**Talking To Strangers: Temporality, Identity and Politics in Live Webcam Sex Channels**

Aras Ozgun

Immediacy has been a constitutive characteristic of electronic and online communications from the very beginning. E-mail, instant messaging, bulletin boards and user forums, and later RSS technologies[[1]](#footnote-1) and social media networks have relied on the immediacy of information exchange, and have gradually replaced traditional forms of interpersonal written communications. The emergence of electronic text —writing on the screen— has radically altered the ontology of text as had existed before in the print cultures, by depriving it of its authoritative permanence, destabilizing it and making it dynamic, ever-changing, and temporal. Up until recently, because of a variety of technological limitations, this ‘instantaneousness’ remained confined to the exchange of this new kind of (electronic) ‘text’. Although digital media platforms and networks had the potential to connect distant people, locations and events, not only textually but audio-visually as well, this potential has been limited by availability of access to the networks, bandwidth, and technical equipment. Over the past few years, with the increasing popularity of camera-equipped smart phones, laptops, and wireless and mobile data networks, these limitations have been largely surpassed.

This development has an obvious practical impact primarily on face-to-face communications: Skyping, using Facetime, and video chatting increasingly substitute or supplement face-to-face communications in general. However, the potential of webcam for one-to-many communications, as a ‘broadcasting’ device, is still neglected or unfulfilled, and this is largely due to the economic logic of media industries rather than technological limitations. ‘Televisuality’—that is, the immediate and live transmission of events, which has been the definitive power of TV - still remains under the monopoly of television networks. The emergence of the webcam as a technological form only marginally challenges the monopoly of television in defining social time and collective temporality. ‘Real-time,’ as a term that refers to a computer’s capacity to render image streams continuously while they are being displayed on the monitor (or, any other process in which the tangible results/effects of the process is simultaneously displayed), emerged with the introduction of digital media technologies to distinguish this new form of temporal immediacy from the latency of print cultures. Yet, the ‘real-time’ of social life in general ironically remained associated with television. Television networks sustained their monopoly over the information regarding what is happening at that very moment. So far, except substituting face-to-face communications, the Internet has provided a vast archive of past ‘moments’ of collectively experienced ‘real-time,’ in the form of digital video recordings, shared and made available online on YouTube, Vimeo or other social media networks. The instant availability of such a wide video archive had been a fascination in new media studies during the second decade of online communications. Before us now is another potential; a new, truly decentralized technological form of television (that does not require the massive organizational structure of corporate television networks) available to individuals. This creates new temporal depths apart from the hegemonic time regimes constructed and sustained by television networks. What I am going to discuss in this article, live webcam sex channels, is one of these marginal instances in which online video challenges television in its own realm, and claims the rights over ‘live-ness.’ I will argue that the ‘live-ness’ of the webcam constitutes a new type of reality effect, which I will provisionally call ‘realness.’ In the last part of the article, I will analyze a particular interaction that occurs in Turkish live webcam sex channels as a result of such realness, in which feminine desire falls into confrontation with patriarchal moralism, which leads to a productive crisis that makes enjoyment impossible.

**“I see, therefore I am”: The Ontology of Televisuality**

The ontology of the webcam is that of television on a minor scale; it possesses the same ‘live-ness’ and ‘immediacy.’ ‘Live-ness’ of the televisual image, as pointed out by many media theorists from Raymond Williams to Mary Ann Doane, provides television with a unique potential for relating to the event it presents. In this respect, the televisual image has an ‘ontic’ condition, in Heidegger’s terms. Martin Heidegger used ‘ontic’ in reference to the undeniable existential quality of being, of things and events, which surpass any ontological inquiry.[[2]](#footnote-2) We can inquire into how we perceive the outside world, how we gather our knowledge of things and events, but we cannot deny the existence of things and events— that was the ontic condition of being, according to Heidegger.

The tense of the image, its perpetual reference to the present, distinguishes the iconic signifier of television from that of cinema and photograph. The ‘live-ness’ of the televisual image transfers the ontic quality of the things and events it depicts to the screen they appear on; the televisual image thus possesses undeniable presence of the outside world it shows. We can always question how things and events are represented to us on the television screen; we can always associate particular instances of such representation with ideological constructions beyond epistemological questions; we can always remain doubtful about the “truth value” of these representations and question what is really happening there; but we can never deny that what television shows us does exist somewhere at that very moment. The “truth” of the televisual representation is primarily the event itself; that something happens at that very moment. “What happened, really?” is a posterior concern.

