Too close to see: men, women, and webcams

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Abstract
Internet studies researchers should consider how internet spectators are addressed and encouraged to engage. In this article, I offer some basic comments about internet spectatorship and present a detailed analysis of the ways in which spectatorship operates in the women’s webcam form. Webcam spectators may have less control than they expect because women webcam operators exert authority and achieve agency through their visibility. Feminist considerations of spectatorship and the gaze offer important methods for considering these representations, and suggest how viewing positions are being revised. Spectators are in a position that has been associated with women and is believed to be undesirable because of their nearness to the computer screen. The cultural and technological reconceptualization of spectatorship and the particular aspects of women’s webcams offer some unique opportunities to intervene in the ways that looking at and categorizing bodies produces gender and sexual difference.

Key words
cam • feminism • film theory • gaze • gender • internet • spectatorship • web • webcam
INTRODUCTION
In this article, I consider the kinds of spectatorial positions that are produced by women’s webcams and the ways that being visual, looking, and gazing are restructured by this form. Women’s webcams can be defined as free and low-cost webcams that present ‘lifecam’ images of women in their homes, rather than ‘pornographic’ sites that sell webcam shows and other salacious material to the spectator. Users may correlate the webcam to the referential or reality-producing aspects of photography, because linking a camera to a computer produces these images. This association makes webcams appear to deliver ‘real’ bodies and environments. However, the presence of the camera, varied web site elements, blurred or static-infused views, delivery problems, and operators who resist spectators’ demands are the more common aspects of webcams. Women’s webcams do not provide spectators with an empowered gaze or access into private domains, despite rhetorical promises. Women maintain control of their representations and develop a form of power through the ways in which they become visible.

Webcams act as a troubling mirror onto similarity and difference because they can propel spectators to see the way that they must seem in front of the computer. This suggests that the spectator is involved, or even intricately bound-up, with versions of his or her own image. Computer and webcam spectators are intimately close to the screen or even too close to see. The privileging of a distant male subject position, which is figured in such media as traditional Hollywood film, will probably become less viable as computers are increasingly incorporated into varied situations. At this point in time, the diverse valuation and functionality of the computer leaves the spectator uneasily shifting between privileged seeing and an abject near-blindness.

There are currently some unique opportunities to intervene in the ways in which gender, race, class, and sexual difference are produced through spectatorship. Radical interventions into webcams and other internet technologies can have an effect on this developing medium and prevent empowered male spectatorship from being reinstituted through closeness. Modes of opposition that women webcam operators use include highlighting their control of the apparatus, establishing an empowered gaze by seeing things that the spectator cannot view, and being visible and visibly not available. The mediated appearance of women webcam operators and the tactics of other internet producers who construct versions of their intimate selves through weblogs, home pages, and photo archives suggest that societal sentiments about visibility – at least among many internet users – are shifting. Critically studying these developments is imperative in order to understand the ways in which authority is mediated through empowered looking, submission, and even controlling visibility.
THE LOOK AND THE GAZE

In this article, I employ feminist theories about spectatorship, looking, and the gaze in order to suggest how women are empowered through their use of webcams and become visible in controlled ways. This feminist literature does not specifically address computers, but it does provide an important set of theoretical concepts for discussing spectatorship and the gaze. There is a wealth of feminist and gender scholarship that considers how the gaze, which can be defined as a form of power-laden staring, produces and enforces gendered positions. Webcams certainly have the potential to reinforce gender norms and provide erotic views. However, webcams also offer women a heightened level of control over their representations. This argument is different than the kind of feminist analysis that presumes that visual media technologies are always part of an objectifying process that permits viewers to look upon and possess women’s bodies.

In her work on Hollywood film Laura Mulvey (1975) has argued that the subject of the gaze – the person who looks – is male and the object of the gaze is female. She ‘attributed the polarity of gender, of masculinity versus femininity, to the very structures of pleasure and identification in the classical cinema’ (Mayne, 1994: 48). Considering how webcams and other internet technologies function, the concepts that make images seem real, and the tendency to privilege certain spectators, can disable the more limiting aspects of the gaze and its production of binary gender. A number of scholars, including Mulvey (1981) and Mary Ann Doane (1991), have reconsidered the idea that the gaze is a purely patriarchal structure and tried to develop a set of strategies to empower the female spectator.

Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek present a more gender-neutral conception of the gaze. They describe it as ‘the medium of control (in the guise of the inspecting gaze) as well as of the fascination that entices the other into submission (in the guise of the subject’s gaze bewitched by the spectacle of power)’ (1996: 3). They make it clear that compliance and power can be the products, as well as the instigators, of the gaze. However, certain kinds of heterosexual white masculinity still result in privileged forms of looking. The rendering of the computer as an empowering device and its association with straight, white, and Western subjects is troubling when it seems to provide access to physical environments and bodies. A consideration of spectatorship and webcams can show how incapacity also circulates in this medium. Such studies can further disable entitled male users and programmers whose position was partially disarmed with the reporting of the dot com bust.

