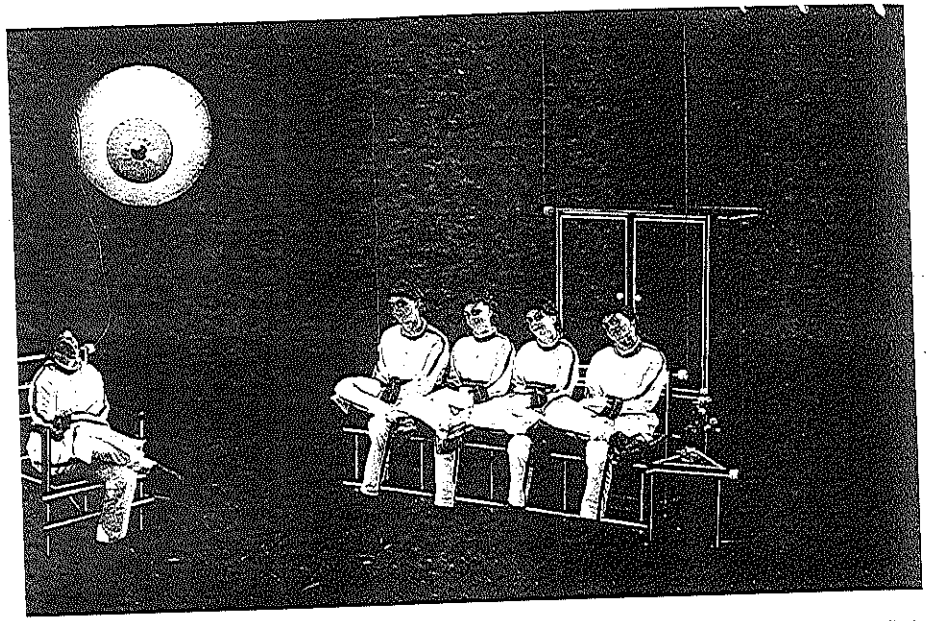

Figure 18.2 The computer operated, all-seeing surveillance eye in David Saltz's production of Handke's *Kaspar* (1999). Photo: Bradley Hellwig.

of the actor playing Kasper, emphasizing his inescapable surveillance. In the "intelligent" stage environment, the Kafkaesque, disembodied voices of the "prompters" of Handke's play are themselves "prompted" by Kasper's actions in trying to arrange the furniture in the room into their prescribed and proper configuration.

Sensors, accelerometers, and pressure-sensitive resistors embedded in the different pieces of furniture are connected via visible wires to an offstage computer. As Kasper touches or sits on the cushions of a sofa, a prompter voice is activated. It stops abruptly the moment he breaks physical contact; the same occurs when he rocks a rocking chair and then stops its movements. As Kasper's agitation and paranoia intensifies, the different male and female voices of the prompters begin, continue, or are cut short in response to his touch, as they bombard him with questions, assertions, syllogisms, and clichés. Kasper frantically opens and shuts cupboards and drawers, starts and stops brushing the floor (the broom "voice" is active only when the broom is in motion) and desperately removes a leg from a triangular table to stop it talking. The claustrophobic sense of external surveillance and control becomes extreme, and Kasper suddenly stops and stares at the large eyeball projection, which implacably returns his gaze. Kasper points to it, and quietly reflects:

The pupil of the eye is round. Fear is round. Had the pupil perished, fear would have perished. But the pupil is there, and fear is there. If the pupil weren't honest, I couldn't say fear was honest. If the pupil weren't permitted, fear wouldn't be permitted. No fear without pupil.

In the final sequence, nine performers in identical white costumes and fleshlike masks enter while Kaper, now similarly costumed and masked, delivers his final monologue. Mouth gags with flashing LED lights are fitted to each of the robotic characters, who then overcome Kasper, and attach a gag to finally silence him. He is literally, physically brought into line with the rest of them, and the lights fade on the intermittent flashes of the LED gags on the perfectly straight line of identical, anonymized figures. Having done its work, the unblinking and all-seeing eye finally closes.

