so, I said, I'm really bad, I can't give advice here. So I guess I'm saying the same thing, all I can say is, I just followed my fascinations.

Elena: Follow your pleasure, because it's also your ... for the place of cogitation, right, that's the ... they're not separated. So, as we've already been clearly discussing that your work is really at the center of the emergence of porn studies as a field, then I'm really interested in what, if there's anything you'd like to observe about this developing field of research within film media studies. You're on, obviously, an advisory board of a journal called *Porn Studies*. We've recently seen the development of Adult Film History, a special interest group at SCMS. At the same time, the study of porn seems, in certain ways, still somewhat marginalized in our field, and is there still a sense that this work is something that should be done on the side, or in terms of career or professionalization concerns, not as one's primary research strand, or something that's saved until after tenure. Are we, as porn scholars, or adult film historians, still engaged in a battle for legitimacy?

Constance: The reverend Pat Robertson had something to say about this, in a special of the 700 Club, on godlessness in public schools. Pat Robertson denounced my class. He said ... well, he first called it a new low in humanist excess. I'm using that as a blurb in my book, *Teaching Pornography*. And then he said, a feminist teaching pornography? That's like Scopes teaching evolution. Greatest compliment of my life, and I get it from the reverend Pat Robertson. And by the way, I did not see that on the 700 Club. You know who saw it, and told me about it?

Elena: Who?

Constance: David Bordwell. Like okay, what was David Bordwell doing watching the 700 Club? Anyway, so he saw that. So, for Pat Robertson, the question was, why, on this issue especially, would a feminist ally herself with science? A feminist teaching pornography, that's like Scopes teaching evolution. So I actually have a whole chapter of the feminist porn book ... of my *Teaching Pornography* book, on that, just parsing that. In what conceptual universe is a feminist teaching pornography, like this high school teacher, science teacher, in Tennessee, teaching evolution, teaching science, when it was against Tennessee state law to do that. So, when it comes to pornography, people can't even imagine that it could be taught. Certainly it couldn't be taught by a feminist. We know where feminists are supposed to be on that. They're supposed to denounce it, not study it. But that's an idea that I think a lot of us have, that's very much out there. So, bringing it into the academy, and bringing it, we have to ... it's a delicate operation, how we're going to do it.

Constance: I think that ... and I have graduate students, who will do one chapter of whatever it is, on pornography. They might want to do the entire dissertation on pornography, but they don't want to go out there on the job market as a porn scholar. There are already many brilliant and brave people, who are doing it. And so, I think that it's going to happen. But we just have to keep going back and back. Film wasn't a proper discipline. Film had no place in the academy. Feminism had no place in the academy. And there are some scholars, but also anti-porn people, who think pornography has no place in the academy. So, I just ... it's helpful, I think, for all of us, to just keep going back, and to see there was a moment when the things that we care most passionately about, that's our lives and our vocations and our politics and our careers, that did not exist in the academy, and we just had to do it.

Elena: So you've been working on this *Teaching Pornography* book, that's in process, and will be out soon, but I'm curious about if you have new projects, that will no doubt bring together all these strands of your interest and your work, that you're working on for the future.

Constance: I have one project that's quite recent, but it goes all the way back, all the way back to my work on female media fan culture, and specifically on slash fan culture. And with two slash fans, and writers, and convention organizers, we are going to be doing *The Slash Book*. This was inspired by the feminist porn book, which was the first collection to bring together writings by feminist porn scholars, and feminist porn producers, to be in conversation with each other. So we decided that ... well, the fans themselves, they have seen how known and influential this secret thing that they used to do, how

influential it is. And they are coming to realize, yes, slash was, as I said, early feminist pornography, social media before its time. I think prescient queering of culture. And also, a strong contribution to masculinity studies. And also, you can imagine that the fans are a little pissed off, because they see bad *Twilight* fan fic getting turned into this billion dollar *Fifty Shades of Gray* phenomenon, and so they know the creativity that's there in their fan culture. And so, they're not so interested, anymore, in hiding out, and hiding what they do. So, we decided that we wanted to do this book of fans and scholars, in conversation, to be able to just get out there, this contribution that this female and feminist project has been able to contribute.

Elena: That's fantastic. So, thank you so much, Connie. It's been just an honor and a pleasure to talk to you.

Constance: I can't imagine a better interlocutor.

Elena: Thank you.

Constance: Thank you.