Visually and textually analyzing women’s statements, web pages, and webcams indicates how women webcam operators intend for their sites to be perceived. Close readings also function as a form of proof for my
theoretical arguments. An understanding of the webcam form is achieved by examining the literature on webcams, the ‘history’ of webcams, the ways in which such terms as ‘real-time’ inform spectatorship, women’s role in running the technology and designing webcam sites, the ways in which women regulate spectatorship, conflicts between operators and spectators, how viewing and voyeurism malfunction, and the ways in which operators seem to look back. The advent of such internet technologies as webcams demands that we reconceptualize the ways in which the spectator is structured to look, as well as what the spectator sees. The gaze of internet users and computer forms of spectatorship remain largely unconsidered despite their obvious importance. I hope to rectify this gap in the internet studies literature and encourage further writing in the field by providing information about how internet and webcam spectatorship functions, suggesting how the literature has misrepresented the webcam form, and indicating some theoretical models that can explain computer and internet spectatorship.

CRITICAL AND JOURNALISTIC CONSIDERATIONS OF WEBCAMS

There have been a variety of popular and critical considerations of webcams that focus on the voyeuristic aspects of the medium and the ‘unbecoming’ ways in which women become visible. Jesse Berst (1998) refers to webcam viewing as ‘virtual voyeurism’. John Dvorak (2000) describes the operator as an ‘exhibitionist who positions a cam on herself to titillate young boys’. In Howard A. Landman’s (1999) ‘Sonnets to JenniCam’, the potentially submissive aspects of being looked at are underscored by highlighting the spectator’s ‘gaze’ and the ways in which the operator ‘offers up unto the world golden apples for our eyes’. Katharine Mieszkowski (2001) expresses concern about ‘the spectacle of teenagers displaying themselves’ with webcams. Such comments suggest that women webcam operators too willingly relent to the sexual passions of men and enable traditional forms of spectatorship by offering themselves up to the male gaze.

Dvorak’s (2000) assessment that ‘there’s something creepy about having a camera pointing at you as you work’ is understandable, because descriptions suggest that webcams extend the spectator’s body and sight into the operator’s domain and are an intensified kind of voyeurism. Campanella argues that webcams ‘are a set of wired eyes, a digital extension of the human faculty of vision’ (2000: 23). He briefly discusses the possibility that images are faked or pre-recorded (Campanella, 2000) but continues to support the idea that webcams allow us to ‘watch the real thing’ (Campanella, 1997b). Simon Firth also describes these representations as a direct recording of reality or even as an unmediated physicality when he
suggests that what women’s webcams ‘share is a fidelity to the moment’ (1998). Even if there ‘isn’t that much to see’ (Shaviro, 1999), the ability to look is always presented as a key aspect of this form.

Webcams are believed to facilitate otherwise unattainable views and to enable entrances into distant lands and private domains. Campanella rhapsodizes that he has ‘never set foot in Jerusalem, yet on most days I see the faithful gather at its Western Wall’ (1997a). Sandra Blessum (1999) – a user of the Africam site that delivers images of game reserves – argues: ‘I may never get to SA (although I wish I could) but I go there EVERY day.’ The webcam is believed to facilitate spectatorial closeness to otherwise distant terrain and bodies. Brooke A. Knight indicates that ‘we feel close to those with whom we communicate online, but are physically distanced from them through servers and wires’ (2000: 22). Mieszkowski (2001) suggests that webcams ‘offer a strange mixture of distance and intimacy’. However, the computer spectator’s closeness to the computer is never correlated to these rendered forms of intimacy.

Kristine Blair and Pamela Takayoshi (1997) briefly suggest that the webcam operator Jennifer Ringley may have some control over her male spectators’ view. However, they conclude that the ‘addressed and invoked audience for Jennifer’s site is male, a creation of an image by a woman for a man’. Blair and Takayoshi’s analysis of internet spectatorship is incorrect and potentially damaging to feminist politics, visibility, and empowerment.