Webcams, or the Virtual Performance of Real Life

To me Art's subject is the human clay.
—W. H. AUDEN[22]

Since the early 1990s, the dispersed users and communities of the Internet have reflected the trends toward CCTV in "real-world" society to provide their own, distinctive takes on surveillance and voyeurism. This is primarily through the use of the webcam: "a camera that takes pictures at set intervals, that can range from 15 times per second to once per hour, then instantly transmits the images to a web server."[23] Webcams are trained on everything from growing plants to fish tanks, from traffic congestion to vending machines, from offices and living rooms to the bedrooms of masturbating models and copulating couples. While CCTV surveillance is commonly covert and broadly concerned with policing, the webcam is characterized by a generally opposite impulse toward openness, sharing, and freedom of expression.

Artists and performers have commonly used webcams to document and make available their "authentic" daily working processes, including the Parkbench group of artists at New York University CAT, who used one of the Web's first remotely controlled cameras to transform their studio into a twenty-four-hour Web installation. An experiment to research the nature of webcams as an art medium, the group reflect that their awareness of the surveillance sometimes heightened their actions, while at others they felt themselves "dissolved in the ubiquitous surveillance which now erases the boundaries between private and public."[24] Parkbench also claim to have created the first live Web performances, entitled *ArTistheater*, in 1994.[25]

While willingly surveyed human subjects are inevitably affected in myriad ways by their consciousness of being watched, webcams nonetheless provide a sense of documentary realism, using the camera as the proverbial "fly on the wall." But whereas film and television documentaries are prerecorded and edited, and current live reality TV shows are stage-managed and use multiple camera techniques, the normally static, impassive

wide shot of the webcam provides a quite different experience. Its poor image quality and its fixed view differentiates the webcam from the televisual (although its place on the Web does not, as TV now increasingly resides there too). Its low-resolution, grainy pixelation lends it an antiquated, pre-television quality, while its stubborn stasis echoes the stern discipline of the surveillance camera. These qualities imbue the webcam with both a sense of documentary authenticity and of liveness that is central to its appeal and status: people log in to webcams to see what someone is *actually* doing *now* (or what is *actually* happening in the space *now*). Liveness and actuality are the ontological conjoined-twins of the webcam; and this inextricably links the new webcam medium to the liveness and actuality of performance art. Of course, unlike performance art, the webcam is a mediatized experience; its transmission of the live is mediated, but its particular form and documentary immediacy convey a unique sense of liveness, different from both theatrical and television experiences of the live. Webcams essentially purport to be the virtual performance of real life.

Webcam Sex

A sense of liveness is crucial to many pornography webcams, where paying subscribers to sites devoted to a single model tend to log in regularly, sometimes daily, striking up long-term relationships that are dependent on the models' live and personal responses in real time to the user's textual chat. Models are highly conscious of the need to gain subscriber loyalty to their sites, and strategically address their fans by name. Typically, as each user logs on in the chat window, they are welcomed by the model who is seen and heard via the video webcam—"Hi Joe, how are you tonight? Glad you could join me. Bill, Yoshi and Pole-Dick are also online right now, we're going to have a great night, you guys!"

Digital artist Susan Collins engaged in research into pornographic webcams in 1997 when she discovered that they were at the cutting edge of the then new tools of Net streaming media, which she was about to utilize in her *In Conversation* (1997) project. She was struck by the extent to which liveness, and its verification, was crucial to the users' experience. The time delay (typically between twenty and sixty seconds) between the user typing a message in the chat window and its receipt and response by the model was a source of both frustration and wonder:

> Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of the virtual tête-à-têtes I witnessed during my research consisted of the viewers asking the model to "wave to prove you're really there" (or similar). The delayed visuals tended to frustrate the viewers in their attempts at verification, and so the question would be continuously repeated in different forms with slightly different demands. The whole operation appeared to be engaged with establishing the truth and reality of the situation rather than an opportunity to create an intimate or erotic exchange (assuming this was the initial intention).
>
> I became increasingly interested in this particular act of verification—this effort to "establish the actual"—and the way it appeared to take over the original aim of the communication and the aim of the Web site itself. I even started drawing a parallel between this phenomenon and the methods visitors to a séance would apply to confirm the true identity of the person they were "making contact" with.[26]

The majority of interactive webcasts derive from the sex industry, where the traditional theatrical form of striptease has been transposed into a remote encounter in cyberspace. Catherine Waldby argues,

> Like money, sexuality is succumbing to digital dematerialization. Just as economic exchange is now less a matter of the transaction of palpable objects (notes and coins) and more the circulation of debt and credit data, so now certain domains of erotic experience are less a matter of bodily proximity and tactility, and more to do with electronically mediated communication between partners separated in space.[27]