The webcam image claims the same ontic quality in a similar way; the existence of what it shows us on the other end of the line at that very moment is undeniable, beyond any questions regarding its identity and its truthfulness. The early incarnations of webcams were online cameras placed in various remote locations from Antarctica to Times Square. These webcams did not attempt to impress the Internet-savvy voyeurs with the photographic quality of their low-resolution pictures, which were only updated in every few seconds, but indeed fascinated them with a different type of realism—with their temporal reference. They quietly, without any commentary, showed us what was going on at a remote part of the world, somewhere that exists beyond our sight at that very moment. Against the hyper-realism of larger-than-life LCD billboards, multi-monitor TV walls, high-precision satellite imagery and HD projections on every facade, the tiny pixelated webcam image offered the realism of a ‘trace’ rather than a map, of a silhouette rather than a portrait. The uncanny truth of the jerky video stream recalled a Vertovian dream amid the spectacle of high-tech visual media: ‘life as it is,’ at that very moment. What becomes clearly expressed in the intensified eroticism of live webcam sex channels, in their seductive power, as I will try to explain below, is this temporal reference—the extended sight that simply registers what exists there at that moment, beyond any question regarding its ‘representation.’

After the proliferation of bandwidth and camera equipped computers, a 17-year-old Russian high school student, Andrey Ternovsky, cultivated the true nature of the webcam by combining it with two other constitutive characteristics of online communications: anonymity and interactivity. The algorithm Ternovsky deployed on the site he founded, Chatroulette, allowed the users to randomly connect to other users through their webcams. In complete anonymity, users could video chat with others, perform acts for complete strangers, just look at each other, or try to catch another’s attention before he or she clicked on the ‘next’ button - or if all failed, to just hit the ‘next’ button and jump to another random user’s webcam. Without any advertisement, the users of Ternovsky’s Chatroulette exponentially grew; when the site launched in November 2009, it initially drew 500 visitors per day. Within a month, there were fifty thousand daily users, and Chatroulette is still one of the top five video chat sites in the world. [[3]](#footnote-3)

The popularity of Chatroulette revealed the erotic potential of the medium. According to an informal study published in 2010, hitting the “next” button on Chatroulette yielded a 1 in 8 chance of seeing someone apparently naked, exposing themselves or engaging in a sexual act, a considerable chance of seeing a ‘show your tits’ sign, and a considerably lesser chance of seeing actual female flashers.[[4]](#footnote-4) The amount of users seeking erotic pleasure and anonymously exhibiting themselves on the site eventually generated a series of public controversies, to the degree that Ternovsky finally had to modify the website’s program to detect skin tone and block nudity, and employ users with ‘moderator’ privileges to filter out obscenity.

Webcam sex sites that appeared in the recent years were built on the idea of providing an open space for what has been excluded from Chatroulette and other video chat sites: nudity, obscenity, exhibitionist thrill, voyeuristic orgy, purely and intensely erotic communication.

Although the content of most popular live webcam sex sites are open to all adult Internet users, they are economically sustained through paid membership as well as advertisement revenues.[[5]](#footnote-5) Any adult Internet user (or, in fact, any Internet user who confirms that she or he is over 18 years old) can access the sites and follow the broadcasts. The members whose webcams are open, who are visible to other viewers, are marked as ‘broadcasting.’ The use of the term ‘broadcasting,’ a term borrowed from television in this context, once again reminds us the closeness between TV and the webcam as a technological form. The broadcasting members are listed according to their self-declared sexual preferences, under the sections: female, male, transsexual and couples (not necessarily heterosexual). Different sites offer different extra categories, such as the ‘party’ category on cam4.com (in which a group of people gather in front of the webcam), or ‘featured broadcasts’ (which include the performers selected by the sites administrators). The listings of members performing/broadcasting at that moment in each section of the sites are displayed in order of popularity—meaning that the performers with more viewers are displayed on the top of list. On cam4.com and chaturbate.com, top-ranking performers can draw an audience of a few thousand members depending on the time of day. Membership, although free, is a requirement for broadcasting. Members can also purchase ‘tokens,’ which can be offered and transferred to other members. Members who receive tokens from other members can convert these tokens to cash, and the site operators cut a commission from this exchange. Token exchange sustains the economy of the sites as well as facilitating the sex work they provide.