In this article, I refute most of the ideas presented in the webcam literature and suggest that there are positive political aspects of women’s webcams. Women webcam operators employ resistant modes of address and never fully produce their images for the male gaze. I intend to avoid replicating Victor Burgin’s (2000), Mieszkowski’s (2001), and other writers’ belief that only girls or young women engage in webcams and thereby reduce webcams to a childish practice, a transitional stage, and ‘rights of passage’ (Burgin, 2000). A productive cultural analysis must acknowledge the different people who use the internet at the same time as it attempts to theorize the ways that internet systems function. Only a study that addresses both personal statements and larger genre-wide trends can indicate the significant ways in which looking and being looked at empower and subdue the individual.
WEBCAMS

A consideration of the aspects of webcams facilitates a clearer understanding of how spectators engage. Webcams are sometimes called cams, livecams, homecams, or netcams. They periodically make images available to other internet users through a web page (Free On-line Dictionary of Computing [FOLDOC], 1999). The webcam may deliver images as frequently as every few seconds or it may not deliver any image, or at least any representation of something that is currently happening in front of the camera. A higher bandwidth can facilitate ‘streaming video’, which may be described as ‘moving images’, but it still provides the spectator with a staccato view or a sequence of stills (What Is, 1999b). Despite these delivery problems, various internet dictionaries and webcam sites suggest that one of the key aspects of webcams is ‘liveness’ and the way that it delivers ‘real-time’ images.

The discourse about real-time is an important aspect of the internet and works to make settings seem real. Real-time events occur at roughly the same speed that they would in ‘real life’ so the highly simulated aspects of computer technologies are easier to displace. Real-time is understood as ‘sufficiently immediate’ (What Is, 2000). Computers or other technologies produce real-time but this facilitation is displaced. Maggie Morse argues that ‘computers allow duration to be simulated in a way that disguises the large amount of processing of information going on inside the black box’ (1998: 22). Real-time makes images seem like a physical setting that can be looked upon and entered by the spectator.

The photographic aspects of webcam images also encourage the spectator to engage with internet representations as if they were a physical reality. The webcam is defined as a ‘camera designed to take digital photographs’ (Dictionary.com, 2002). These devices are employed to take ‘portraits’ of the user. However, the photographic and produced characteristics of the webcam sites remain largely unaddressed. Roland Barthes argues that a ‘photograph is always invisible; it is not it that we see’ (1981: 6). The reliance of most individuals on the apparent truth and presence of photography and webcams – what Barthes describes as ‘that-has-been’ (1981: 77) – is based on the assumption that the camera has recorded light traces from an object that was in front of it. Susan Sontag argues that the ‘photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image) an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask’ (1977: 154). Webcams and webcam sites appear to be real and to provide access to material bodies because they direct the user’s attention to the referent – what is depicted – rather than the representation.

Early webcam views of fish tanks and coffee makers appeared to deliver real and unmediated objects because of the simplicity of the depicted visual forms. In 1991, Quentin Stafford-Fraser and Paul Jardetzky, who were
Cambridge University computer scientists, wrote some simple programs so that they could deliver images of their coffee pot over a local network before the advent of the web (Stafford-Fraser, 2001). Such ‘histories’ suggest that the webcam medium began as a way of providing a voyeuristic position with visual access onto a changing spatial environment, since the fish’s position and the level of coffee changed, but at the same time resisted total infiltration into users’ lives and intimate environments. It is also likely that the low resolution of early cam images and the length of time that it took for images to load determined the genre’s conventions. These early chronicles indicate users’ investment in the documentary aspects of webcams, the level of engagement that users had with their computers (since they were unwilling to disengage if there was no coffee), and the ways in which they employed the computer as a tool to map their local environment.

The webcam attains a certain level of realness by borrowing from documentary and autobiographical genres. The presentation of people’s home spaces and personal lives through webcams is related to such documentary explorations as PBS’s *An American Family*, which broadcast the private lives of the Loud family to the public in 1973. Laurie Anderson, Joseph Beuys, Holly Hughes, and Adrian Piper make art that seems to ‘share’ their lives with the audience, while Ana Voog and Julia Scher have employed webcams in their work. Webcams are related to ‘reality television’ shows, including *Cops*, *The Real World*, and *Survivor*. Reality television provides viewers with lifestyle reassurances, since the interactions can be banal, and the voyeuristic thrill of watching ‘real’ people going about their daily lives.

These media forms can provide a background for webcams, but there are also distinct production and spectatorial differences. Reality television shows are usually taped rather than broadcast live, highly edited, and rely on such conventions as hearing the participants’ private conversations to produce meaning. Webcams present individuals in unedited – in the sense that this term is used in television – but still highly mediated real-time. Webcam interactions often remain incomprehensible because most images are not accompanied by any diegetic sound. This means that viewers are reliant on visual cues in order to determine the action. However, ‘action’ may be the improper word to describe empty rooms and images of operators in front of a computer. One webcam operator comments on this problem of inactivity by titling her pop-up window ‘They’re alive!!’ (JennyLee, 2000). She states that ‘The cam will be set at 1 minute refresh (gamers are known to not move for a few hours at a time)’. This suggests that the position of the depicted subjects can be so static that the spectator may not be sure if the cam is delivering new images or a steady stream of the same shot.
In some more complex websites, the presence of multiple webcams as well as the addition of diaries, chat forums, and other chronicles allows the spectator to weave a narrative and provide some form of action. More importantly, these materials contextualize the webcam’s otherwise unstable images and act as meaning-producing mechanisms. These devices suggest that the spectator has a privileged position and can gaze onto a compliant object, since there are multiple ‘entrances’ into the webcam operator’s personal life. Christopher R. Smit argues that ‘because these women, the Other, are available as images, they are seen as objects’ (2000: 133). Even the shape of many webcams, a white orb with a smaller inset lens, is designed to indicate that the webcam facilitates a geographically-unbounded human eye and empowered sight. This design implies that the viewer’s body, or at least eye, has been incorporated into some larger seeing and surveying mechanism. However, impermanent and often illegible webcam images, as well as women webcam operators’ control over sites, suggest a much more ambivalent relationship between the viewing subject and the object of contemplation.