Waldby suggests that Internet eroticism demonstrates the extent to which computer-mediated communication has brought about a new kind of corporeal space, and new configurations of embodiment and intersubjectivity which cannot be adequately described in terms of absolute presence or absence, proximity or distance:

> This space comes about through particular conjunctions of the body and digital technology, which in turn enables new forms of intersubjective space. To engage in eroticised exchange at the screen interface is to suture the body's capacities for pleasure into the interactive space of the network, to use that network as the medium for pleasuring and being pleasured at a distance.[28]

Webcam Falsities and Fictions

Webcam artists Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio suggest that webcams can be thought of as "a public service, or a mode of passive advertisement, or it may be a new type of exhibitionism, or self-disciplinary device. The desire to connect to others in real time may be driven by a response to the 'loss' of the public realm."[29] They point out that the term "liveness" originated in broadcasting to denote the idea of authenticity and "a trusted reality," and that webcams continue and extend this tradition. They argue that since webcam views tend to be casual and to lack dramatic content "they appear unmediated" and that their sense of liveness appeals to both technophiles and technophobes:

> For technophobes who blame technology for the collapse of the public sphere, liveness may be the last vestige of authenticity—seeing and/or hearing the event at the precise moment of its occurrence. The un-mediated is the im-mediate. For technophiles, liveness defines technology's aspiration to simulate the real in real-time. Lag time, search time, and download time all impair real-time computational performance. But whether motivated by the desire to preserve the real or to fabricate it, liveness is synonymous with the real—an object of uncritical desire for techno-extremes.

Regardless of where one falls within the technophile/technophobe spectrum, it is hard not to be captivated by the potential of witnessing something uncensored, no matter how banal.[30]

Diller and Scofidio's own artistic work with webcams plays on and teases the audience's act of faith in reading webcams as live and real. They also employ webcams to subtly point at how society operates and how social and professional relationships develop according to normative conventions, and in relation to the knowledge of being watched. Their webcam site *Refresh* (1998) presents twelve office webcams in a grid. One of these is live and is refreshed when clicked, the others are recorded, fictional narratives constructed using actors who are pasted into the office backgrounds using *Photoshop* software. The narratives are deliberately prosaic; the focus of the piece is the way in which the characters' behavior and actions are affected by their knowledge of the webcam's presence over time. A character's dress styles begin to change (flirting with the camera), paper becomes stacked more ritualistically (impressing the camera), a character's ordering of takeout food becomes obsessive (ignoring the camera), a sublimated office romance develops by the water cooler (trying to deceive the camera, but erotically excited by its gaze). As the artists put it: "There is nothing shocking or dramatic, rather, everyday conventions are slightly modified either to perform for or to hide from the camera."[31] While webcams always appear to be casually and innocently positioned, "their field of vision is carefully considered, and behaviour within that field cannot help but anticipate the looming presence of the global viewer."[32]

While many webcam artworks and performances challenge, parody, or otherwise take issue with surveillance society, as many others transform them from the negative power politics of Foucault's panopticon to present a positive environment highlighting notions of community and social anthropology. Andrea Zapp inverts the Big Brother paradigm for her *Little Sister—A 24-Hr Online Surveillance Soap* (since 2000) where she links together multiple existing public and private webcams that she selected according to their associations with the locations of typical television soap operas. The central image on the homepage is a globe made up of a jigsaw of webcam images of bars, hairdressers, offices, shops, living rooms, kitchens, and so on from all over the world, and the user clicks these to bring up discrete windows running the real time footage. Among the real webcams, she also incorporates some prerecorded fictional scenes such as shoplifting incidents and shootouts, both to inject dramatic action into the soap and to complicate the sense of authenticity and actuality (figure 18.3). While webcams and surveillance cameras are popularly trusted as providing gritty, real time documentary realism, Zapp's *Little Sister* reminds us that apparently live webcams and their timeframes are easily manipulated and falsified.

