Everyday Cinema: The Films of Marc Lafia

Marc Lafia, Daniel Coffeen

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Hi, How Are You Guest 10497: a woman, living alone in Manhattan, tries to find connection in the strange new world of the network. In this seeming simplicity, complex issues emerge: What is it to be alone? What is it be a self? What is it to be a woman today? What is it to be real, to be naked, with another who is only on-screen?
A friend of mine introduced me to a Web site called MyFreeCams. I liked the image of what I thought he described (this was over the phone), and I knew I wanted to find out what this was and to make a film about it.

I asked Raimonda, who was so brilliant in Revolution, if she would like to join the site and record herself in the process of becoming a “model.” Once we worked out the details of getting the right computer and several cameras, we then talked about a scenario to give context to her getting involved in this network and what to record. We would meet and she would bring me her footage. I kept building the scenario with small scenes, asking her for more and more day-to-day details so we could establish an authentic and lived sense of her life as an online sex worker. I did not want to push her in any way, but for her to come to this in her own way.

We went on shooting for six months, quietly meeting and accumulating footage. Some takes went on for twenty, thirty, forty minutes. Before I started the edit I thought the whole thing a disaster. Like many of the above projects, I felt it could fall apart at any moment, or just not come together. But then I started watching and watching how completely Raimonda had invested herself in the project. How she patiently recorded, her initial steps and gradual immersion into this world.

In what became Hi, How Are You Guest 10497, the actress is never acting with a person physically in the room with her, it’s just a voice or a text line from the screen she’s immersed in. Though I wanted at first to see the men she communicates with, when I see the film now I realize the fact that we do not see them or anyone is what makes the film so compelling. To me it is Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles and The Passion of Joan of Arc, and Raimonda is brilliant and genuine. I can’t imagine any other way to have made this film but to have had Raimonda patiently record herself over the months.

I screened the film to maybe eighty people at the Tribeca Grand in the After Set program. A splendid and posh screening room. There, up on the big screen, the world of the one-to-one, of the small computer screen, that connects people all over the world in the most intimate way, in the privacy of our rooms, was writ large and shared publicly. If cinema was, for the longest time, before the DVD and Netflix, a communal seeing, what made it so was the consensual seeing of private and intimate events. The seeing of all of us, gathered in this dark visual and acoustic chamber, seeing one-to-one with everyone else, publicly yet alone, often the most intimate of relations, sometimes dangerous, promiscuous, shameful, abject, and exhilarating, what we called dramatic events was what the cinema could bring us. The language of cinema would parse, reenact, examine, take apart, shot by shot and put together again in its mise-en-scène, such events. And here on screen was Raimon-
da and hundreds of other women placing
temselves inside the cinematic for this
new cinema audience.

Our film would use cinema to turn its
gaze and apparatus onto this new circuit
of seeing, this ongoing mise-en-scène that
we step out of and into on a daily basis.
Guest 10497 would use the constraints of
cinema's classic codes to allow the audi-
ence to look at this new circuit of seeing,
the network. A circuit that would afford a
proliferation of recordings yet to be for-
malized. A circuit of ubiquitous seeing,
one-to-many, one-to-one, all-at-once, with
anyone, everyone anytime.

MyFreeCams is one of many new regimes
of sight, and as such splices us into its
never-ending and multiple flows. If the
early cinema was a cinema of attractions,
a cinema of clips, really, and the classic,
coded cinema, one that organizes the
relay of the gaze, MyFreeCams is both.

In a similar way, the installation film,
now pervasive at museums and galleries,
allows us to enter at any point. It has no
beginning, exactly, and at the same time
any possible beginning; and it ends when
we want to leave. I presented Guest 10497
as a diptych at the Minsheng Art Museum
in Shanghai on a large-screen monitor in
an intimate corner of the gallery room.
In the same room against a wall was pro-
jected large Raindrop Ecstasy, an eight-
minute, three-screen film. Raimonda
is in both films, and both have material
of her working at the Standard Hotel on
the High Line park in New York. The two
films share content and the same actress
and in the context of the museum, start at any time, playing continuously through the day. That is, you can enter the works at any point. It is not simply that the works loop but that they interrelate and that they are distributed in time and space. In this way there are any number of beginnings, middles, and endings, and perhaps such notions no longer apply and are indistinguishable. In Raindrop, the characters begin and end at a karaoke bar, stepping up to an open microphone, not dissimilar to the open video camera of the worldwide karaoke of network culture. The network now is a cinema, a karaoke cinema, where we splice ourselves at the same time into the online real-time recording and the instantly archived.

If I go back to my first film, Exploding Oedipus, shot in 35 mm, about a young man who brings a film projector into his one-room living quarters, obsessively returning to film clips of his youth and waiting to make a film of his own, to remake the film of his past, and then I think of Hi, How Are You Guest 10497, about a young woman who records herself while video chatting with any possible person around the world from her very small apartment, both films are to me as much about cinema and how this pervasive networked event of recording has now absorbed the codes of cinema into a new apparatus of always-on recording.