WOMEN AND WEBCAMS
A growing number of women and men present their images on webcam sites. Ringley, who continues to run JenniCam, is often credited with starting the ‘lifecam’ trend in 1996. However, Teresa Senft (2000) has stated that Danni Ashe’s webcam site, which is designed for a ‘pornographic’ market ‘predates Ringley’s by two years’. It seems that Ringley’s combination of innocence and erotic possibility has offered the media a more palatable genre. However, her site was ‘the target of Roman Catholic wrath’ in attempts to ‘instill morality in cyberspace’ (Taylor, 1998) and there was an outcry among JenniCam fans when Ringley publicly documented her involvement with a friend’s boyfriend.

The continued importance of Ringley’s project within the growing webcam subculture is suggested by the inclusion of JenniCam in webcam definitions. ‘Some cams are in people’s offices or homes. Probably the most famous is the Jennicam, which is in the home of a “tall redhead” with a sense of humor’ (What Is, 1999a). Popular, cam, and academic communities have all credited Ringley, rather than a hardware designer, with playing a key part in, or even ‘inventing’, this form. Ringley’s own version of the ‘historical’ narrative focuses on the move from whimsical exploration to the medium’s more weighty implications:

JenniCam was started in April of 1996, when I was a junior in college. It was intended to be a fun way my mom or friends could keep tabs on me, and an interesting use for the digital camera I bought on a whim in the bookstore. I never really contemplated the ramifications of it. (Ringley, 2001b)
The more advanced sites, which run 24 hours a day, offer multiple webcam views, chat forums, and other features, require a monetary investment and a great deal of technical upkeep. I am using the term ‘webcam operator’ in an attempt to emphasize the significant work that women do in technologically, visually, and conceptually sustaining this form. However, women webcam operators’ complex skills are downplayed by the convention of describing them as ‘cam girls’. This term has an unfortunate tendency to aid in the simultaneous infantilization and eroticization of women webcam operators. Even some cam operators are intolerant of certain aspects of the form.

Alicia Grace (2001) tells her spectators: ‘Don’t call me a cam girl! I have a website and it happens to have a cam. I’m not one of those pathetic 14-year-olds that runs around naked to impress some old geezer that will buy her cdnow gift certificates.’ Cydniey (2000) notes: ‘the unfortunate truth is that the word “camgirl” carries with it a springer-esque legend.’ The cam girl label suggests to spectators that women will respond to monetary rewards with personal favors, always be visibly available on the webcam, able to chat and respond to email on demand, recognize individuals by waving or holding up their name to the camera, smile and look happy while they are depicted, offer nude pictures or other salacious material in their archives, and flash their breasts or reveal other parts of their bodies on the webcam. These expectations have caused problems and even contestations within the webcam medium.

Regulating the spectator
Detailed requests or even demands for women webcam operators to reveal themselves are quite common. Aimee (2001c) parodies the conventions of the medium, conceptions of cam girls, and the expectations of spectators by posting the demands of spectators as well as her sarcastic responses. She reacted to a directive that she appear naked by:

offering [to] ‘get out my sequined thong and dance around for you, just like in those strip bars that I secretly work in when I’m not out being a prostitute or making porn movies (you know that all women with web cameras do at least one of these things).

Aimee’s visible efforts to change the behavior of spectators through humiliation and critical commentary is representative of a larger trend among women webcam operators to regulate the spectator and maintain control over their representations. For example, Messy (2002) may offer instant messaging information but she also advises that ‘if she’s busy, PISS OFF!’ Julie (2002) states that if ‘people get out of hand, or outride [sic] rude, I have banned them from my domain’. Through these strategies, women webcam operators force the webcam technology and a set of
presumed promises about the sexual availability and submissiveness of women to fail.