A number of artists use webcams to question or ironically undermine notions of webcam authenticity by fictionalizing events in the camera's view; and writers such as Ken Goldberg have reflected on webcam forgeries and their implications. He uses Plato's

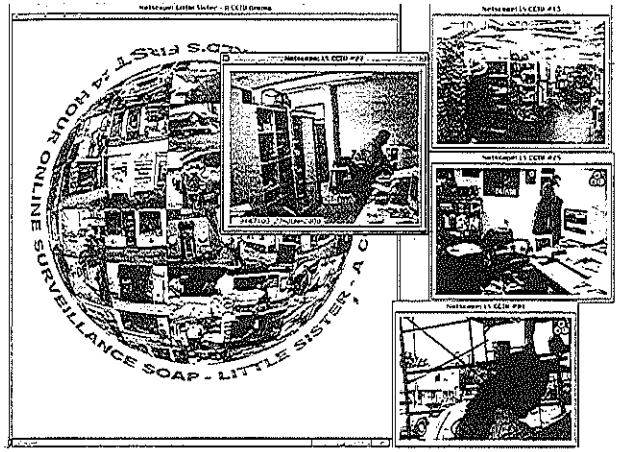

Figure 18.3 All the world's a surveillance stage in Andrea Zapp's *Little Sister* (2000).

classical triangulated definition of knowledge to argue that remote webcams can never be definitively known to be *true*. He draws on N. Goodman's discourse on art forgery, "Art and Authenticity" (1976) to conclude that "if forgery sheds light on the nature of authenticity, the Internet provides an ample supply of illumination."[33] For avid viewers of a particular webcam, like his own *The Telegarden* (1995–99) where remote users commonly spent long hours operating a robot arm to grow and tend a real garden, Goldberg suggests that the trauma which could greet the discovery that such a webcam was falsified would be comparable to a museum curator discovering his prized Rembrandt was a forgery.

Other academics have focused on the webcam as a technology that above all provides a digital window into another real time and space, thereby conjoining the actual and the virtual. Garnet Hertz suggests that webcams "re-introduce a physical sense of actual sight into the disembodied digital self,"[34] and Thomas Campanella argues that webcams are mediating devices within the "spatially abstract" world of cyberspace: "points of contact between the virtual and the real, or the spatial anchors in a placeless sea. Webcams open digital windows onto real scenes within the far-flung geography of the Internet."[35] The owner of the world's most celebrated webcam, Jennifer Ringley, provides her own window metaphor in describing her Jennicam as "a sort of window into a virtual human zoo."[36]

Jennicam

People are always waiting for real life to start.
—JENNIFER RINGLEY OF JENNICAM[37]

If "Real Life" ever started, for Jennicam and its many followers it ended on 31 December 2003 after a continuous run of netcasting twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for approaching eight years. No reason for its sudden demise has been advanced by its creator, Jennifer Ringley, although press speculation placed the blame firmly on her subscription service PayPal's adoption of a policy of refusing to act for any website that could involve frontal nudity. An equally plausible explanation might be that "Jenni" had simply become tired of playing out her entire adult home life in front of a camera relaying live images to the Internet. Whatever the reason, Jennicam's passing was in quiet contrast to the media furor and instant celebrity status that greeted its initial launch in April 1996 at the height of the "digital revolution" and its attendant predictions of a new world order primarily determined by the computer and the Internet.

Jennicam presents one of the great ironies of the digital performance era at the end of the twentieth century. Despite the endless energy and commitment of performance artists and pioneers struggling with all the tools, codes and technicalities of virtual space and digital existence, the live performer who by far received the most media exposure worldwide was an unknown student at Dickinson College, Pennsylvania. Ringley claims that she originally connected a camera to her computer so that her mother could see her in her student room via the Internet; the original Jennicam screen began with a simple statement, "My name is Jennifer Ringley, and I am not an actor or dancer or entertainer. I am a computer geek . . . I don't sing or dance or do tricks (okay, sometimes I do, but not very well and solely for my own amusement, not yours)."[38]

Jennicam was not the first and certainly not the last webcam, but it became by default the most publicised, the most enduring, and arguably the most endearing. Ringley unwittingly created one of the most influential and longest running pieces of improvised endurance theater ever, without the benefit of theater or media training or any enhanced performance skills. Jennicam was an ongoing life constantly flashed up on the Internet that seemed to reach out towards some ultimate dramatic play—a life portrayed. Or perhaps, given the absence of the title-holder much of the time, a portrayal of the life of her furniture and occasionally one of her cats. It was never perfect documentation and immortality was not assured. There were inevitable technical hitches and some significant gaps—her first nineteen years, for example, and whenever Jennifer was off camera, which was much of the time, or switched the lights off. But it remained the revelation of the "ordinary" life of a young Western woman from April 1996 to December 2003, the elapsing of time captured in a series of snapshots.