My interest is not in the economic aspects of the sex work on these channels. The income derived from performing sex work on webcam must differ hugely from performer to performer, and it is difficult to estimate it without an in-depth analysis of overall exchange. As I’ll try to explain later, the fact that not all performers seek sex work, plus the fact that sex work and erotic pleasure become almost indistinguishable on these sites, makes it difficult to analyze the volume and intensity of the sex work without referring to the site operators’ records. While pointing to the erosion of the perceivable difference between sex work and erotic play, I also acknowledge the fact that these are already fluid and problematic categories, and I don’t intend to espouse a clear-cut, hierarchical distinction based on moral standards between these. My interest is in the psychodynamics and sociodynamics of this particular form of communication, in which further indiscernibility of these loose categories becomes an important feature. This indiscernibility, as I will argue, while intensifying the erotic thrill, also generates a crisis in the patriarchal language. This is crystallized in the interactions between Turkish female performers and male audience.

Among these dynamics, what becomes immediately recognizable is a heightened sense of anonymity. At the basic level, the anonymity of the webcam offers certain conveniences, such as providing a safe space for the expression of uncommon forms of desire in respect to erotic imagination, and in respect to sex work. Additionally, one does not have to leave home to watch a strip show, nor does a performer need to drive to a different city’s strip club to avoid being recognized by their neighbors.

Anonymity is not only something convenient for circumventing the moral norms and taboos surrounding sexuality, but it is also a vehicle for constructing virtual identities. Combined with the intensity and interactivity of communication that is involved, anonymity creates the grounds for a few different layers of indiscernibility, which I consider to be the constitutive element of the medium that provides its distinct seductive power.

The first layer of indiscernibility is between the performers and the audience: audience members turn on their cameras and perform too while watching each other performing; performers sometimes participate in each other’s sessions; and performers can turn on the viewers’ cam and make them a part of the performance as such. In this respect, webcam channels resemble the form of a ‘carnival’ in the Bakhtinian sense. Russian Formalist literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin was pointing to the carnival form in his analysis of polyphony and dialogism in narratives: As a non-scripted event that is constituted by its participants, a carnival can only be experienced through participation as such, and does not leave any space for passive “spectatorship.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

Another layer of indiscernibility, which I find to be even more important for constructing the seductive power of the medium, appears between the professional sex workers, who perform regularly (sometimes every day, sometimes even all day, every day) as a means of subsistence, the amateur sex workers, who casually perform to earn extra money, and the common exhibitionists and voyeurs who just seek erotic pleasure. It is this layer of indiscernibility that blurs the distinction between sex work and erotic thrill and provides the perfect ground for fantasy, giving the webcam its seductive power.

We can see this at work when we look at the most popular performers’ channels. Contrary to the common wisdom, the rankings that are apparent in the listings show that the popularity of the performers does not directly correlate with their physical attractiveness or attributes (in other words, the conformity of their physical appearance with the hegemonic conventions of ‘beauty’), or how much nudity they display, or how explicit their broadcast is and to what distances they go to satisfy their audience.

**‘Realness’ of the Webcam Image: Benefit of the Doubt**

Oftentimes the popularity of performers is related to their ability to construct ‘verisimilitude’ - an effect that I will provisionally call ‘realness.’ ‘Realness’ is an immediate effect of a direct, unprocessed, unscripted and unedited visual reference - something with which we are now becoming familiar, by the multitude of cell phone and amateur video images we are being exposed to in our everyday communication environment. What I call ‘realness’ here is, on one hand, a certain kind of ‘reality effect’ that is somehow different from and opposed to what we find in Hollywood narratives, and, on the other hand, a strategy that is born out of such layers of indiscernibility that is inherent to this particular form of communication.

‘Realness,’ as such, is embedded in the ‘live-ness’ of the webcam. ‘Live-ness’ appears to be an integral part of the erotic pleasure, to the degree that, although the streaming of a "pre-recorded" video feed to the site (instead of the live video image from the webcam) is technically and practically possible, this is considered ‘cheating’ and it is highly undesirable among webcam users. The sites are therefore designed with a particular administrative attention to sustain ‘live-ness’; the audience is given the chance to mark the performers’ feeds that they determine to be “recorded" and these channels appear marked as such on the listing page. ‘Live-ness’ is an essential element for the ‘realness’ of the webcam, to the effect that ‘recorded’ is a synonym for ‘fake.’