Comments by webcam operators in their rules, FAQs (frequently asked questions), and other postings establish a set of strikingly similar legislated behaviors that spectators must follow if they want to watch and perhaps communicate with the webcam operator. Justice (2000) informs her viewers that ‘You won’t see me naked’ and ‘You won’t see me taking requests to smile, wave, blow kisses’. Cindy (2001) reminds her viewers that ‘I am not your virtual puppet [. . .]. I will not smile for you’. Kathy (2001) states that ‘I don’t do requests and I don’t do nudity. So don’t ask’. Even webcam operators such as Elektric (2001a), who offer more explicit content such as ‘walking around nude’, warn spectators that they should not ‘DEMAND that I do things or perform particular acts, especially in the chat room. I consider that to be extremely rude. I will do what I want to do when I want to do it’. Such comments suggest the ways in which women cam operators establish their power in interactions with spectators.

Assertions by women that they control the apparatus are an essential part of the webcam genre. For example, Aimee (2001b) suggests that webcams are ‘almost like being on your own TV show except that you own the network and make all the decisions. I can broadcast when I like and what I like’. Saksi (2002) argues that ‘nobody can tell you what to do or what not to do. It is a very creative and controllable form of expression’. Andi (2002) believes that not charging for her site allows her to be ‘really in control of it’. It is always clear that the webcam is contained within the woman webcam operator’s terrain and that the view may be terminated at any time. Even in cases where the technical maintenance or the economics of pay sites are managed by a boyfriend, husband, or some other person, the woman operator still largely determines the ways in which she addresses the webcam from moment to moment. Women assert control over when they are available and what can be seen, even though they may design sites in which their bodies are represented as erotic objects and allow their spectators – both male and female – to look.

Operators such as Messy (2002) make it clear that this control includes the possibility of being visibly not visible. She warns her viewers not to ‘expect her to be here Friday night or Saturday’ and that she ‘turns off this cam when DOING IT’. Resistance and a kind of violence to the spectator’s vision are an important part of women webcam operators’ practices. Messy (2002) and Aimee (2001a) address their spectators as ‘dumbass’, ‘fuggin’ twit’, ‘freak’, and ‘giggle at the intensity of the ignorance’ that is so unbelievable that at least Messy wants ‘to poison the water supply’. Their obstruction of the user’s demands and ‘right of way’ conflict with conceptions of the internet as a setting that offers ‘direct access’ to information and communication (Tambini, 1999: 305, 311). Women
webcam operators’ comments about control, as well as the problems that arise when they assert authority over their representations, suggest the deeply contested stakes in webcam spectatorship as well as other processes of gazing.

VISIBILITY AND WEBCAMS
The presumption that women become visible in order to meet the desires of spectators and to ‘submit’ to a controlling gaze (Salacel and Žižek, 1996) is discredited by women’s narratives about the ways that they employ the technology. A study of FAQs and About profiles (2002) indicates that many women webcam operators started using webcams in order to communicate with friends and family. However, women are interested in learning about the technology and working through some of their problems as well as being visible. Ringley has described her early engagement with webcams as a way to learn about the technology and allow family to keep in contact. Aimee (2001c) notes that she ‘just wanted to see if I could do it and it’s a nifty way to let my friends and family check up on me every now and then’.

Many women webcam operators produce sites in order to develop and advertise their computer skills. Ali (2002) runs a webcam because she ‘like[s] to design!’ Amy (2002) states that her webcam site is as an ‘opportunity for me to work on my html skills’. Mandy (2002) describes the webcam as an ‘outlet for me to showcase my creativity and some of my computer skills’. Ali (2002) enjoys ‘designing the site and coming up with more features more than I do having the cam. The cam is just a way to get people to come to the site’.

Spectators fulfill the needs of webcam operators by contributing money to support sites, making fan art about operators, and functioning as a kind of ‘surveillance system’ (Mandy, 2002) or ‘security cam’ (Karen Ann, 2002). Films and other media texts may have suggested that being available to the gaze can be dangerous, but a number of women feel safe and even comfortable while they are being watched:

I am very comfortable with people watching me. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be doing this. I am a rather shy person by nature, and being in front of the camera is very therapeutic for me. It allows me to ‘come out of my shell,’ but still maintain some distance. I feel very safe knowing that people are out there watching amy cam at all times of the day/night. (Scislowicz, 2001)

It can be very comforting knowing there are people on the other side of the cameras, just checking in to see what’s going on [. . .] I’ve always been pretty shy with people, especially when we first meet. I’ve been able to open up a lot more through my website and cameras. (Izzi, 2001)

Women webcam operators’ comments suggest that they accept being visually represented, the surveillant effect of technologies (Foucault, 1995),
and the social regulation that can result from being watched because being invisible is even more unappealing. Some women have set up their own system of surveillant protection with webcams, but their comments indicate that the controlled forms of visibility that they allow provide a much more empowering position than submitting to the gaze. Carol Clover (1992) suggests that women who curb their sexuality and adopt an androgynous persona survive in slasher films. These films have indicated that there are ways of being properly visible and protected and ways of being endangered through obsessive and invisible surveillance. However, in the webcam form women may gain a protective visibility and form of empowerment through their visibility and sexuality rather than at its expense. Operators such as Elektric (2001b) enjoy ‘living out’ their ‘exhibitionist tendencies’.