Jennifer Ringley was the first celebrity formed by the Internet, "The Queen of Cyberspace," with a multiplicity of fan sites, dedicated chat rooms, and hundreds emailing her every day. Estimates varied around the level of popularity Jennicam enjoyed as the media and public interest grew in the late 1990s, but reports of three, four, and five million hits *per day* were common, and a 1997 Reuter's report put it as high as twenty million. As press and media coverage intensified, copycat sites mushroomed (including popular

parodies such as "NotJennicamCam") and the webcam as a socio-performative phenomenon came of age.

Jennicam, such a huge success almost literally overnight, had to cope with the effects in both the short term and the long term. The earliest demands for the Net to be "free" (of financial and censorship restrictions) did not appreciate the hidden costs of the former, and Ringley introduced a subscription scheme in 1997 in order to offset her estimated monthly costs of $3,000. She immediately attracted 5,500 paying members. The initial $15 a year subscription increased fourfold to $15 dollars for 90 days by 2003, but always maintained a free point of access, albeit less preferential, in order to fulfil its original raison d'être:

> Jennicam Members get still images at a more frequent rate, once per minute instead of once per fifteen minutes. Put plainly, bandwidth costs money. So do accounting services and legal services and all the other services that make sure the site stays alive and kicking . . . PLEASE feel free to use the guest site for as long as you like, that's what it's there for. I don't want anybody to feel ripped off or cheated.[39]

The Telematic Theater of an Ordinary Life

Few have ever met Jennifer Ringley, but no one is inclined to think she is purely an Internet figment or media-created cyborg; for most people her house exists much as does, say, Timbuktu (or Elsinore). The audience is content to suspend disbelief and accept slowly changing Internet still frames suggesting a place and on occasions somebody within that space. The space is a stage: we are in a darkened auditorium occasionally observing, confirming her existence, and maybe she ours, a convenient exchange agreement not unlike witnessing Samuel Beckett's *Not I* or *Waiting for Godot*:

> *Boy:* What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?
> *Vladimir:* tell him . . . *(he hesitates)* . . . tell him you saw me and that . . . *(he hesitates)* . . . that you saw me.
> *(Pause. Vladimir advances, the Boy recoils. Vladimir halts, the Boy halts. With sudden violence.)*
> You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!
> *Silence.*

Its basic theatrical underpinnings have been largely overlooked by commentators, perhaps because they are too obvious, perhaps because Jennicam too conveniently fits into any and every category for study by psychologists, feminists, and sociologists, so that "new theater piece" becomes just another critical tag. Ringley latterly even introduced herself, irony intended, as "a computer geek and recent entrant into the field of social service." More significantly, it may be because the *fixed* location of most webcams prioritizes *place* ("setting") above all else and certainly above *character*, which in this scenario has to be interpreted from a sequence of incidentals. In contemporary parlance, Jennicam is a "*site*-specific time-based *installation*." Academics who have discussed the phenomenon of

webcams have therefore tended to see them more as *distance-location* devices or travel aids showing the changing state of the world and beyond. Bolter and Grusin, for example, draw attention to webcams placed on Mars as well as Miami, a backyard bird feeder in Indianapolis, and a panoramic view of the Canadian Rockies: " 'Web-cams' on the Internet pretend to locate us in various natural environments. . . . In all these cases, the logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: . . . standing on a mountaintop."[40]

They usefully counter the notion that webcams are banal: "Apparently frivolous, web cameras are in fact deeply revealing of the nature of the Web as a remediator."[41] With a degree of seriousness, they show a still picture of two windows of prostitutes' shops in Amsterdam's red light district. But both blinds are pulled *down* so no characters are visible—when there is any human interaction in the red light district, the curtain comes *down* and the play is left to the imagination. The emphasis remains on *place* and therein lies the essential theatrical difference experienced by the Jennicam viewer, and a primary reason for its huge popularity. With Jennicam the blind is always open, the only exceptions being rare technical blackouts or offline days when Ringley physically moved to another house, which she did on six occasions since her original Dickinson College student room. Like the "we never close" wartime boast of the Windmill Theatre during the London blitz, the modern equivalent was "Jennicam: Open 24/7" or even, it was once assumed, "Jennicam: Open 365/lifetime": the stage curtain remained raised, the action continuous. Some phases had little or no dramatic action; lengthy periods passed with only the image of an empty set; and at night, the mighty power of the Internet was used to convey nothing more than a nearly black screen. But this was life *chez* Jenni: "We are not always at home, sometimes you may see an empty house for hours or longer at a stretch. That's life."[42]

