## 0. Introduction

(Has to be re-written to include the different subjects touch upon and explain the form of the thesis -> different bundled essays).

In recent years the main thematics in my work as a filmmaker and artist have closely related to identity and sexuality. More specifically the work I make investigates how we, as a society, view and shape our sexual identity through mediated spaces like the world wide web. I look at these spaces through different lenses, to create a distance from its explicit content, to re-contextualise it. The digital space as a space/place for sexual encounters has been the main focus of my past projects.

My interested in these subjects started with webcam site's like *chaturbate.com* and *myfreecams.com*. These are website where webcam-models earn money by performing (sexual) acts. Visitor's can tip them in 'tokens', which are converted to dollars. In my research and work I mainly focus on cis female performers and cis male spectators and moderators. Moderators are people that keep a chatroom 'clean', it's a form of free labor, in return for private shows and/or 'friendships' with the performers. I emphasise the word friendship here because it is seen as a medium of exchange.

During my research I came across performers that work from home (e.g. their own bedroom, living room, etc.) and performers that work for and from webcam studios. Cam studios are company's that hire webcam models to work for them. They provide a safe environment and 'sets', colourful rooms set up with lighting, a webcam, a keyboard and a mouse, a screen and a high speed internet connection, from where the cam models can work. Sometimes theses companies also provide hairdressers and make-up artist. Most of these companies are situated in Bulgaria, Romania and Russia.

The rooms that are created within these studios really intrigue me. A lot of rooms have names like 'Los Angeles', 'Hollywood' and other names referring to the western world which probably sounds attractive to work in. The rooms are filled with kitsch and cliché ideas of what wealth looks like. They are in themselves liminal spaces, almost like you step into a virtual reality box. A room created just to exist in an online digital setting, for the spectator not one to be experienced offline or unconnected. Sometimes they are even provided with a green screen.

At the same time these spaces are corporeal, they hide things in the corners that the webcam can't reach, sometimes they even hide an 'operator'; a person, often a guy, present in the corner of the room talking as if they were the webcam model. They also translate requests to the models and moderate the chatrooms.

## I. My body as a disembodied object

When I was around eleven years old I once dialled the number of a sex-phone. I remember the choice menu you had to go through very vividly; what kind of woman did you want to talk to? Old and experienced, young and naive, etc. I don't remember what choice I made, but what I do remember is that my parents found out quite quickly and I was confronted with the high telephone costs. Not a lot later I downloaded my first porn. Back then it was normal you had to pay for pornography on websites, but I'd learned my lesson by then, and everything I downloaded was illegally, through peer2peer software like lime-wire. With a software that doesn't moderate its material in any way, and everyone being able to share whatever they like, my eyes have crossed a lot of wonderful and (sometimes at the same time) disturbing material. Throughout my youth and still, the magical world of the internet has influenced and shaped me and my sexuality in different ways.

Not only in porn, but in general, the objectification of the female body has always worried and fascinated me. Especially during my teenage years I felt that the insecurities I dealt with found their origin in the way the female image was portrayed in magazines, movies, videoclips, etc. My high-school research project was a short documentary I shot visiting several dancehall music parties. I edited the material together with some explicit videoclips that were shown on TV at that time, to make a comparison between the way me and my peers behaved at these sort of parties and the images we were confronted with daily. During the public presentation of my project, the grandparents of one of my classmates stood up and left. The school almost failed me for showing such explicit content. At that moment it struck me that some people willingly close their eyes and don't want to be confronted with the reality of sexuality present within our society. We can *consume* porn but we can't *talk* about it.

Although objectifying the (female) body has obvious negative aspects to it, it also fascinates me a lot. I have always fantasised about how it would feel to be wanted just for your image, there to be looked at, to get off on. Maybe this is has been my 'taboo'. It has something to do with the gaze and the pure physical desire as well as the opportunity to be something and somewhere 'else'. Apart from some occasional sexting, I didn't really experience having virtual sex myself until I had a boyfriend that was living in another country at the moment. Seeing myself on camera was a turn-on. Often I caught myself gazing at my own body rather than my boyfriend's. I could see my own body and my actions through some-one else's eyes, dissociated from my person. Somehow the representation of my body as an object for desire was something very sexual.

By viewing my body as an object through a digital lens, I could see my body as something different, something disembodied from my self (selfhood). The body, much like the self, exists as both a viewed object and an experienced subject. As Dennis D. Waskul describes in *The naked self: Being a Body in Televideo Cybersex,* participants of webcam-sex manipulate this relationship by presenting themselves as only a body, the experience of which acts back in an erotic "looking glass" affecting how the self conceives of the body.