These women webcam operators are not the only visible individuals. Women constitute a significant part of the viewing audience. Their interest in particular women webcam operators and construction of a form of community are documented by their participation in webcam chatrooms, contributions to fan sites, and posts to other operators’ web logs. On the About site (2002), women webcam operators such as Ali, Charity, and Lilith underscored their role as viewers by crediting Ringley and Voog for their interest in webcams. During a Live Journal (2001) contest to nominate the best female webcam operator, women enthusiastically reviewed sites and credited Voog and others for bringing them to the medium. Women webcam operators are much more likely to mention women than men when discussing what inspired them to start up a webcam. Personal expressions of comfort about operating webcams, potentially pleasurable women’s activities, and the ability of women webcam operators to look at other women are key aspects of this form.

Making texts real
This ‘conversation’ between women operators may encourage them to use a variety of effects in order to make webcam images and texts seem like a physical world. The spectator is ‘welcomed’ and encouraged to ‘enter’ into the personal environment of the cam operator. Gwen’s (2001) advertisement encourages the spectator to ‘enter the life of a college student’. Mandy (2002) invites the spectator to ‘look into my life’. The spectator accesses Mystrys’ (2001) site by ‘clicking’ on the ‘Welcome to My World’ link. Such greetings suggest that the spectator has entered into a private domain and will gain intimate views of personal happenings. Textual and visual representations of entering support claims of realness. They suggest that physicality and presence are possible through the internet.

Such terms as ‘life’, ‘live’, and ‘real’ are used within the webcam genre, as well as in other internet settings, in an attempt to make internet representations over into a kind of physical and material reality. The slogan
for Jennifer Ringley’s webcam site is ‘life, online’ (Ringley, 2001a). Luciano Paccagnella (1997) animates text-based material when he describes it as ‘logs and messages taken from the actual life of a virtual community’. Esther Dyson (1997: 2) makes it appear like people live on the internet rather than use it when she states that ‘the Net includes all the people, cultures, and communities that live in it’ and that ‘the Net is a home for people’. On some level, all users acknowledge that there are mediated aspects of these representations. However, with the encouragement of varied internet effects and discourses ‘it takes little effort to be of the belief that such data represent . . . well, something, some semblance of reality, perhaps, or some “slice of life” on-line’ (Jones, 1999: 12).

Women webcam operators rhetorically make over sequential representations so that they seem to provide access to their bodies. Viewers help to complete this narrative by the ways in which they talk about viewing webcams. Steve Shaviro describes his viewing of Ringley’s representations as his invasion of her bedroom:

The sleeping Jenni lies utterly exposed. She has let her defenses slide. She has allowed me, a stranger, into her bedroom. Now she is powerless against my prying gaze. She isn’t even aware of my presence. She just lies there, passive and vulnerable. This body, this image, could be anyone’s for the taking. (1999)

Shaviro points to one of the problems with webcam viewing and an inherent problem with the way in which photography is perceived without fully critiquing it. The availability of representations is conflated with the availability of bodies and spaces. Webcam sites rely on our willingness to connect digital images with photographs and also to believe that we are receiving unmediated traces of the real or a virtual body that is still made of flesh. Shaviro suggests that the webcam spectator is allowed an intimate view onto people’s bodies but still does not have access to their thoughts and motivations; that oddly it is the virtual that still eludes the spectator.

Some problems with webcam viewing
There are a number of aspects of the webcam technology that prevent the spectator from achieving a seamless view onto exposed and vulnerable bodies. These include the incremental appearance of the image, scrambled surfaces or ‘noise’, the loss of image at the edge, the visibility of the pixels, and the omnipresence of the square format. Webcam images are often unavailable because of technological reasons or because the webcam operator has decided to take some time off from the internet. Images rarely remain accessible or under the spectator’s control because they are downloaded incrementally. Time and date stamps, which often appear on the images, make it clear that there are lapses in time and missing parts of the visual narrative. Sequential gaps and flickering images offer a way to resist claims
that webcams deliver real views of bodies and environments. The flickering indicates that there are a variety of representations rather than a unified perspective.

The unfinished and incomplete aspects of webcam viewing suggest that the spectator is too close to see. The spectator often obtains partial views because the woman webcam operator is near the camera lens. At times, the spectator’s reflection seems to be conjoined with the operator’s image. This experience of intermingled closeness is particular gripping when both users, the spectator and the operator, are engaged with the computer. This suggests that the model of spectatorship may be one of bodily morphing and synthesis rather than the discreet articulation of bodies and objects.