But Bolter and Grusin's point remains important insofar as Jennicam was more the ongoing life of a particular location (or locations in Jennicam's final mode of multiple webcams throughout the living quarters) rather than necessarily any particular character—Ringley simply being the one most frequently featured, with different (animal and human) creatures occasionally moving in and out of view. But Jennicam's enticing indicators, bodies, and hints of action remained theatrical and the seconds ticking away to the next frozen picture continually offered a dramatic countdown to the next episode. Although many commentators noted that most of the images were completely mundane, they always invited interpretation, and many images also begged questions—particularly the ones without any living presence (cat or human)—of a metaphysical nature reminiscent of the painting genre of the same name.

Bedroom Theater and Its Hauntings

Webcams are generally pointed at areas of maximum presence and activity, and ironically this webcam was left pointing at Ringley's bed much of the time. Viewers would commonly see a sleeping person in a darkened room at night, and a neatly made bed the next morning (perhaps still a reassuring communication to her mother that she makes it every day before setting out to work). The bed image has elements of tease, what Victor Burgin calls "the eroticism of absence,"[43] as well as reassurance. More reassuring and considerably tidier, for example, than Tracey Emin's *My Bed* art object, shortlisted for the prestigious 1999 Turner Prize, an installation comprising Emin's unmade bed with grubby sheets surrounded by scattered litter including condoms, soiled knickers and bottles of vodka. *My Bed* is a stationary unoccupied art installation that owes not a little, one suspects, to Jennicam, and whose only performative aspects have involved unexpected interventions by gallery visitors. One outraged housewife, Christine de Ville, drove from Wales with a packet of Vanish detergent to try to spruce up the sheets and get Emin to improve her ways, but gallery staff censored her attempts. Two Chinese art students attempted to cavort and have a pillow fight on the bed "to improve it" before that performance too was curtailed by conservative forces. No such restrictions applied to Jennicam, where the bed was used daily in much the same way that beds are frequently used: for sleeping, occasional lolling, occasional sex, and, if permitted (and also if not) as a temporary oversized cat basket. Inevitably both Jennicam and *My Bed* became subject to imitation by others employing the detritus of their particular lifestyle and emotional state as an artist's window for the world.

Unrevealed offstage action is a standard theatrical narrative device: we do not see Macbeth's victorious battles or the blinding of Oedipus, but are content to accept the descriptions and hints that help create a convincing imaginary context. Similarly, the long periods of time watching empty rooms with no characters within the Jennicam set—previously "occupied" but now "empty", previously "empty" but now suddenly "occupied"—presented an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of patterns where, like a Beckett play, like an Eliot stanza, people "come and go." Ringley's sets remained empty longer than a conventional theater director would ever dare permit, but this particular digital performance was running on a different time scale. When Ringley was not visible "the set" was ever-present; there to be read as one reads an advertisement—signifiers everywhere, like a Jacques Tati still of a sleepy village evoking a particular mood and era, everything reeking of time and a version of normality. And since her absence rather than presence characterized the normality of Jennicam, when she suddenly became visible—and it may only have been a part of her caught on camera—it was often accidentally reminiscent of evocations of those traditional theater ghosts rumoured to inhabit theater stages and concourses but only wisps of which are ever spotted.

Alternatively, figures "caught" on-camera and not offering any composed or designed image often seemed so brazen and candid that their appearance suddenly disrupted the spectacle in such a way that it prompted a peculiar shock to the senses. Other appearances or apparent apparitions seemed so mysterious in their motivations that they teased ingenuity in the same way as "Spot the Ball" competitions do, exciting the detective instincts in the viewer.

Coffee Theater

Jennicam was not the first webcam, a distinction generally bestowed on the University of Cambridge's infamous "Trojan coffee-pot" webcam, and the story of the one is every bit as unlikely as the other. In 1991, the "Trojan" group of Cambridge computer scientists formed a "coffee club" to share a coffee machine conveniently sited in a corridor between offices. Those farthest away from the location were frequently disappointed when they went to fetch coffee and the pot was empty, and they mounted a "frame-grabber" camera that enabled a regularly updated image of the coffeepot and its fluctuating contents to be accessed on their computer screens. In November 1993, as images within webpages became a possibility, the coffeepot became a mildly humorous presence on the Net with its inclusion as a regularly reloaded image on their website. Media interest in this prosaic and witty oddity grew, and by 1996 the coffeepot site annually received more than one million hits, prompting one commentator to call it the number one tourist attraction in eastern England. Droll observations of this type—usually underscoring the fact that the computer was changing an old established way of life—were increasingly commonplace, and would in the same year also ensure Jennicam's enduring fame.