The ‘live-ness’ of the performance includes (or, it is constructed through) the performer’s interaction with the audience. This interaction does not merely consist of passively responding to the demands of the audience to perform sexual acts, but largely, and more profoundly, and sometimes counterintuitively, sustained by talking with them, engaging with them communicatively. At various intensities, interaction ranges from passive communication (such as "hey joe, you are here again?") to in-depth, intimate personal conversations that do not necessarily revolve around sexual topics.

Such conversations construct the ‘realness’ of the performer as an individual, as a social subject, as a desiring subject, and not as a sex worker who submits herself to her customers’ desires. At the moment that such ‘realness’ is constructed by the performer, the difference between erotic play and sex work becomes indiscernible, and the flow of desire, the erotic exchange, appears to be authentic.

It is possible to see female performers in these sites in heavy makeup, lying down naked in bed in front of Manhattan-skyline wallpaper, lit with pink and purple lamps, masturbating all day and just asking for tokens with a big forced smile on their face all the time. This is obviously sex work, and in fact, what is displayed bare here is the reality of the sex work. But no matter how good-looking these women are and what sort of challenges they undertake, what often draws more audience are the female performers who appear at home, on a laptop computer in their bed, or at work, in rather casual situations, interacting with their audience ‘as they are.’

A cam4.com member, Shygirl652, regularly broadcasts from a library. Without showing her face, she places the camera between her legs and plays with herself under her skirt, or places it on the desk and unbuttons her shirt, and from time to time turns the camera around to show other people working on the desks behind her. Stella, another cam4.com member, typically broadcasts from her jewelry shop, exposes herself in the store when there are no customers, or even in front of the shop when the street is empty. A few performers regularly broadcast discreetly from their workplaces while doing their day jobs, and their discretion while exposing themselves to the webcam becomes a part of the thrill for the audience as well. Yet, all these performers accept tokens, and the ‘realness’ of the ‘coworker exposing herself’ shatters only if the audience is presented with a ‘workspace’ composed of a desk in an empty room and the performer does not do any work other than exposing herself and asking for tokens.

Exchange of tokens, and the performers demand for tokens for continuing the show can be considered as a marker of sex work. But even this is not a clear marker, since it is possible to see the sex workers appearing on their channel declaring they are not ‘working,’ they are just there to ‘talk,’ and socialize with their audience. In some cases, the performers who don’t accept tokens - and therefore appear as they are only interested in erotic pleasure - draw their audience to other sources of commercial exchange. For example, *BusinessLady* describes herself as a sexually active financially secure professional businesswoman who is seeking erotic thrill on chaturbate.com.[[7]](#footnote-7) She writes on her profile page; “I work hard and have way too much stress in my life… I do this for fun. I don't get to read much of the screen because I am busy pleasuring myself… If you join my room and I do not seem to be putting on a show, it is because I am resting. I may work on cam, and have even read articles aloud to viewers. It may be boring, so change the channel.” She explains the fact that she accepts token as: “Any tokens / tips are donated to a respected 501(c)(3) animal rescue charity. I wish I could prove this, but it really is the truth.” But her profile page directs her more than 6,500 followers to her personal blog on Blogspot, where she shares her experiences and fantasies in writing, and also offers a paid membership for her fan club that gives free “phone sex in every other month” and privileged treatment for “free private 1 on 1 camera time.”

*Vnmses*, who is one of the most popular performers on that same site, whenever she is online, gives us one of the best examples of ‘realness’ as such.[[8]](#footnote-8) Her performances are almost intimate live-broadcasts of the everyday life of a dissatisfied suburban American teenager. In contrast with the heavy makeup and forced welcoming smile of the third-world sex workers on the site, whenever she turns it on, *Vnmses* looks through her webcam with curious big eyes, and a serious face that searches for a smile. She talks to her audience/friends before she goes to sleep and when she wakes up, while she hangs out naked around her suburban house, while she steals her mother’s wine from the fridge, when she lounges in the yard. She keeps broadcasting when she occasionally goes out to shopping with her girlfriends, and introduces the boys she occasionally picked up before they had sex in front of the webcam. The parallel scars on her arms and legs, she explains, were because she likes to cut herself when she feels down. She talks with her audience members on punk music, movies and anything that can be a subject of mundane conversation. She also shares her intimate stories: Her first boyfriend was black, and because she was being raised by her conservative grandparents, and because she and her boyfriend were stupid enough to try, they started with having only anal sex —”God, that was so painful!”. And then, when they got caught by Grandpa together in the shower, things became obvious. Her masturbation sessions in front of the webcam seem more to be curious experiments to overcome the profound boredom that she shares with her audience, than a service to them. Excess and mundane, boredom and orgasm, friends and audience mix into each other in *Vnmses*’ broadcasts. She does not appear as a sex worker trying to satisfy an audience, but as a twenty-something punk seeking satisfaction in her life with them. She never asks for tokens, but takes them as they come, plentifully.