Computer spectators are already much too close to the screen in order to enact a classic film viewing position. Film theory indicates that a clear distinction and an appropriate distance between the spectator and the webcam operator are necessary aspects of voyeurism – a process that provides individuals with pleasure from secretly watching:

The voyeur is very careful to maintain a gulf, an empty space, between the object of the eye, the object and his own body: his look fastens the object at the right distance, as with those cinema spectators who take care to avoid being too close or too far from the screen. (Metz, 1977: 60)

According to psychoanalytic and apparatus theory, male cinema viewers achieve an ideal spectatorial position because of their physical distance and intellectual detachment from the screen. However, female spectators are conceived as being inextricably bound to their bodily processes and tied to a version of their image. Women’s nearness to the cinema image is less than ideal because, according to Noël Burch, such an intimacy prevents the spectator from a comprehensive understanding:

If he is too close, so close that his field of vision does not include the whole screen, his eyes must change focus as the centers of visual interest shift, and he will never be able to grasp the total visual effect created by the framed image. (Burch, 1973: 35)

Computer spectators become wrapped up in the image, rather than being able to grasp the whole representation. For example, many spectators identify with the characters ‘built’ in various online settings and seek out social and erotic interactions through these representations. The computer and software programs become an extension of the individual when information is gathered with the aid of the browser’s hand-pointer. In this sense, all computer spectators become collapsed with the computer and may fail to distinguish where subject ends and object begins.

Cinematic theories of spectatorship indicate that the closeness of computer spectatorship is a troubling position, because to ‘fill in this
distance would threaten to overwhelm the subject, to lead him to consume the object (the object which is now too close so that he cannot see it anymore)’ (Metz, 1977: 60). So, the spectator engages with the computer and is too close to see. Or rather, the computer spectator may see in ways that are more partial than the cinema and more enmeshed with the screen. The spectator, who is both subject and image, is in a position that has been previously associated with women and is perceived to be undesirable. This feminization of the computer user may be connected to the portrayal of obsessive male computer users as abnormal and not ‘appropriately’ masculine. These shifts in viewing suggest that a significant reconceptualization of ideal spectatorial positions is underway.

Webcam sites highlight the potentially voyeuristic aspects of the medium with images of binoculars (Messy, 2002) and fishbowls (Gwen, 2000). Wikked (1999) references cultural narratives about surveillance by titling her page ‘The Wikked Show’ and ‘The View Out Of My Monitor (20-second updates) Brought to You by Big Brother’. Campanella describes webcam spectators as ‘armchair voyeurs’ (2000: 32). Voyeurism is ‘any kind of sexual gratification obtained from vision’, and it is ‘usually associated with a hidden vantage point, such as a keyhole’ (Stam et al., 1992: 160). However, the keyhole logo of the CamGirls ring (2001) represents both webcam voyeurism and spectatorial failure. The spectator seems to be on the ‘wrong’ side of the door because there is already an eye pressed up against the keyhole. For voyeurism to function, the view must seem to be under the spectator’s control and to fulfill his or her desires (Stam et al., 1992: 160–1). Yet in the webcam medium, Messy’s refusal to respond to her fans, the almost illegible image inside Gwen’s fishbowl, and the declarations, representations, and images of women webcam operators all resist the spectator’s desires and demands.

Women webcam operators only ambivalently connote Mulvey’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ – that which is to be looked at – and replicate gendered processes of gazing because they are not readily available. Certainly, there are some still images in the webcam form where women are leaning back passively in chairs, being ‘caught’ half dressed, reclining on beds or on the floor, sleepily relaxing in bathtubs, and bending over so that their cleavage or buttocks are revealed. Women may occasionally address an idealized male spectator, but the webcam genre cannot facilitate a completely normative form of spectatorship because the male gaze is usually envisioned, produced, and controlled by women.

Women’s control of the webcam apparatus and ability to look back is underscored by self-depictions. For example, Ringley (2001a) depicts the top portion of her face in a title banner. She holds a camera up so that the mechanism supplants one of her eyes and emphasizes her control of the technology. The gesture echoes the self-portraits of many photographers.
More interestingly, a fuzzy reflection on the camera lens implies that Ringley can see her spectators and control them by employing her surveillant camera and empowered gaze.

Women’s empowered sight is also underscored by images of eyes on many sites. In some cases – such as the depicted eye peeping through the keyhole – these images are meant to evoke male voyeurism, but instead support the woman webcam operator’s alliance with the camera and enabled sight. Classic voyeurism and the male gaze are destabilized in the webcam form because many of these depictions represent women’s eyes. For example, Aimee (2001a) includes a graphic depiction of elaborately made-up eyes perched on top of the webcam frame so that the spectator is unblinkingly surveyed while watching the screen. In a flash sequence, Voog (2002) is depicted as having eyes that survey her space like searchlights.