Trojan's webcam relied on some level of theatrical resonance, albeit rudimentary: whether a coffeepot was full, empty, or somewhere in between, this was theater reduced to its basic fundamentals. It also laid bare the complex relationship between absence and presence that defined so much minimalist art and postmodern performance at that time. But it failed to have the depth of human interest and therefore staying power associated with Jennicam as "drama." Jennicam offered new horizons of heightened human interest, a slowly unraveling drama, and even occasional naked female flesh; on the Web, mere "coffee theater" could simply not compete. What scientists call the "Uncertainty Principle," a key ingredient common to dramas, whodunits, and quantum physics (and the core purpose and joke of the Trojan webcam) split and multiplied with Jennicam. "Uncertainty Principle" plus human interest, a young female "star," a love interest, a sex interest even—this was webcam meets Hollywood (or at least, daytime soap opera). The resulting intensity of media coverage, debate and outrage produced an overnight sensation, taking "Jenni" from obscurity to celebrity performer.

Invention plus the narrative "uncertainty principle" ensured the webcam phenomenon achieved considerable fame and, in the case of the coffee pot, fortune, with its celebrity status resulting in its eventual sale on eBay for £3,350 GBP ($5,346 USD). Jennicam outlived the Trojan webcam when the scientists moved to a new laboratory (doubtless with improved coffee facilities from the auction proceeds) and finally turned off the webcam on 22 August 2001. The world's first webcam had lasted seven years and nine months (a period only just superceded by Jennicam), and as the creators ceremoniously switched it off, they issued a droll statement, possibly with Jennicam in mind: "We expect this to start a new trend in webcams: online cameras which take images of themselves being finally turned off. Such sites will be much sought after due to their ephemeral nature."

So Jennicam was not the first webcam, and neither was Jennifer Ringley the first student to put "self" as the core subject of a webcam in a dorm room. That distinction is claimed by others, including computer student Dan Moore, who with friends set up a webcam that watched his every move in his student room for around four years. The informal team developed two-way communications, never a feature of Jennicam, which retained a more traditional theatrical structure of stage/auditorium, performer/audience. But this male webcam did not arouse media interest in anything like the same way as the slightly titillating, bare-all Jennicam, whose Web-audience male/female ratio was estimated at its commencement to be 75:1, in stark contrast to the 3:7 male/female ratio of the average repertory theater audience.

Banality and Profundity

The webcam phenomenon in general, and Jennicam in particular, immediately raised a host of debates and observations. Watching Ringley watch television on Jennicam was the perfect image of media swallowing its own tail. Being able to watch her at various (fairly standard) times sit, eat, pay bills, read, dress, undress, shower, make love, and sleep in the privacy of her own rooms was an open invitation for debates on exhibitionism, voyeurism, pornography, and feminist philosophy. At times she was even held responsible for the development of the tens of thousands of "porncams" that emerged in the late 1990s, some of which attempted to emulate "real-life" but invariably reverted to exaggerated theatrical scenarios without ever catching the genuine fly-on-the-wall charm and daffiness of Jennicam. It was its serene, unpretentious banality, its innocent and tedious ordinariness which left Jennicam standing apart and which made it the idiosyncratically effective theatrical event it became: a reaffirmation of predictability, a large dose of trite, trivial, and reassuring *dullness*. "Extreme sports" may make good viewing for short periods (already "ultra-extreme sports" are available on TV networks) but with the theater of Jennicam the viewer could undertake that most basic of performance engagements, identification.

Ringley's portrayal of existence was never very electrifying or exhilarating, despite being a child of the seventies in the age of New Woman and with advanced technological skills to boot. She ate, worked, slept, watched TV, and had parents and friends round. Here was the Alison of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) forty years later, no longer saddled with a brutish husband and now more actively choosing partners and life's rich pattern. But she was still not revolutionary or heroic, but rather accepting, fairly ordinary, and annoyingly "nice." It probably did not *have* to be Jennifer Ringley that created this iconic improvised reality soap opera (in the same way that perhaps it *did* have to be Einstein who undermined Newtonian physics), but even so her particular

individuality and adroitness in popularizing and developing the webcam phenomenon should be applauded.

