

# “Life's a Movie in Which She's the Star”

## Situating and Surveying the Camgirl

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*Kate Mason*

“A Bombshell is full of contradictions... She always expects to run into someone who matters, even if she's home alone. She behaves as if life's a movie in which she's the star.”<sup>1</sup>

She carefully positions a webcam atop her computer and begins a live broadcast of herself to the world; twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.<sup>2</sup> All that she does and all that she says is recorded and transmitted to anyone who wishes to watch and listen. The relatively new and often contradictory performance of the camgirl propels notions of imitation, archetype and compliance into the foreground of contemporary debates concerning power and sexuality. In a time where many young women have become alienated from 1970s branded-feminism, the Internet appears to be their purported saviour; a realm of control and creative space which beckons invitingly. The camgirl herself is loosely defined as a girl or woman who broadcasts images or streaming video of her self via a webcam.<sup>3</sup> It is crucial to note at the outset that not all camgirls or webcam sites are solely about sex or pornographic performances, and many camgirls seek to use their webcam as a way of attracting viewers to their websites to admire their creativity, or simply for conversation. Indeed, Michele White even defines any “pornographic sites” as existing outside of the definition of the camgirl,<sup>4</sup> while Terri Senft identifies five overlapping genres of camgirls: the real life camgirl, the artist camgirl, the porn camgirl, the cam house camgirl and the cam community camgirl.<sup>5</sup> Importantly for my discussion, although there are certainly clear subsets of camgirls, there are often no clear delineations between them, as I will go on to discuss further. Therefore, I will specifically focus upon 24 hour/7 days a week so-called ‘real life cams’ that seek to record every moment of a camgirl's existence.<sup>6</sup> These cams encompass various different genres of camgirls, and indeed encapsulate almost all five categories of which Senft identifies.

Much recent critique of camgirls focuses on the multimedia form itself, looking at webcams and the industry specifically,<sup>7</sup> and the important issues of consumerism, celebrity, and narcissism.<sup>8</sup> Offering an alternate view, I seek to focus less on the media form and its broader dissemination and meaning, and

instead on the very relationships formed between the camgirl and her immediate audience. In *Gender and Community in the Social Construction of the Internet*, author Leslie Regan Shade argues,

If, indeed, cyberspace is a metaphor for community, if it constitutes a network of varied relationships, and if digital citizenship is a prerequisite for participation and engagement in society, then we need to look closely at who is being included, and who is being excluded.<sup>9</sup>

Following Regan Shade's examination of the included/excluded, I wish to examine the intricate tensions between private expressions – especially sexual expressions – and the public spaces of the Internet, and the subsequent uneasy relationships that emerge. In so doing, I seek to further examine the discrepancies that lie *between* those who are included; the virtual participants in the webcam world. This will be taken up by looking specifically at the viewer/viewee relationships that develop, and the subsequent power imbalances present in such transactions.

### **New or Old? Forms of Cultural Exploitation and Woman as Construct**

Whether these young ladies are online whores, teen hustlers, or savvy young businesswomen remains to be seen. What's clear is that ... thousands of teenage girls are using technology to take girl power to a wild and scary new place.<sup>10</sup>

Britney [Spears] and Christina [Aguilera] are doing their own thing, and I think that's great. If they feel the need to show off their body to get somewhere, then so be it.<sup>11</sup>

In a cultural context where the documentation of exploited people is not unusual,<sup>12</sup> the camgirl inhabits an ideologically fraught body. It is difficult to define whether the camgirl is exploiting her audience, or whether they are exploiting her. While there may be no clear delineations, as exploitation is a wide-ranging and insidious occurrence, the camgirl exists in the precarious position of being (or purporting to be) the empowered woman/girl as well as an exploited victim of innumerable, and often conflicting, discourses: sexual, pornographic, and at times even paedophilic.

New and old forms of exploitation are intricately woven throughout the site of the camgirl, for she is the ultimate woman as construct. If a viewer/voyeur is not

pleased with her personality, looks, or opinions, another camgirl exists a few clicks away. A 'self' becomes reduced to an 'image' that sums up the entire female. In many ways, the event of the camgirl has taken us "back [to] where we started...[where] a woman's body defines her...the fact that... our culture has moved online makes no difference... we live in a world that has trouble seeing past a woman's body."<sup>13</sup> In other crucial ways, however, the world of which the camgirl is part can be seen as an arena where women can choose how to display and how to construct their bodies. Indeed, in her account of the camgirl, Michele White argues,

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 spectators – both male and female – to look.<sup>14</sup>