Representing the body, especially a naked body, through digital mediation, gives you the opportunity to see yourself as someone else might see you. To look at your body as a sexual object, an object of desire. For me, this experience was very liberating and exciting. Even with someone I knew dearly I already experienced this partly disembodied state. But imagine having this connection with someone you don't know, without showing your face. Since the face is the most identifiable feature of one's body and self; it is the single human physiological feature that concretely conjoins the corporeal body with the self. This experience can be taken even further.  We can reimagine our own identity on our body, or maybe even imagine that our bodies aren't ours. As we grow up, we have to acquire a self by looking at how other see us. (Mead, 1934). Waskul argues that the same applies to the body. We are born into a body but not born with the capacity to understand that body as an object. — to see it as other might see it. It acquires meaning in a symbolic process that is no different from any other object. We need to

view our body through others to understand it as a body.

Being naked on webcam reduces the self to the body. Selfhood is not only reduced to the body but is also made into an object; a naked sexual body to be looked at and commented on. In research done on online-sex (webcam-sex but also even more disembodied research on sex in second life) participants play with this experience of being the object/subject and gain much more than a sexual gratification. In everyday life it is almost impossible to reduce the self to the body in the same extend we do as in the online.

[[—> need to add appreciation of body through affirmation here
Link to research done with anonymous webcammers.. But maybe also to the job as webcamming ->
"but i was complexed feeling ugly because i have big nose round face normal weight but big hips.... in a way this job made me feel beautiful and liked appreciated" [ interview with Jessica ]]

Objectifying our bodies through a digital lens is off course not limited to webcam sex, although the naked body is the ultimate disembodiment in a way. But also through representing sexuality online in other forms, do we, being female, contribute to the 'male gaze' by objectifying our bodies and showing our objectified bodies online? There is one important and notable difference between my own objectified body and someone else's. As there is a choice in when, and more importantly how, I objectify my body. This way of giving agency to one's own sexualised body has in recent years been looked at by different theorists, including F. Attwood. She argues that since this age and time we are more in control of our own image then ever. Creating our own cultural production of the sexual body and with that creating agency (2011).

In this sense, 'experiencing', (not as an experience) objectification of the body in the traditional sense, as described by Laura Mulvey's, where woman are 'turned ... into objects of display... Yet, in a real sense, woman are not there at all.' They are 'simply the scenery on to which men project their own fanatasies' (1987, p. 131) is very different from 'creating' an objectified body. Creating an objectified body asks for experimenting with ways of refusing, commanding and controlling the representation of woman as passive sexual object (Attwood, F. 2011, p. 13).

[[—> Expanding this with texts and analysis from The Body and The Screen (michelle white) and the text of Attwood.. ]]

## II. Sex work as emotional labour

There has been a long tradition of stigmatising and marginalising sex-workers and sex-work. With the introduction of online based sex-work, especially those focussing on a live-connection, also comes a possibility to look at sex-work in a new way. In traditional feminist theory and research, sex-work, and especially prostitution, has always been seen as inherently exploitative, mostly due to the physical vulnerability that comes with the work. But looking at new forms of sex work, also asks for a new definition of the work. When looking at 'camming', models perform sex acts, often from their homes or other indoor domains like web-cam studios, for online viewers who pay them. When looking at these new form of sex-work, the hybridity and complexity of contemporary sex work should be taking into consideration.

Sex-work like camming is next to body work mostly emotional work[1]. 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.

I don't see sex-work, especially digital sex-work, as being exploitative on it's own, in that sense I'm more of a 'liberal' feminist [1]. I am not ignoring the fact that the business of camming, especially studio-work, *can be* exploitative. I have read many messages on online fora from models that had bad experiences with studios, like no payment, not being able to move to another studio or work individual within a certain time, etc.) but almost all of them are about money. Like marxist feminist argue; sex work is inherently exploitative due to the oppressive nature of work under capitalism. [2]   But this would be the case for any form of making money within this economic system. It is a wide spread misunderstanding that women and men are forced into this line of work in Romania. The reason that there are so many webcam studios is because of the economic situation and liberal rules towards the webcam industry and high-speed internet. [3]

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-> both ways, the performer build a relationship with the client, helping them. On the other side the client communicates positively or negatively with the performer, making them feel bad or good about themselves. From talking to most performers tho, they deal with the abuse and mostly hold on to the positive feedback they get.