In the case of *Xaida*, a chaturbate.com member, who often broadcasted in highly professional, Hollywood-grade zombie makeup and outfit during 2012, her makeup and outfit did not appear to jeopardize her ‘realness,’ but on the contrary, offered proof of authenticity: Sex workers don’t look like zombies, and aren’t assumed to know much about the zombie literature either, therefore sophisticated makeup and costuming establishes the fact that the performer is a female artist seeking erotic thrill rather than a sex worker seeking customers.

This is what I refer to ‘realness as a strategy’ as well as an effect. As much as the female performer on the webcam can really be a ‘housewife,’ a ‘coworker,’ or a ‘bored teenager’ seeking erotic thrill, she could be a sex worker presenting a carefully and meticulously constructed fantasy. So, any fantasy as such that is presented with sufficient believability, lacking any other reference, receives the power of ‘real’ by having the effect of ‘real.’ I choose to use the term ‘realness’ in order to distinguish this form from other kinds of reality effects. What we register as ‘real’ often appears to us as a whole, verifiable and perpetual discursive construction, whereas the verisimilitude of the webcam is a temporal effect sustained by its partial and unverifiable image. Its irrefutable partiality also distinguishes the webcam image from the ‘illusion of reality’ that is aimed at achieving cinematic realism. ‘Illusion of reality’ in cinema is an effect of ‘realistic fiction,’ whereas a webcam bears no script and it is decidedly not fiction. Rather than an ‘illusion of reality,’ a webcam, like an illusionist, inspires us to accept what it presents: it is impossible not to believe what happens before your eyes, although your logic tells you that a rabbit wouldn’t fit into that hat.

‘Realness’ in this sense also differs from what Baudrillard calls simulation: simulation, in his terminology, refers to an artificially constructed event that assumes the authority of the real, and substitutes the real without having any reference to it. By contrast, ‘realness’ asserts an ambiguity by being partial, its verisimilitude stems from its lack, its vagueness, in contrast with the overarching narrative of the simulation; it doesn’t project the whole that envelopes the present in the way Baudrillard problematizes.

‘Realness’ in this sense, resonates more with what Gilles Deleuze describes as “virtual” at various points of his philosophical inquiries (from his early work in Difference and Repetition, to his late works on Cinema).[[9]](#footnote-9) Virtual, in his terminology, is not something “unreal,” or “opposite of real,” but a “potential,” a “nebulous state” of the real that constantly becomes “actualized.” For Deleuze, “reality” is the outcome of the dynamic passages between the “virtual” and “actual” state of events and things. The “actual” here, what becomes “actualized” in the context of webcam sex, is the erotic desire. Therefore “realness” is the “virtual” constitution of the desiring subject on/through the webcam. With no reference to the past or the future, with no other identifiers or discursive elements apart from (or use: beyond) the image itself, a webcam virtually constructs and affirms the “desiring subject,” purely within the temporality of that moment. “Realness,” the power of the webcam to virtually construct a “desiring subject” as such, is therefore the constitutive element of the medium, and it is directly related with ‘live-ness.’

‘Live-ness,’ the temporality of the webcam, then, brings about a double transgression. On the one hand, it imposes the transgression of the sex work by blurring the markers between “desire” and “work,” and amplifies the core erotic fantasy by unhinging it from its subordination to “sex work.” The female performer, as non-sex-worker, ordinary woman - a desiring subject - becomes more desirable as she fulfills the fantasy perfectly with her “realness.” By appearing as a “desiring subject,” the female performer fulfills the underlying fantasy, and calls for active participation from the other party, who has to respond in kind and join the game by generating his own desires, just like the erotic play in physical intimacy. On the other hand, the escapist erotic fantasy itself transgresses the banality of mundane, uneventful everyday life - as in the case of *Vnmses*, the proper suburban girl breaking moral restraints through immediately shared affective intensities. The seductive power of the webcam is closely related with this two-fold transgression that stems from indiscernibility, which becomes the definitive characteristic of the webcam image.