While it is true that women may have control as to when they can appear online, it appears that this is one of the last vestiges of control they do maintain. Many women, particularly those who fail to conform to traditional norms of femininity and body image, as I will discuss later in this paper, are often victimised in their online environment. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, countless websites<sup>15</sup> exist that lecture potential camgirls on how to make themselves appealing to virtual visitors. While the most common advice is about how to make the actual site eye-catching, it also frequently relates to making the camgirl more attractive, for instance, recommending a photo gallery and suggestive poses. So the camgirl seeks to create a persona for herself that is innovative and unique, yet continues to endorse conventional performances of woman or girl. As Marj Kibby notes, "The Web is not a new world, but an electronic reflection of the world we currently inhabit."<sup>16</sup> It seems that woman still exists as a culturally exploited construct, and that an age-long inequity has been reborn in a modern multi-media form.

The pressure to sexualise for success is particularly apparent at the site of the camgirl. It is no coincidence that it is the most attractive camgirls, with exhibitionist tendencies, that tend to receive the most attention and gifts.<sup>17</sup> It seems that in this virtual reality, the camgirl has decided to appropriate aspects of the porn industry for self-profit and so-called empowerment. As Susan Hopkins notes, "...men have been exploiting and objectifying women in cyberspace for years. What's new is that the camgirls have taken control of this process - and cut out the middleman."<sup>18</sup> However, just because the pimp has changed from a man to

the camgirl herself, this doesn't (or shouldn't) qualify the sexualisation of women as better or even good *per se*. The prevalence of sexualisation on-cam is staggering. When the cam world had its own version of the reality TV show "Survivor," called Survivorcam, sixteen camgirls competed for US\$300 by completing various immunity challenges in front of their cams, some claiming to be as young as fourteen. The motto of this Survivorcam contest? "Outpose. Outshine. Outwhore."<sup>19</sup> As Hopkins notes, "the vocabulary and images of sexist exploitation have been appropriated by camgirls. They have taken commodified girl power to its logical extreme - they have objectified themselves."<sup>20</sup> Terri Senft – who herself maintained a webcam in order to conduct research for her doctoral dissertation – claims, "Although no camgirl would deny that pornography comprises a large portion of the web, not every single camgirl feels pornography is the point of her choice to webcam."<sup>21</sup> However, even when camgirls choose not to participate in the game of sexualisation, they are very often unwittingly or wittingly, still implicated. Ali of Alicam says, "...actually, I enjoy designing the site and coming up with features more than I do having the cam. The cam is just a way to get people to come to the site."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, another camgirl complains, "I've tried having just a normal teen site before, but the only way to make any profit is to cater to the people who are looking for porn. Showing more skin on your webcam gets more people to visit."<sup>23</sup> Further, camgirls who choose to participate in these endeavours are not the only ones affected: some camgirls are forced to place links to nude webcams on their own no-nudity websites, directing other visitors onward.<sup>24</sup> For that, they get a cut of US\$10 for every new sign on.<sup>25</sup> The pimp may have changed guise, but not purpose. The same camgirl wishes that she didn't have to place the porn link on her site, but satisfies herself with the disconcertingly concessive; "At least I'm not getting naked."<sup>26</sup> A further distressing aspect of sexualising for success is the insidious manner in which it creeps into the domain of the camgirl, almost as if by accident. For example, Jennifer Ringley of JenniCam<sup>27</sup> – one of the first, and most famous camgirls – claims that her website is about "real life," yet there is a game featured called 'Name That Curve' which involves viewers having to guess a particular part of Jennifer's body, whether it be her earlobe, her areola, the bottom of her breast, or the nape of her neck.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Jennifer's Internet server crashed the first time she had sex online, because an unprecedented number of people logged on at the same time.<sup>29</sup> So while purporting to represent 'real life' before a camera – a method of which one imagines Heisenberg to be critical –

JenniCam is at its most successful, or popular, when focussing on sex, and sexually related activities. While White argues that Jenni's website title banner, which depicts Jenni holding a camera up to obscure one eye, "emphasizes her control of the technology,"<sup>30</sup> it could also appear to simply stress the emphasis she places on her body as that which lies *behind* the camera. As Hopkins accurately writes, "This is hardly a passive, submissive, self-doubting female sexuality. But it's not exactly feminism either. It's the downside of girl power."<sup>31</sup> The fact that camgirls must sexualise for (online) success is highly disturbing, and although some of the camgirls may realise their manipulation, their sexualisation and self-exploitation furthers a sense of worth which is largely contingent only on their body.