"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." (FROM INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA)

 "[...] He was like 15 years older then 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 hart, not in the words you share with the clients." (FROM INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA)

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[1] 'Always hot, always live':[1] Computer-mediated sex work in the era of 'camming' (2017)

"... about the insults maybe I wasn't clear enough; This job isn't for sensitive girls [...] some of my colleagues cried or got depressed and quit the job you need a strong character and understand it s a game not something personal, and yes there are more compliments than insults" (FROM INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA)

[[ —> ON THE TEXT ATTWOOD //
The writer argues that it is a good idea to think about defining sex work in new ways; by using the terms body-work and emotional-work. In this way we can step away from the problematised definition of 'sex'-work since sex is a contestable definition grounded in a problematic heteronormative ideal.

The idea that sex-work is in it's definition, harmful, despite the fact that sex-workers themselves continuously try and subvert this idea, shows intense social and legal policing of an industry.  (For example, dentist show high suicide rates but there is no movement to abolish those practices).

Camgirls offer visually explicit images like in traditional porn but offer the personal contact and 'customization' normally associated with prostitution, however unlike physical sex-workers, cam girls are protected by the streaming medium. (Bleakly 2014)

It has to be addressed that the emotional labour involved with this line of work can be physically draining and can lead to physical and mental health issues. It's important to note that this is not specific to sex-work - also for example counsellin to nursing, also involces clients benefiting from emotional work. This emotional labour (in sex-work and other professions) has been researched extensively, especially in relation to the ways it is devalued and under compensated. Camming is also a form of labour with issues and concerns similar to those which relate to other creators of 'amateur' online user-generated content.]]

**III. The fantasy exists.**

Based on the different stories of the performers and their relationships with the men they deal with.
Connecting to the internet as a place for this performance.

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.[2]

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"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"

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—> ON THE TEXT FROM WASKUL //   As the researchers claim the internet is "a natural environment for liminality: a place separate from one's space where the ordinary norms of everyday life easily may be suspended (Waskul 2002:205). This is certainly true for second life. Again in that way it is not much different from cyber sex-chat and phone calls, webcam's etcetera. Also these give space to playfully enact selves that are betwixt and between the person and the persona. Internet is also a place where people do not nee to conceal their stigma nor be concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it." (Goffman 1963:81). People feel free to openly engage in playful diviance. "Enacting the perfromance of transgression and traversing the realm of the taboo in backspaces (backspaces/backstage) allow secret selves to materialize (Redmond 2003:36 *[ note: this is also something i read in an interview with an american psychologist mainly counceling in relationships where one of the two cheated. She also claimed this was not about cheating but about a secret-self that needed to be explored outside of the set boundries of everyday life]*)

As Giddens (1992) claims the 'pure' relationship, which emerged in the late 19th century and was based on the idea that a durable emotional tie could bind people together. Parallel to the pure relationship is the countertrend of "plastic" sexuality (Gidens 1992) - ludic sex-based relationships that are free of commitment, reproduction, and other closely connected projects of the self. According to Falk (1994:65), "The more articulated and multifarious the restrictions on corporeality, the more sophisticated the forms of transgression become." The liminal nature of the computer-mediated medium facilitates these active transgressions and make the porous boundaries between first and second life more one-sided than the other, That is, first life bleed into second life more than vice versa.]]

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[2] Ekstasis and the internet: liminality and computer mediated communication, Dennis D. Waskul (2006)

## IV. Pixelated wallpapers and empty echoes of luxury

When I close my eyes I wander through the spaces, like a digital ghost, slowly moving forward through the hallways, into the rooms, limited by the interface these websites provide. Red is definitely a colour that appears in front of my eyes. Pixelated wallpapers and empty echoes of luxury. When 'walking' through these spaces I am subjected to the transparency these websites provide. They upload these 360 walkthroughs as a means to entice potential webcam models to work for them. For me its an inexhaustible source of data. Although the rooms in itself appear meaningless, an empty subject, they promise something to the workers and the viewers. I wonder for who these spaces are designed. Do they want to hide the actual conditions of the webcam models working from them, to act like they are in a wealthy environment, or pretend that they are girly? Or maybe they are designed for the models themselves, designed as a promise of prosperity.

