

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

October 7, 1998

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MORE MINUTES OF FAME: UCSB'S CONSTANCE PENLEY IS ON A ROLL

Constance Penley has found a handy way to get in touch with long lost friends---be named by Rolling Stone magazine as among the eight most dangerous minds in America and appear as a commentator for the Sci-Fi Channel's remastered, special edition of the original Star Trek series.

"I've been hearing from friends from my undergraduate days---and I'm not going to say how long ago that was," said Penley, professor and chair of UC Santa Barbara's Department of Film Studies. Her appearance on a television program that includes interviews with William Shatner and other Star Trek cast members and the nod from Rolling Stone has kept her phone busy and her e-mail jammed.

An article in Rolling Stone magazine profiled "notorious" academics whose scholarly works have been targets of outrage and centers of controversy. Penley was cited for her pioneering work in presenting pornography as a legitimate subject for film study.

"The Rolling Stone honor was in fact earned awhile ago, because I started teaching the course in 1993. The student reaction has always been very positive, although they complain that the films are boring and I grade too hard. But they say that about all my classes!" Penley said. "At the time I didn't feel dangerous so much as endangered. Teaching pornography as a film genre is more acceptable now."

Acceptable enough to require a textbook: Linda Williams, UC Berkeley professor of film studies and rhetoric; Susie Bright, radical sex writer and UC Santa Cruz lecturer; and Penley are writing a book for academics interested in teaching such a course, titled "Porn 101."

When Penley first began teaching the class five years ago, she had to develop materials for the course, and fortuitously found historical films from the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco. An organization called the Santa Barbara County Citizens Against Pornography vociferously opposed the course's existence at its first offering. The stir did not end there.

"Pat Robertson denounced the class on his evangelical talk show, the '700 Club,' as well," Penley said. "In a special on godlessness and public schools, Robertson said that 'a feminist teaching pornography is like Scopes teaching evolution'."

Penley seems to thrive on controversy. She took on Carl Sagan, the Challenger disaster, Star Trek and "slash" fiction in her exploration of the role of space travel in popular culture in a book titled, "NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America" (Verso, 1997), which in turn captured the attention of scientists who reviewed the book favorably in "Nature," "New Scientist," and "Space Policy." She also captured the attention of the producers of the Star Trek program.

"I am not so much a fan of Star Trek as I am a fan of the fans of the show," said Penley, who provides an academic's perspective to the 80-episode series. "I have spent the past 12 years studying the women who write pornography about Star Trek in so-called 'slash' fiction. The 'slash' serves as a code for same-sex relationships, as in 'K/S' for Kirk and Spock, in the amateur fan magazine (fanzine) world."

Penley's "pop culture moment" is not over yet. She has co-organized a "Public Affairs" panel on the ever unfolding Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr events for Thursday, Oct. 8 on campus, challenging anyone to come forth to present a fresh viewpoint on Starr et al. All participants are encouraged to wear navy blue dresses.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary

collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.