**Fear and Loathing on Live Webcam Sex: The “Turkish” Case**

The suspension of physical distances leads to a truly international audience in live webcam sex channels. Yet this international audience is divided into linguistic spheres because of the nature of communication-—which once again shows the importance of verbal interaction in these channels: the performances are not merely displays of flesh, nor is the audience just a crowd of passive voyeurs; the verbal interaction is an essential erotic component. The flag symbol chosen by a performer for his or her profile indicates the language s/he is comfortable speaking. Major linguistic spheres are the usual internationally spoken languages; English, Spanish, German, Italian, etc.

Among these international linguistic spheres, we find an unusual one, a Turkish sphere. The presence of Turkish-speaking performers and audiences on these channels is not surprising when we consider the size of Turkish-speaking public worldwide.[[10]](#footnote-10) Although there is a large Turkish-speaking immigrant population living outside of Turkey, considering the fact that Turkish immigrants are not limited to speaking only Turkish but have access to other, more popular linguistic spheres (such as English or German), it is safe to presume that the Turkish-speaking audience mainly consists of people logging in from Turkey. The conversations within the audience also clearly confirm that they are overwhelmingly from Turkey. But considering the circumstances surrounding these channels, not only conservative social norms and but also Internet regulations in Turkey, the presence of such a community may be seen as highly unusual. Unlike in other countries that compose other linguistic spheres, live webcam sex sites are entirely banned in Turkey together with other pornographic and “harmful” sites. Since 2007, the Telecommunication and Transmission Authority in Turkey has been able to impose bans on Internet sites without prior judicial approval, through an IP filtering system. This IP filtering system is installed on the domain name servers and blocks access to the banned sites by displaying a generic error page that informs the user that the website is blocked. The nature of such Internet censorship and the controversies surrounding the regulations are also somehow related with the nationalist political culture that becomes crystalized in the Turkish-speaking male audience’s interaction with female performers.

The sites that are banned by the Turkish Telecommunication and Transmission Authority include some of the highly popular social media sites such as YouTube, because of a particular statement in Turkish criminal law that prohibits “insulting Turkishness.” The vagueness of the legal term, the extra-judiciary power of the censorship authority, and the technicalities of the IP filtering system (which does not only censor the particular prohibited content on the sites, but blocks access to the IP address-—to the server/site—-entirely) opened up arbitrary censorship practices over the past years. In the face of the huge controversy resulting from the censoring of some of the most popular sites, Turkish Prime Minister, still not willing to ease the censorship regulations formally, yet still trying to uphold his populist image, famously declared: “My people know how to circumvent the censorship if they want to, and to access to the sites they want”. So, while a huge number of Internet sites (including the webcam sex sites) are still banned in Turkey, various types of easily available technological devices (such as proxy servers, IP tunneling applications or DNS scripts) to bypass the censorship are legitimate, and are widely deployed by Internet users on their personal computers in Turkey.

Therefore, assuming the majority of the Turkish-speaking audience on webcam sex sites connects from within Turkey, these individuals are not only overriding social norms regarding sexuality, but circumventing the legal regulations related with Internet usage.

In addition, the size of this audience is unexpectedly large, considering the circumstances. One can often see audience members with Turkish nicknames watching performers from other linguistic spheres, quietly enjoying the performances. There are few Turkish performers present under the “male” category at any time of the day. But the real size and dynamics of the Turkish audience become apparent as soon as a Turkish-speaking female performer starts broadcasting. The Turkish-speaking male audience immediately crowds the performer’s channel, and the number of attendees becomes large enough to push the ranking of the performer quickly to among the top viewed. The popularity of any Turkish-speaking performer is so readily guaranteed that it is possible to find female sex workers from other countries who choose to appear under Turkish flag in order to lure the Turkish-speaking male audience to their broadcast (which becomes a futile effort, of course, because as soon as the audience realizes they cannot communicate with the performer, they leave her channel).

The interaction between the Turkish-speaking performers and audience is distinctly interesting, since it displays a quite productive paradox between the national identity (which is a product of nationalist fantasy) and erotic fantasy—the essential seductive power of the medium.