The responses Jennicam aroused ranged from the vitriolic to the reverential, and its popularity and notoriety afforded debates to be aired at a much wider and public level than concurrent discussions on cyberculture by technologists and academics. Feminists were divided between those criticizing the "regression" of its porncam aspect, and others praising the "progression" of a technologically attuned woman familiarizing visitors with the daily toil, living conditions and everyday experience of females within the new technological world. *Cybergrrl: Voices of Women* interviewed Ringley in 2001 and, interestingly, adopted coy innuendo in their tagline—"Jenni of Jennicam Bares it All for Cybergrrl":

Jenni: The media, by and large, ADORES making a big deal out of the nudity and sexual content on the site. I don't strip. I don't even sleep naked much. And since I started dating Geofry 10 months ago, I haven't had sex on camera a single time because Geofry is camera-shy.[44]

But serious consideration of the significance of Jennicam has been overshadowed by numerous undermining voices from the mass media and even occasionally academia, which have argued with reductivist aplomb that essentially she is nothing more than an exhibitionist, and the people watching are voyeurs. It is notable, however, that the same analysis could be made of every theater event. Victor Burgin has taken issue with such oversimplistic readings by drawing on a wide range of psychological interpretations from Freud and Lacan to Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein in his essay "Jenni's Room: Exhibitionism and Solitude" (2002).

There can be little doubt that in the early days at least, Ringley occasionally did enjoy "exhibitionist" tendencies, including vampish moments of performance, her initial choice of a website name (www.boudoir.org), and her infrequent confiding of "secrets" (like a stage aside) such as buying a breast pump to see if she could produce lactation. But such revelations were part of her (private = public) Web journal and were not made in a lascivious manner, and it is ultimately debatable whether she generally displayed exhibitionist traits much more than many westernized young females (or indeed males). As she once put it: "I keep Jennicam alive *not* because I want to be watched, but because I simply don't mind being watched." Ultimately, Jennicam was an enjoyable hobby for Ringley, not one that was too self-absorbing or demanding, but rather akin to the pursuits of the Sunday painter or, more pertinently, the amateur thespian:

Jennicam was started in April of 1996, when I was a junior in college. It was intended to be a fun way my mom or friends could keep tabs on me, and an interesting use for the digital camera I bought on a whim in the bookstore. I never really contemplated the ramifications of it, just plugged it in, challenged myself to write the scripts that would take care of the image processing (nowadays you can just download software to do that), and told myself I'd give it a week. After that week, I decided to give it another.[45]

Conclusion

The twenty-four-hour reality screenings of webcams in general and Jennicam in particular could lay some claim to aiding and abetting such films as *EdTV* and *The Truman Show* as well as television's "reality entertainment" series such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *The Jim Scileppi Show*. Such media texts epitomize a particular attitude toward performance derived and honed through an exploitation of *lack* of performance skill that most theater academics detest but many audiences consider to be the defining characteristics of theater—exaggeration, exhibitionism, pantomime, theatricalism, self-exposure, and foolishness. Jennicam's particular form of digital theater has at times embraced all of these aspects, but it has also defined a specific and idiosyncratic webcam dramaturgy conjoining and continually balancing (over days, months, and year after year) the absent and the present, the banal and the profound, the dramatic and the antidramatic.

As we have seen, Jennicam was certainly not the first webcam; neither was Ringley the first to engage with, subvert, and counter the prying surveillance of the camera lens to show "Reality Life," an accolade usually afforded to Andy Warhol. Others might prefer to trace the history of reality surveillance and media enslavement across a longer period to include major literary figures such as Huxley and Kafka. Their work lives on, conceived and produced for that most traditional and antiquated, but also most permanent and lasting of expressive forms, the book. By contrast, Jennicam was an ephemeral and seminal endurance performance art event; and an influential VR-meets-RL telematic surveillance-soap-opera. As such it was always unlikely to achieve longevity, and it is a sign of our current times that tuning in to Jennicam today one is confronted not by Jenni, her bed or her cats, but by the standard death-knell notice of the Internet: "The page cannot be displayed."