I enter the hallway, the first space that pops up on my screen when opening the digital walkthrough. On the left hand there are lockers. There are more lockers situated in the hallway further up. In total there must be like 100 different lockers, all to be opened by keys, none of them sticking out of the locks. This webcam studio maybe has ten different rooms, so there will be no more than ten people working at the same time. I wonder why there are so many lockers, are they meant for the models to store stuff during working hours or are they for when they leave for home, to stow their sexy outfits? All the windows in the hallway and the rooms are covered by fake wallpaper views, nowhere to look out to the real world. There are three paper holders above the lockers and they are all empty except one. -> *The paper has to be translated*

The hall connects to an open smoking space, which basically makes the whole hallway a smoking space. I've been walking through this hall a lot, clicking forward and backward, always wondering why I couldn't pass through the smoking room to the other side of the hallway. I kept bumping into borders. It took me several visits to realise it's mirror I've been bumping into. Somehow they did a very good job in erasing the 360 camera. Because of the absence of any human form or digital capturer these mirrors become very disconcerting, with no reference to where a space stops existing. I'm baffled by how clean the mirrors are and how much mirrors there are.

The hallway turns into the smoking room on one side and the kitchen on the other end. The kitchen is equipped with a tv, a washing machine and a dryer. The kitchen also connects to a corridor with a total of six doors. On the other end of the hallway there is also a corridor consisting of four doors. All these doors lead to different rooms except for one, that leads to a room with a cabin inside it. I presume it's like a stand-up tan-bed but I haven't figured it out yet. The hallway and smoking room are covered in low quality prints. Mostly consisting of images of an American subway, probably New York. I tried reverse image search these different images, hoping to find the source and location but I could only find one picture of a girl in front of a graffiti wall. I found the image pop-up on a number of computer-wallpaper websites that look like they are designed in the 90's. I wonder if someone hand picked this image and printing it especially for this room. The one who did these wallpapers must have done the room interiors as well.

The smoking room keeps confusing me every time I visit it. The mirror in the back just makes it look like its's very narrow space with four ashtrays, instead of it just being one room.
Even the bathroom is visitable. It looks really modern, like it has recently been refurbished. There are purple led-lights surrounding the space. It doesn't seem like the most convenient spot to put make-up one. There is hand-soap next to the sinks but no shampoo or shower-gel in the shower cabin, unless it's hidden in the cabinet under the sink. Maybe they all have to bring their own?

There are some random photo's scattered through the hallway, big prints with wooden plinths around it. There's two of a bowling trip; one of a young woman holding a bowling ball and in the kitchen there's a group-photo consisting of three men and six woman all holding each other and pulling weird faces, it seems like it was a company outing.

The kitchen is the only room with a window that hasn't been stickered. The blinds are almost hermetically sealed. Across from the kitchen there's a washing machine and a TV. On the screen there's a paused image of an

'angel' on the catwalk of a Victoria Secret show. The image is clearly superimposed during the editing of this 360photo walkthrough. The house is filled with empty promises [Statement]. The confinement of the space makes it feel like it exists in a different reality. It is made to exist for people to sell fantasies, must they therefor live and believe in these fantasies?

There are 7 rooms, they are all numbered. The fact that they wouldn't exist without the internet fascinates me. They wouldn't exist if there weren't people looking for sexual pleasure combined with a sense of intimacy. What makes us want to look and gaze into these rooms from across a screen, mediated through wires, codes and lenses. The distance this creates to the subject at the same creates a possibility to connect. Every body shows just what they want to show, a distilled or morphed version of theirselves. [being able to see yourself through the web cam on the screen, to choose what you want to show, by looking at yourself in the way others do you can control your own image, control of one's own mediation = managing one's own image - controlling my image [cite] [The Work of Being Watched - see also video therapy. o ]]

[perhaps it's the case that the fact we can see the wires and cables carries the burden of proof [cite]]

[[ 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? ]]

The internet creates a liminal world, a space, where the cybersex occurs. Webcam sex is done from a particular place, e.g. a home or webcam studio, 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 easily may be suspended.
This liminality, the dislocated and disembodied nature of computer-mediated communication make cybersex an experience that potentially expresses a sexuality separate from and transgressive of the person, the body, and everyday life.  This makes it possible to explore and experiment with new forms and different forms of sexual play.

The interior architectures, who might just be the owners of the studio, or friends, or acquaintances, who knows, they try to create something which has identity, but at the same time is a fantasy. The themed rooms make you think about cheap porn sets.
…. (TBC)

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Laura Mulvey (1987)

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