Quite often we find Turkish-speaking transexual sex workers performing under the “female” category in these live webcam sex sites-—although, as I mentioned, the sites are organized according to sexual preferences and there is a separate section for “transexual” performers. These performers do not hide their transsexuality or sex work, although they do not tend to directly disclose or forefront these either-—these become apparent very soon in the course of their performance, and go unquestioned. The appearance of transexual performers under female category as such does not seem to be an issue for the Turkish-speaking male audience; on the contrary, they participate in the performance as aware of the performers’ transsexuality and sex work, and their interaction with the performers shows that some of the audience members are regulars, followers, and even fans of the performers.

A similar negotiation applies to Turkish female performers. The overwhelming majority of Turkish female performers we find on live sex channels don't show their faces, or choose to wear a mask. A male partner often accompanies them (who also doesn’t show his face). They do interact with their audience, and while they play out the fantasy —of the bored housewife, or the sexually adventurous couple—the female performer openly demands tokens/rewards for acting out the acts her audience demands - which sometimes include her male partner. These performers appear to be quite familiar with sexual slang and the jargon of sex work. The settings of the webcam show are always in a domestic space, seldom revealing identifying markers. The interaction with the audience almost never involves personal details or depth, and often remains at the level of seduction-oriented small talk, or trivial coquetry. Any details revealing hints of identity (such as a performer’s location, her “job” etc.) appear blatantly fake - oftentimes such details echo very common clichés of the Turkish erotic imagination: if she is a bored housewife or secretary, she is always from lzmir, which is an Aegean town famous in the rest of the country for its good-looking libertine women; if she is a student, she is always from Ankara, the capital city, which is also the home of some famous universities; if it's a couple looking for sexual adventure, or a transsexual sex worker, they are always from famously decadent lstanbul. All these clichés, and the performers’ insistent demand for tokens/rewards to continue with the show or in performing the acts her audience asks for, clearly reveal the fact that the performance is a part of sex work. The interaction and exchange is not intended to build up a “realistic fantasy” (or “realness”), but function as a “protocol,” a mutually agreed convention through which the parties declare their positions and agree on the nature of the exchange; the common clichés presented by the performers about themselves do not reveal anything other than reifying their identity and their presence before the audience as sex workers. Unlike in other linguistic spheres, the inept visibility, or direct disclosure of sex work in Turkish linguistic sphere is not a turn-off. On the contrary, in fact, it is almost a requirement.

Occasionally, a Turkish-speaking female performer who doesn’t observe this mutually agreed-upon convention will appear on these channels. Her broadcasts immediately receive the same attention as for the performers that “play the game.” But, at the moment the Turkish-speaking male audience members gather the clues that the performer may indeed be a “real" housewife or a student, a “real” woman just seeking erotic thrill by playing out a sexual fantasy or by exposing herself, or just “talking to strangers” of the opposite sex, they respond with a particular reaction. If the performer is not asking for “tokens,” if she seems to be hesitant to respond to their insistent demands for showing more flesh, or performing the acts they desire, the doubts of the audience grow. They resist buying the idea that they are actually interacting with a woman who is not doing sex work but just seeking erotic thrill. The audience first starts to question the authenticity (the “realness”) of the performer, often claiming that the performance is fake or recorded. If the performer proves that the performance is a “live broadcast” (by spontaneously responding to her audience’s comments), and she confirms that she is really there talking to them, the reaction of the audience becomes more aggressive. Their demands to see more flesh in exchange for tokens become more insistent. If the performer continues to ignore their demands and imposes her own will, which proves that she is not interested in rewards, she is not a sex worker, she is just a woman looking for erotic thrill, the tension turns into a crisis. The “realness” of the performer in other linguistic spheres, which serves to amplify her seductive power in this medium, is enhanced by her disambiguating herself from sex workers; in the Turkish sphere, however, this would function in the opposite way, with such “realness” creating a sober repulsion in Turkish-speaking male audience members. Confronted with proof of such “realness,” the only response left for the audience is the denial of enjoyment through a moral reaffirmation that is attached to the nationalist fantasy. “This woman can’t be Turkish…!” the audience cries, “She is either Armenian, or Kurdish, or Greek perhaps?” And before the frustrated woman finally decides to end her show, we often see remarks about how bad this webcam is for Turkish culture, how it corrupts the social values. “These things are not good for us!” the Turkish speaking male audience concludes.

This pattern repeats itself almost every time a Turkish-speaking female performer who does not seem to be a sex worker appears on live webcam sex channels and stays long enough to build such tension among her audience. Occasionally, some audience members may choose to voice their opinion towards not caring about moral virtues and enjoying the performance, but then they also receive their share of aggression, and this time by fighting among themselves the audience makes it impossible for them to enjoy the show.