The event of the wishlist is a further sinister aspect of exploitation. Many camgirls display a list of items they desire viewers to buy for them on their website. In many ways, the wishlist is a safe vehicle for receiving gifts – the vendor on the wishlist doesn't reveal the 'wisher's' address or location to the buyer, so the relationship remains entirely virtual.<sup>32</sup> Some camgirls offer 'personal rewards' for the gifts, such as photos, phone calls or even meetings. As Katherine Mieszkowski writes, "teen webcams have met the e-commerce version of the wedding registry - the wishlist. And the result of this virtual marriage is an online beg-fest that makes it easy to take candy from strangers on the Internet."<sup>33</sup> This is a clearly provocative and somewhat problematic arrangement; the camgirl exploits the viewer watching for her own gain: he then uses his money to have power over her. Some camgirls dislike this idea. Camilla, 19, from Trondheim in Norway says, "To me, it's the newest form of prostitution."<sup>34</sup> However, many camgirls seem to include wishlists as the main feature of their site. Kate, an eighteen-year-old student from England says, "I'm 18 but I've told men that I'm as young as 15, and they still buy me stockings and garter belts and ask to see me in them. The guys are looking for a fantasy girl - I play up to it. They get their fantasy, I get [my] profit."<sup>35</sup> This camgirl is happy to exploit the men for her own gain, however she is not without fault; agreeing to act as a fifteen-year-old implicates her in the dangerous, and disturbing, realm of paedophilia. Although the camgirl's agency has reached a marketable level (she has leverage in market value) she is co-opted into the exploitation discourse through her willingness to pander to men's needs. Senft argues, "To cynics, cam whores appear to be cashing in on, rather than naïve victims of, our contemporary Lolita economy,"<sup>36</sup> however it is difficult not to be cynical of an arrangement that while offering financial compensation, provides

little opportunity for the camgirl to be seen as anything other than an object in an uncomfortable transaction. Many camgirls are aware of the difficulties of their situation. Katneko claims that, "the Internet community views me as untouchable because I won't get naked on my cam." She recently mused on her site: "Some people show tits, and some people don't. I wonder what it is I'm whoring to get presents exactly, since I'm not the showy-fleshy [sic] type of girl."<sup>37</sup> The question of what is being 'whored' is far deeper than it appears on face value. Are girls whoring for company? Attention? Visibility and fame? The possibilities are endless. And none comforting.

The myriad ways in which woman is constructed and positioned by her own conduct seem to allow little opportunity for advancement beyond sexualisation. As such, the exploitation of a camgirl is not necessarily a new form, but the ways in which it is directed towards a more knowing subject are a different manifestation of an older and insidious form of subordination.

### **Surveillance: Who Will Watch The Watchers?**

...constant surveillance can be a dream come true - an affirmation of identity. Today, it seems, you're nobody if you're not on camera.<sup>38</sup>

We've become bored with watching actors give us phoney emotions, we're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects, the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit, but there's nothing fake about Truman himself.<sup>39</sup>

Notions of surveillance operate both within and around the realm of the camgirl, and the most obvious is the actual 'watching' that takes place by predominantly male viewer/voyeur figures. It has been argued that although women are watched and surveyed in the real world, that the virtual world is somehow exempt from these structures. Anne Balsamo notes,

The virtual body is neither simply a surface upon which are written the dominant narratives of Western culture, nor a representation of cultural ideals of beauty or of sexual desire. It has been transformed into the very medium of cultural expression itself, manipulated, digitalised, and technologically constructed in virtual environments.<sup>40</sup>

However, as the camgirl seems to exist with very little power or control, her added burden of being surveyed by a faceless male viewer population is highly suspect. To paraphrase Balsamo, it is perhaps that the virtual body of the camgirl is

a surface upon which the dominant narratives of western (patriarchal) culture are written: subordination, objectification and constant surveillance exist as much in a virtual world as the real one. Laura Mulvey argues that cinema is an “advanced representation system through which a range of pleasures may be derived.”<sup>41</sup> Although the camgirl is distinctly different from traditional cinema, her performance is similarly viewed by an audience – but in an even more voyeuristic and ‘Peeping Tom’ manner than Mulvey could have imagined. Senft argues for a sense of empowerment through the choice of physical webcam placement, and claims, “...homecamming isn’t a panoptic or “all seeing” self-surveillance practice. For example, although many camgirls place a camera in their bedroom, most choose not to put one in the bathroom.”<sup>42</sup> Although the camgirl is allowed this choice, one would think the larger problem is not where to put multiple cameras, but in fact the implications of having one at all. Further, this statement implicitly suggests that having a space free from webcams – in this case, the bathroom – is a crucial negotiation of identity and freedom *from* surveillance. Surely this suggests that webcams themselves produce potentially difficult physical and critical negotiations of space and self. Webcamming is distinctly different to the ‘real’ world, as the watching or surveillance that takes place polices, regulates and controls the behaviour of the camgirl. The same “representation of cultural ideals of beauty or of sexual desire” of which Balsamo writes are reiterated and replayed in the arena of the camgirl. White argues, “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.”<sup>43</sup> Yet these forms of control and power of which White writes are only evidenced through the ways in which camgirls *respond* to requests for nudity, which is not so much a form of control, as perhaps a reaction against another form of control of domination by the faceless viewer/voyeur figure.