Other forms of lenses also figure the webcam operator’s sight. Mary Ann Doane (1991: 26–7) suggests that in films, wearing glasses provides women with a certain form of release from the ever-present intimacy of her own image and position as the object of the gaze. This is because glasses de-eroticize women and suggest that they can see as well as be seen. Not only do glasses stress women’s ability to look back but they also impose a mediating frame, a kind of screen, between self and other. In this sense, glasses suggest the ways in which femininity is mediated and constructed. When cam operators’ glasses reflect the computer it reminds us that webcams are a genre in which women look while they are being looked at. Glasses may screen the computer operator’s eyes from the viewer while also allowing her to see. The cam operator can view, edit, and comment upon images of herself but the spectator rarely observes what she sees on the screen. Seeing the screen reflected back in the operator’s glasses reminds spectators of their own physical relationship to the computer screen and reinserts the computer frame and mediation back into the webcam process. Less detailed reflections may even suggest that the spectator is reflected in the operator’s glasses.

The comments of webcam operators and writers as well as the reflective surfaces of screen and glasses suggest that the spectator is engaged with a version of his or her own image. Voog (1999) argues that ‘what u see at my site and your reactions to it say everything about YOU. anacam is just a mirror’. Christine Humphreys (1998) indicates that webcams encourage spectators to reflect on their own visibility and feelings about being observed:

When alone, do you dance around your living room like Tom Cruise in Business? Do you read hefty novels while wearing a mud mask? Do you pick your nose, adjust your underwear or drink milk straight from the container? Would you do these things if you knew someone was watching?
Humphreys’ description evokes a surveillant society in which the possibility of being seen encourages individuals to self-regulate their behavior and means of presentation. More interestingly, her comments indicate that spectators who engage with the webcam form must also address the possibilities and the problems of being visible.

Pat Cadigan (2001) explores the possibility of being surveilled while viewing webcams in her story ‘Icy You . . . Juicy Me’ (I See You . . . You See Me). Not surprisingly, the main character resists evidence that ‘people caught in the webcam’s gaze’ knew ‘who was watching them’. However, Cadigan’s story suggests that there is always a mirroring aspect to watching, even if it (like her title) remains difficult to initially understand. Mandy (2002) also implies that webcams facilitate views of spectators. Each page renders a video camera – complete with an almost full battery icon and flashing red indicator – suggesting that footage is being recorded. Spectators may become more uncomfortable upon discovering that the lens is directed out towards them. Obviously, there is no invisible webcam trained on the average spectator. However, if the renderings of Cadigan (2001), Humphreys (1998), and Mandy (2002) are correct then the webcam form reminds spectators of the ways in which they can also be observed. More importantly, such writers and producers disable the dichotomy of spectatorial mastery and operator submission by reminding spectators that they can also be visible.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF BEING SEEN

Webcams can suggest some ways to resist the more submissive aspects of being looked at. These shifts in spectatorial power have already been articulated in such films as *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Body Double* (Brian de Palma, 1984), *Sliver* (Phillip Noyce, 1993), and *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995). In all of these films, the male voyeur is disturbed upon discovering that he is also being watched. These films certainly do not present a unified description of this effect, but they do portray a destabilization of the technological order as it has been previously established. They suggest a kind of breach or rupture of the logic of the screen because the watcher and watched no longer occupy contrary positions.

Whether male or female, the webcam spectator is literally mirrored, doubled, and confused with the screen. The webcam spectator is situated in a place where voyeurism is constantly promised, yet theoretically uninhabitable, because the viewer has relinquished a distanced position. Instead, the webcam propels some spectators to see the way that they must seem:

But when somebody writes to me and says: ‘I saw you with your big thighs, naked on the cam, and not looking self-conscious. It gave me more confidence


to not be self-conscious around my husband, to just say this is my body, and I’m sexy anyway.’ Every time I get one of those emails, I’m like, oh my God, somebody got it! Somebody’s actually happier in their body, or happier in their life, or less insecure with something about themselves, just because I was able to say that I didn’t have to be. (Ringley, 2000)

The comments of Ringley and women spectators suggest that webcams provide a variety of political outlets for women. Women’s webcam work can have an effect on the developing internet as well as larger societal conceptions of what it means to be a woman.

Women spectators can observe how women webcam operators have controlled their images and decided to be visible. Women spectators can also see that other women use and control computer technologies. Treating the work of women webcam operators and other internet producers as significant forms of cultural production suggests the vital role that women play in technological aspects of culture. Women’s webcams offer a setting in which to emphasize women’s employment of the internet and a means to rethink other aspects of their cultural representation.

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