How should we interpret this crisis, then? This pattern shows a few things at once: First of all, it displays a patriarchal fantasy that intends to confine female sexuality into the service of male desire; sex work is negotiated and accepted, but feminine sexual desire that seeks and imposes its own satisfaction is not. Then, when this patriarchal fantasy is shattered by an insistent “realness” of the feminine desire, the Turkish male audience responds by escaping to a larger fantasy - the fantasy of nationalism, and reestablishes the moral ground on that front: “She can be a real woman, but in that case she can’t be a Turkish woman.” National identity, as imagined as it is - as a purely modern fantasy in the case of Turkish identity - offers a last refuge for patriarchy that female desire cannot enter and cannot lay claim to.

Because of the nature of communication and the medium, we can consider that live webcam sex channels are open to various manifestations of misogyny in all linguistic spheres - to the degree that other linguistic spheres are structured through patriarchal cultural forms as well. But the particular appearance of misogyny within the Turkish speaking audience, that it paradoxically leads to the denial of erotic pleasure itself, must be associated with the strength of a particular cultural ingredient: nationalism. In the final stage of the confrontation between misogyny and feminine desire, what glues back the shattered male ego and opens the gates for a proud, hateful exit is a greater fantasy of nationalism.

In any linguistic sphere, male or female, people are born with desire, not with national identities. In the Turkish case, the nationalism that expresses itself so schizophrenically at this moment has been cultivated for decades in popular culture. Turkish national identity was a fiction that enabled the foundation of modern Turkish Republic, and became an ideal model (rather than an existing “type”) for molding its modern social subjects. Militarism, authoritarianism, and patriarchy became interrelated components of the political culture of “modern” Turkey, as the previously non-existing “Turkish identity” was built by embodiment of these notions. After 1980’s military coup, a “national culture industry” emerged, emphasizing the same notions that are now seen in a liberal market environment. This national and nationalist culture industry started to dominate the local cultural markets particularly with the emergence of private TV channels by the 1990s. Since the early 2000s, only one or two foreign films per year have broken the top 10 box-office list (from the lower ranks) in Turkey, and hybrid pop forms produced by the Turkish music industry dominate most genres in the local music market.

Under these circumstances, the crisis in these seedy, dimly lit internet rendezvous houses can be seen as offering a productive tension: not only productive for exposing and understanding the Turkish patriarchal culture, but further offering a fertile confrontation with it.

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1. RSS stands for “Rich Site Summary”, and refers to the automatic syndication of data between publishers, which also enables the users receive timely updates [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper and Row Publishers, 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moore, Robert J. (2010-03-16). "Chatroulette Is 89 Percent Male, 47 Percent American, And 13 Percent Perverts.” TechCrunch. Retrieved 2010-05-14.

   <http://techcrunch.com/2010/03/16/chatroulette-stats-male-perverts/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In fact, there are also sites that offer commercial “live webcam sex shows,” not unlike online peep-shows, which are performed by sex workers to an adult audience for a fee. The dynamics that I want to draw attention in this article are found on “open” sites such as cam4.com, chaturbate.com, myfreecams.com etc., in which everybody who connects to the sites with a webcam can broadcast themselves and there is not a clear distinction between performer and audience, nor between sex work and erotic pleasure. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://chaturbate.com/businesslady/ (1.15.2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://chaturbate.com/vnmses/ (4.7.2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, Columbia University Press, 1995.

   Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, University Of Minnesota Press, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Now, I will refer to this particular audience as the “Turkish-speaking audience”, since, contrary to the assumptions of the nationalist fantasy I will discuss later, speaking Turkish language is not necessarily an indicator of “Turkish” national identity. Ethnic and cultural minorities in Anatolia (such as Kurdish people, or various non-Muslim minorities) also speak Turkish along with their native language, and a considerable number of people, such as myself, refuse to associate themselves with a national identity, as “Turks,” for ideological reasons. The problematic occurrence of the nationalist fantasy I will discuss later also confirms that speaking Turkish is not an indicator of national identity. Therefore, in this article, I will refer to this audience as “Turkish-speaking” with reference to language, rather than “Turks” or “Turkish people,” which denotes national identity. As the case I will discuss eventually confirms, it is a “linguistic sphere” rather than a “national identity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)