As if it were not enough to exist constantly before the gaze of another, the insidious notion of self-surveillance further haunts the camgirl. A paradox of self-surveillance is that the camgirl desires freedom and yet seeks enclosure. As Bartky notes, women are:

far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality...Woman’s space is not a field... but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined.<sup>44</sup>

This proposition has become literally true with the advent of the camgirl; the cruel irony of the situation is that the camgirl has placed herself in the confined enclosure of which Bartky writes. Women's space is confined, and in the realm of the camgirl, 'space' becomes policed and regulated. Indeed, the notion of Foucault's "docile bodies"<sup>45</sup> becomes quite twisted; as Grosz notes,

...this docility no longer functions primarily by external regulation, supervision, and constraint...but rather is the consequence of endlessly more intensified self-regulation, self-management, and self-control. It is no longer a body docile with respect to power, but more a body docile to will, desire, and mind.<sup>46</sup>

Camgirls have been described as "strong voices, which often consciously refuse to be pigeon-holed or controlled...[and] there are seldom apologies for contradiction [sic] or outbursts."<sup>47</sup> However, this generalisation belies the important fact that the camgirl places herself in the traditional self-surveyed position as an object of desire.<sup>48</sup> The majority of these camgirls appear to be slender, young, longhaired and attractive.<sup>49</sup> In terms of self-surveillance, the camgirl must both police, and sell herself. Such self-surveillance appears to embrace Bartky's notion that the "panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment."<sup>50</sup> Not only does the camgirl literally exist before the gaze of others, she is doubly implicated in the sphere of which Bartky writes; the sphere she herself surveys.

A final aspect of surveillance is the notion of surveillance of the body, or bodies. In an era of pop star obsessions, the cult of celebrity, and rampant consumerism, it appears that in order to exist, one's body and self must be watched, observed, and surveyed. Hopkins notes that in such a star-obsessed culture, the "message girls receive is that to be on camera is to count, to matter, to be acknowledged."<sup>51</sup> The truth of this statement is exemplified by camgirls such as Marissa, who claim that the cam universe is "basically like high school blown up exponentially...it's a huge popularity contest. Popularity rules."<sup>52</sup> Such reality TV shows such as *Big Brother*,<sup>53</sup> *Survivor*,<sup>54</sup> and *The Apprentice*,<sup>55</sup> make manifest the desire to observe and to be observed. Hopkins argues that, "If you have a life that is constantly recorded, you are culturally inscribed as important - someone worth watching."<sup>56</sup> Such thinking has led to the emergence of the camgirl being viewed as 'real'; that to watch someone 'live life' unedited and uncensored is somewhat

closer to 'reality' than our own lives. A camgirl, calling herself 'Perfekt' [sic], claims that sometimes "I want to break my camera...and yet, if you don't update your cam, it's like you're not in circulation."<sup>57</sup> Similarly, a review of camgirl websites tempts viewers, claiming these sites would appeal if they "just wanted to watch a young girl live life."<sup>58</sup> Such body surveillance by the camgirl, who is competing to be watched, could be an expression of many problems; a sense of insecurity, a desire to seek attention, a form of rebellion. Whatever the causes, however, it is the effects of such self-exposure which are most interesting and problematic. Not only does the commodification of body surveillance raise important questions about authenticity, but it also displays the cultural anxiety of how to inscribe one's identity; and for the viewer, how to interpret it. This anxiety is troublingly exemplified by the camgirl herself, both in her position as an object, but also for her viewer/voyeur subjects. The camgirl strives to distinguish her 'self' from millions of other camgirls seeking to do the same.

