

LIMINAL CONNECTIONS

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By Lotte Louise de Jong

Experimental short film +/- 10 min

Introduction

Working as a webcam model you form intimate connections online, it's not only body-work; it's also emotional work.

Set in a web-cam studio this short documentary will explore the way digital and physical space inform each other and how sexuality and intimacy is experienced within this digital space. It is set in the decor of projected fantasies, fantasies that sometimes are in stark contrast with the blunt, almost banal, reality.

In this short experimental documentary we will visit several rooms and spaces set in a webcam studio in Bucharest, the web-cam capital of the world. A webcam studio is a company where models work for. Performers broadcast their shows from different 'themed' rooms, set-up in a studio-like way with lights, a camera and a computer.

Sex-work like camming is next to body work mostly emotional work¹. Many of the models say that the biggest part of camming is forming connection and friendships with the clients that come into a chatroom. What is different from regular porn is that these viewers want to be heard, they want to connect with the performers and create an intimate relationship.

"They're defining a new kind of intimacy, It's not traditional sex work, not a relationship, but something in between." ²

Camming is done from a webcam-studio or from home, a place, but the internet juxtaposes these "spaces" and "places", and creates a natural environment for liminality; a place separate from one's space where the ordinary norms of everyday life may easily be suspended. In this liminal space there is room for new forms of connection to arise.³

How does the online world of web-camming influence these physical spaces and vice versa? What desires and fantasies arise from this liminal space? What freedom do the clients and workers have within this performed reality?

¹ 'Always hot, always live':¹ Computer-mediated sex work in the era of 'camming'
MADELINE V. HENRY and PANTEÁ FARVID Women's Studies Journal, December 2017

² Viviana Zelizer, a Princeton sociologist and author of "The Purchase of Intimacy," about the interplay between economics and relationships.

³ Liminality

The documentary

This short documentary will try and answer some of these questions through interviews with webcam models. It will explore the different forms of connection that are created within the mediated landscape. Through interviews with models we will explore fantasies and relationships that the cam-girls perform and create, at the complexity of maintaining these connections.

The story will be set in a webcam studio. Visually the studio setting will act as a metaphor for the performed reality. The camera moves through the different spaces and rooms and will play with what is 'in front' and 'behind' the web-cam. It will also focus on the different computer screens in the studio and the conversations that go on these screens.

The studio, called '*Best Studios*', is known for their 'glamorous' image. As a studio they focus on these 'performed relationships'. They don't use sex-toys and focus as much as possible on creating a connection between the viewer and the model. They provide English classes and train the models on how to create these forms of relationship, focussing on creating a 'friendship'. At the same time they tell them to stay honest; don't say you're in love with them if you're not, don't tell them you will meet them, etcetera. The webcam-studios want their models to play by certain rules, to protect the models and to protect their image. But within these set limitations, relationships and friendships arise.

"After knowing the job better, I got to appreciate it. [...] I got to appreciate it because I met some nice people online, that changed my opinion about it. That showed me; it's not only a dirty job, a sexual job. It's also the opportunity, to make a [...] friendship, to open your heart, to share a part of your life, to share your feelings, to share ideas. So this why I got to appreciate it."⁴

A lot of the models they hire are students, woman who speak English well and have something to talk about. We will see the models prepare for work, literally transforming from the offline to an online mediated image. In the webcam studio there are hairdressers, make-up artist and a lot of different ways to dress. We will follow the models through this path of transformation whilst hearing their funny and interesting way of communicating with the other side of the screen. We will also see the training and the English classes the girls get.

"This is part of the job, we are selling illusions. If they want to buy them, it's not our fault."⁵

The interviews will focus on the selling of illusions as well as how sometimes these illusions sometimes slowly turn into something more meaningful. We will hear models tell about special relationships they have created online; sometimes with people they have been talking to for over 5 years on a regular basis. Sometimes these connections turn into a 'real' friendship, one where there is no money transactions involved but one that is based on mutual interests and acknowledgment.

Through these interviews we will also examine what clients of these webcam models are looking for online. Sometimes this is to perform or talk about sexual fantasies they have that they can't express with their

⁴ Interview with Jessica

⁵ <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1865183/camgirls-how-pornography-pioneers-are-taking-control>

partners or maybe don't have anyone to explore them with. Others just want to talk about their relationships or loneliness.

“They [clients that act like slaves] should learn to respect themselves, they shouldn't be paying girls just to laugh of them [...] I mean I would like to help them, I would like to teach them to accept themselves how they are and to appreciate themselves. [...] I had one client, he was addicted to blackmail. He told me that he had lost two houses, his car, two jobs. Just because he paid some mistresses, very expensive girls, not me! He came to me just to cry and complain. “

We see how being a webcam model is so much more than performing sexual acts in front of a webcam. They are exploring the fascinating world of the liminal space where sexuality takes place, which gives them interesting, funny and useful insights into our own sexuality and search for connection. The documentary aims to provide insight in the emotional labour part of the job and will try and reframe the work outside of the marginalised and stigmatised framing of sex-work.

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Extra

Interview excerpts [still transcribing]

These are excerpts from an interview I did with Jessica (29), who has been working as a cam-girl since she was 21. She started as a studio model and now works from her home in Romania.

“[...] He was like 15 years older than me, but he was nice and polite and romantic. [...] He was jealous, he didn't understand that it's my job [...] to compliment other people. Because, why do they come here? Because they are frustrated, they have enough to fight with their wives or have their own problems. Here they need here a smile, they need a compliment. [...] They come here to feel appreciated, to feel good. But he didn't understand that. He thought, maybe I'm not loyal to him. But loyalty is a hard word in the virtual space, almost impossible so to say. I mean, loyalty is in the heart, not in the words you share with the clients.”

“This other man, [...] He was so romantic, he came to see me for 2 years almost all the time, on the same hour. Daily, just one day he couldn't come. And he stayed for like half an hour. He sent me, everyday, two or three poems, that he wrote for me, haha. [...] So this man, he didn't even insist to meet me in real... I mean I think he was aware it was just the virtual stuff. He stayed anonymous. Not everyone shows themselves. I respect that. Maybe he wanted his identity to stay secret”