#### **Power & Control: Where Does It Lie?**

The question remains, is this girl-powered self-determination or just DIY sexual objectification?<sup>59</sup>

Women webcam operators employ resistant modes of address and never fully produce their images for the male gaze.<sup>60</sup>

A camgirl broadcasts live to a typically male audience, who she cannot see. In order to offer any meaningful analysis of this liaison, an important determination must be made as to where the power resides. Michel Foucault made famous the statement that "power is everywhere,"<sup>61</sup> and his theory of power maintains that it is the "name we give to a complex strategic situation in a particular society."<sup>62</sup> However, this analysis of power is problematic because Foucault believes that gender has little, if any, bearing upon power relations.<sup>63</sup> In order to best assess the "strategic situation" of the relationship between the camgirl and her audience, gender must necessarily be the main criterion of analysis. Although it is not a simple exercise to decide where power is vested in the cultural position of a camgirl, as she seems to embody contradiction, the following section of this essay will look at the different power relations at work in and around the site of the camgirl.

First, the camgirl makes herself available to the male viewer/voyeur figure at all times. There is a clear discrepancy here between the camgirl – who must be on show all the time and constantly be ‘ready’ for visitors - and the male viewer, who may come and go when and if he pleases. The male viewer/voyeur figure is able to choose his sexual muse, with choice, power and control resting in him. One camgirl, Brittany, claims that being a camgirl has helped her: “I used to be terribly shy. Now, I'm more comfortable with people passing judgment on me. That used to be one of my biggest fears, people judging me without knowing me. Now, I couldn't care less.”<sup>64</sup> So we're now empowering young women to succumb to men's judgment in a virtual world? As Blair and Takayoshi note,

...[the] addressed and invoked audience for [camgirl's] sites is male, a creation of an image by a woman for a man. [Camgirl] sites represent a complex dialectic between woman as subject and woman as object, woman as both consumer and consumed, and woman as a "performer" of femininity through her interaction with "woman" as object of desire, a positioning that privileges the presence of women online as objects first, subjects second.<sup>65</sup>

White critiques this stance as being “incorrect and potentially damaging to feminist politics, visibility, and empowerment,”<sup>66</sup> yet it correctly identifies the “complex dialectic” within the area of the camgirl which White at times oversimplifies in her own analysis. Further, Blair and Takayoshi are reluctant to represent the complex area of “feminist politics” as one-sided; rather they offer a nuanced account of the particular positioning of the camgirl in relation to her audience. As Susan Bordo writes; “[the] heady experience of feeling powerful, or ‘in control,’ far from being a necessarily accurate reflection of one's actual social position, is always suspect as [it is] itself the product of power relations whose shape may be very different.”<sup>67</sup> The ways in which the camgirl makes herself available at all times does not appear to be a powerful stance to take.

The second element of power at play is the camgirl's lack of any real authority in this uncomfortable relationship. Hopkins argues; “for the new breed of girl heroes, being a sex object is not about sex at all - it's about power.”<sup>68</sup> However, in the relationship between the camgirl and her viewer/voyeur, she is reduced simply to sex itself. Personality, opinion and interaction become simply judged and categorised as sexual images. There exist websites aimed at male viewers that ‘rate’ and categorise camgirls' websites. As Andreas Kitzmann notes, “Web diarists and “cammers” can actually become media objects – self-styled celebrities to be

distributed, evaluated, and ranked.”<sup>69</sup> Such categorisation is not based upon the camgirl’s political beliefs, creativity or how she interacts with her viewers; rather it is based on hair colour, body shape and ethnicity.<sup>70</sup> It appears to be quite impossible to have true empowerment when this power is contingent upon thousands of invisible subjects – subjects which only judge on a woman’s body. The camgirl is still, and always will be, somewhat perversely dependent upon the kindness of strangers to her website.<sup>71</sup> In this way, while the camgirl may be able to manipulate her audience for her own gains, such as the thrill of being watched,<sup>72</sup> this does not equate to the having or wielding of power. Her site of supposed empowerment remains the plaything of generally male, authoritative viewers. Conversely, Lewis argues that the new form of self-presentation of the camgirl actually works to “problematise structuralist precepts of power and power relations...the use of the Net for the personal pleasures of display enables a liberational agency which places the gazed-upon body in an uncertain relationship with the gazer.”<sup>73</sup> Whilst the relationship with the viewer/voyeur may be uncertain, in that the camgirl is fully consenting to being viewed, it is perhaps difficult to label a mere problematisation as “liberational agency” as Lewis does.

The final display of power that sheds doubt on the camgirl’s level of empowerment is the way in which her personal domain is often threatened by unwanted abuse and hassling. The site she sets up as a “personal venue, a place to go and say whatever I need to say,”<sup>74</sup> can be, and very often is, violated: “I have had my share of perverts on-line.”<sup>75</sup> The camgirl makes herself vulnerable to harsh treatment by virtue of being online, and she relinquishes much of her own autonomy and dignity whilst doing so. Eris of Eriscam reports that she was bombarded with hate mail when she first set up her webcam: “there were emails calling me fat and ugly - I had never had my looks attacked in real-life.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Jennifer Ringley of JenniCam had hackers break into her site and replace her image with pictures of mutilated bodies.<sup>77</sup> The apparent site of empowerment and liberation actually becomes a forum for viewer/voyeur figures to voice attacks they could – and arguably would - not have made otherwise. Apart from the symbolic significance of a personal domain being violated by outsiders the most interesting aspect of this abuse is the way in which the camgirl must deal with it: “some camgirls have taken the drastic step of shutting down any form of access to communication from the visitors to their sites.”<sup>78</sup> This means permanently closing their webcam site, so in effect, any remaining power in the relationship must be

resigned when she is harassed. Her self - as a web designer and personality - is similarly shut down. This resignation of power actually works to deny the camgirl any resistance: she continues to operate in the sphere she seeks to dissociate herself from; "As modern industrial societies change and as women themselves offer resistance to patriarchy, older forms of domination are eroded. But new forms arise, spread and become consolidated."<sup>79</sup> The unwanted abuse and hassling that is directed to a camgirl from her outside audience is highly suspect and places any agency that the camgirl claims to have in a very precarious position indeed. Whilst Foucault believes that power is ubiquitous and not value-laden, it is crucial to make a clear distinction between benign and malign power relations.<sup>80</sup> Whilst the camgirl may have limited forms of agency, and may be playing a 'role,' that role appears to be a subordinate one, through the way in which she is made to conform to normative standards of femininity in order to be watched. The ways in which her own creative space is invaded and threatened by her viewer also means that she is always at the whim of her audience: not a powerful position in which to be.

## Conclusion

The camgirl exists at the interstices of power relations, gender issues and cyberspace. She is not an innocent pawn in a patriarchal game of chess; but it is as if she began to play without knowing all the rules. There is no doubt that there is something particularly unsettling about young girls and women who broadcast themselves from inside their bedrooms to millions of faceless viewers/voyeurs. However, classifying this unsettling element is a precariously difficult act. Is it the camgirl, after all, who exploits her viewers? Is she a tease, a taunt, a titillating manipulator who works only to serve her own purposes? And what if two purposes are served? It is difficult to answer any of these questions without feeling a severe cultural anxiety as to what the answer *should* be. One feels compelled at once to admire the ingenuity and creativity of the camgirl; and to feel unsettled by her position in such a problematic discourse.

In this paper, I have not purported to exhaustively cover the issue of camgirls, and the phenomenon of the webcam on a broader scale. What I have sought to do is to examine some of the main concerns that relate to her digital world. These included an analysis of where power exists in the relationship between the camgirl and her viewers, notions of surveillance, and the exploitation of woman. I hope to have opened up many avenues for further study in relation to the camgirl, such as

the problems of lesbian viewers to this analysis, camboys and homosexual cams as resistance, and implications for male subjectivity.

Whilst male webcam sites are outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting that the majority of the male, or 'camboy' sites, are gay or bisexual, and are also aimed at male viewers. Clearly different issues of subjectivity are relevant here, but important for my analysis is that the camboy also assumes the traditional object position. It is also important to acknowledge the possibility of lesbian viewers assuming the traditionally male viewer/voyeur position. Lesbian viewers represent the minority of visitors to mainstream camgirl websites,<sup>81</sup> and whilst they are also outside the scope of this essay, they do pose a different subject/object power relationship that could be explored further. Although the advent of the camgirl is only a relatively recent phenomenon, the intense attention she has received – both popular and critical - demonstrates both her appeal and the fascination she invokes. The image of the camgirl will be watched, absorbed and her construct consumed, and however her function evolves, it is guaranteed she will not go unnoticed.

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- <sup>1</sup> Lauren Stover, *The Bombshell Manual of Style* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> I will knowingly use the pronoun 'she' for the camgirl and 'he' for the viewer/voyeur figure in this essay. I do so politically to make the argument that the majority of webcams feature women, and are watched by men. [See note 6]
- <sup>3</sup> Webcams are also referred to as cams, livecams, homecams or netcams. They all refer to a small camera that is usually placed atop a monitor, so that it directly faces the computer user.
- <sup>4</sup> Michele White, "Too Close to See: Men, Women and Webcams," *New Media & Society*, 5.1, March 2003, 12. White also suggests that the term "webcam operator" is more appropriate than "camgirl" which has the "unfortunate tendency to aid ...[the] eroticisation of women webcam operators," 15.
- <sup>5</sup> Terri Senft, *CAMGIRLS: Webcams, LiveJournals and the Personal as Political in the Age of the Global Brand*, forthcoming (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2006) 48. Available at <http://www.echonyc.com/~janedoe/diss/camgirls.aoir.pdf> [accessed 20 January 2006.]
- <sup>6</sup> These sites overwhelmingly dominate the webcam 'market;' on one of the biggest Internet search engines, Google, a search for 'camgirls' results in over 1.6 million references. This compares to 6,640 for 'camboys', [www.google.com](http://www.google.com). [accessed 2 August 2005.]
- <sup>7</sup> For example, Leslie Regan Shade in her book *Gender and Community in the Social Construction of the Internet*, (New York, Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2002)
- <sup>8</sup> Senft, 220-225.
- <sup>9</sup> Regan Shade, 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Mark Frauenfelder, "Cam Girls: Yahoo Internet Life," 2002 [accessed 12 July 2005] Available from <http://boingboing.net/camgirls.html>
- <sup>11</sup> Frauenfelder, 2002.
- <sup>12</sup> Arguably, the world now exists in a precarious post-September 11 age of denying human rights and exploiting human beings. This is illustrated with (unfortunately) many examples, such as the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal. See generally Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2004.)
- <sup>13</sup> Lisa Gerrard, "Thoughts on Computers, Gender, and the Body Electric," *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology and Pedagogy*, 2.2 (Texas Tech University, 1998 [accessed 17 July 2005]). Available from <http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/2.2/coverweb/invited/lg.html>.
- <sup>14</sup> White, 16.
- <sup>15</sup> See generally such sites as (<http://www.peepingmoe.com/forums/girlcams/>) [accessed 17 June 2005]
- <sup>16</sup> Marj Kibby, "Babes on the Web: Sex, Identity and the Homepage," *Media International Australia*, 84, May 1997, 42.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Payne, "Virtually: The Refreshment of Interface Value," *Postmodern Culture*, 14.3 (May 2004). Available from <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/toc/pmc14.3.html>. [accessed 10 August 2005]
- <sup>18</sup> Susan Hopkins, "Camgirls: Live On The Net," (The Good Weekend Magazine, 9 August 2002.). Available from <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/08/09/1028158010523.html> [accessed 25 July 2005]
- <sup>19</sup> Katharine Mieszkowski, "Candy From Strangers," in *Salon Magazine*, August 2001 [accessed 20 July 2005]. Available from [http://dir.salon.com/tech/feature/2001/08/13/cam\\_girls/index.html?pn=3](http://dir.salon.com/tech/feature/2001/08/13/cam_girls/index.html?pn=3). This is a parody of the Survivor television show's motto, "Outwin, Outplay, Outlast."
- <sup>20</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>21</sup> Senft, 153-154.
- <sup>22</sup> Ali (2002) 'Ali Cam Profile – Internet Conferencing; About.com, Available from <http://www.angelfire.com/mi3/alicia/AliCam.htm>. [accessed 9 July 2005].
- <sup>23</sup> David Rowan, "Every Parent's Worst Nightmare," in *The Guardian*, 2002 [accessed 17 July 2005]. Available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/child/story/0,7369,750908,00.html>.
- <sup>24</sup> See, for example, [www.ukcamgirl.org](http://www.ukcamgirl.org) who writes, "I won't get naked on the webcams though, and if that's what you're looking for then take a look at the adult webcams [sic] section," directing visitors to advertised links on her own site. [accessed 21 July 2005].
- <sup>25</sup> Erin Anderssen, "Camgirls: Empowerment or Predator Enticement?" in *The Globe*, 2002 [accessed 5 July 2005]. Available from [http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/PEstory/TGAM/20021019/UCAMMN/national/national/nationalTheNationHeadline\\_temp/2/2/23/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/PEstory/TGAM/20021019/UCAMMN/national/national/nationalTheNationHeadline_temp/2/2/23/)
- <sup>26</sup> Anderssen, 2002.
- <sup>27</sup> Available from <http://jennicam.nudist.org/faq.html> [accessed at 15 July 2005]. JenniCam ran from 1996-2003.
- <sup>28</sup> Pamela Takayoshi and Kristine Blair, "Navigating the Image of Woman Online: Whose Gaze Is It, Anyway?" *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology and Pedagogy*, 2.2 (Texas Tech University, 1998 [accessed 17 July 2005]). Available from <http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/2.2/coverweb/invited/kb.html>
- <sup>29</sup> Wes Lee, "24 Hours Live - The New Cyborgs: Cyberculture and Women's Webcams," <http://popmatters.com/features/000607-lee.html>
- <sup>30</sup> White, 2003, 21.
- <sup>31</sup> Hopkins, 2002.

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- <sup>32</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>33</sup> Mieszkowski, 2002.
- <sup>34</sup> See Camilla at [Wallflower.nu](http://Wallflower.nu). [accessed at 25 July 2005]
- <sup>35</sup> Rowan, 2002.
- <sup>36</sup> Senft, 215.
- <sup>37</sup> Mieszkowski, 2002.
- <sup>38</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>39</sup> Peter Weir, *The Truman Show*, 1998. Spoken by the character of Christof (Ed Harris).
- <sup>40</sup> Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 16.
- <sup>41</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn, 1975): 9.
- <sup>42</sup> Senft, 20.
- <sup>43</sup> White, 8.
- <sup>44</sup> See generally, Sandra Lee Bartky, "Femininity and Domination," in *Modernisation of Patriarchal Power* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- <sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings; 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 24.
- <sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), 44.
- <sup>47</sup> Lee, 2003.
- <sup>48</sup> Takayoshi and Blair, 2002.
- <sup>49</sup> As with pornography, there are various subsets within the broad definition of camgirl, and they involve groupings of particular ethnic girls (see "India Ethnic" at <http://www.linkforsex.com/adult-links/sweetcamgirl.html> and Asian Camgirls at [www.adult-sex-sites.net/asian.html](http://www.adult-sex-sites.net/asian.html)). Similarly there are camgirls of different shapes and sizes, see "Phat Girls" at [www.webbitch.org/phat/](http://www.webbitch.org/phat/). [All accessed 21 July 2005] See generally Katrien Jacobs, "Pornography in Small Places and Others Spaces," *Cultural Studies*, 18.1 (January, 2004): 67-83.
- <sup>50</sup> Bartky, 1990.
- <sup>51</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>52</sup> Mieszkowski, 2002.
- <sup>53</sup> Big Brother Australia – Channel 10, see [www.bigbrother.ten.com.au](http://www.bigbrother.ten.com.au) [accessed 21 July 2005]
- <sup>54</sup> American Survivor, see <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor/> [accessed 16 July 2005]
- <sup>55</sup> The Apprentice, see [http://www.nbc.com/The\\_Apprentice/](http://www.nbc.com/The_Apprentice/) [accessed 16 July 2005]
- <sup>56</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>57</sup> Mieszkowski, 2002.
- <sup>58</sup> Reviews of Camgirl Websites at <http://www.sextechnology.com/camgirls/> [accessed at 10 July 2005]
- <sup>59</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>60</sup> White, 11.
- <sup>61</sup> Jean Grimshaw, "Practices of Freedom," in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 46.
- <sup>62</sup> Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will To Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 17.
- <sup>63</sup> Grimshaw, 1993.
- <sup>64</sup> Mieszkowski, 2002.
- <sup>65</sup> Takayoshi and Blair, 2002.
- <sup>66</sup> White, 11.
- <sup>67</sup> Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body," in *Up Against Foucault – Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 192.
- <sup>68</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>69</sup> Andreas Kitzmann, "That Different Place: Documenting the Self Within Online Environments," *Biography*, 26.1, Winter 2003, 56.
- <sup>70</sup> See for example <http://teencamlist.com/index.php> [accessed at 1 July 2005] and <http://www.sextechnology.com/camgirls/> [accessed at 10 July 2005]
- <sup>71</sup> Takayoshi and Blair, 2002.
- <sup>72</sup> Hopkins, 2002.
- <sup>73</sup> Lewis, 2002.
- <sup>74</sup> Anderssen, 2002.
- <sup>75</sup> Anderssen, 2002.
- <sup>76</sup> Lee, 2003.
- <sup>77</sup> Simon Firth, "Homecam Operators Broadcast Their Daily Lives to Web Voyeurs," *Salon.com*, May 1998 [accessed 20 July 2005] Available from [http://archive.salon.com/21st/feature/1998/01/cov\\_08feature.html](http://archive.salon.com/21st/feature/1998/01/cov_08feature.html)
- <sup>78</sup> Lee, 2003.
- <sup>79</sup> Bartky, 1990.

<sup>80</sup> Grimshaw, 1993.

<sup>81</sup> It is notoriously difficult to ascertain the gender and sexual preference of visitors to any website, camgirl, or otherwise. However, the overwhelming majority of visitors who sign guest books on camgirls' sites appear to be heterosexual males. See generally <http://teencamlist.com/index.php> for guest books signed by males. [accessed at 15 July 2005]