The cineast must rewrite recording, which is of course not only the rewriting of montage but the site of what is seen. Just as video rewrote cinema, and here I mean video art and television, the network and social media have put an exponent on this. Certain film historians have termed the first years of cinema as a cinema of attractions. Often cited is Edwin S. Porter, who went from city to city with reels of film. He would rent a hall, hire an organist, and get word out about his show. At these events, he would play his recordings, selecting for that crowd and that evening what felt right to him and his audience—so each event of projection was unique—there was not yet a highly codified cinematic grammar of shot, reverse shot, the eye-line match, relay of the gaze, et cetera. With the remote control we all became Edwin S. Porter in the way we watched television. And with the lightweight cheap film stock cameras in the hands of Andy Warhol, we were all on television. For contemporary network culture, like Warhol, it’s not the playback that matters but the event of recording, only network culture has collapsed recording with playback by allowing us to seamlessly record and broadcast.

These two conditions of always-on recording and always-on playback are a constant. As such they constitute a new cultural techno-sphere, already having rewritten our printing press, our television, soon our politics—a contemporary cinema must inhabit this condition.

With digital recordings and social media we are always constructing an image of ourselves. We are always already recorded and recording and hence recording. We change our profile, our picture, and our story to create an image that is a double of us, that in fact is the only us, an image in a never-ending recording.
Marc Laia
Fri, Oct 8, 2010 at 9:34 PM
Subject: The global network

Hi Raimonda,

As always, wonderful to speak with you.

Here is the site my friend Daniel sent on to me.
http://www.myfreecams.com/

And here is what he told me about how you can join and work for them, which your character would do.

He says “there’s an application to be a model; it’s not automatic”:

To look around the site is free. He suggest you “Go to lots of different rooms. See all the different approaches the women take—some get very crass; some quite playful; some sweet; some bored; some annoyed; the full gamut of life and the erotic.”

Raimonda Skeryte
Date: Mon, Oct 11, 2010 at 9:38 PM
Subject: Re: the global network

Hey Marc!

Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. But wow, I’ve just spent some time checking out MyFreeCams and I have to say I can totally see why you are interested in making a story about it. I am a pretty shy person myself and at first it’s a little bit uncomfortable and odd but at the same time so intriguing and I ended up looking up one girl after another. Just as you said, it is so interesting how they expose themselves and how people respond to them. A lotta girls are pretty “straight forward” and I know it’s today’s thing :) I don’t think I am a “fan” of pornography but I have to say it is very easy to fall into it and it always starts with something as simple as being curious. And you might easily end up with an addiction :)

Marc, I am very interested in this project and feel so happy to be offered a chance to take part in it. It is a side of me I’ve been wanting to explore for so long and I believe it could be done while making a film. Why not. And especially because it is you, Marc! Working with you is fantastic and I just love how you like to play with new ideas and explore unknown and shocking cinema.

I would be honored to create magic with you again. I don’t think I could ever say “no” to you :)”

Please send me your thoughts and keep me informed.

Have a good night. Best, Raimonda
Marc Lafia
Date: Wed, Oct 13, 2010 at 9:18 AM
Subject: Re: the global network

Hi Raimonda,
I love your curiosity and appetite to adventure and explore. So let’s get going.

Raimonda Skeryte
Tue, Mar 22, 2011 at 12:20 AM
Subject: Checking in

Hey Marc,
I just wanted to let you know that the laptop and camera arrived successfully to my place a couple days ago. Thank you!

Raimonda Skeryte

Marc Lafia
Tue, Mar 22, 2011 at 11:02 AM
Re: Checking in

Hello Raimonda,
Thanks. Every day I think about this project. Think about you. Though I like to invent stories, characters, and situations—I must tell myself not to. I like the beauty of you and the everyday, the banal, the routine. Here are some thoughts.
So far we have seen you alone in your apartment, cooking, putting on your tuxedo, looking at your computer screen, watching you watch FreeCams.

We have yet to see you interact with anyone on the screen. We do not know that you are “working.”

Though I feel in the film you will already be “working” for FreeCams as it is part of your life, not unlike a person who trades stocks all day at the computer screen or other information workers, I think we should shoot now the following, which would see you joining and getting involved with the service. If we don’t want to use it in the final film we don’t have to but let’s shoot it. |

With that said, let’s still do this. Let’s see you:

Join the service.
Open up the new computer.
Open up the camera.
Set up the computer.
Set up the camera.
See yourself seeing yourself on the screen (I am absolutely intrigued as to how you are going...
to act and interact with others—I cannot say anything here but am so, so curious).

See you prepare yourself for starting to work.

See your very first ten interactions with "guests."

Ten interactions is a lot but we really want to see the journey from the first to the tenth (please take your time and record all these sessions).

Let's see the guests when possible.

Let's see you (do change the angles once in a while).

Let's see you when you get up, what you do—go to the bathroom, stretch, read, clean, prepare food, talk on the phone with someone (your mother, perhaps).

If there are other girls let's see you with other girls.

Let's see you watch the other girls.

Film yourself looking at the girls with the flip cam.

Film yourself—washing dishes, cleaning your bathroom—something very ordinary.

Film yourself dressing for work in your black tuxedo.

Go back to the computer—look at more of the girls.

Come home from work—open some bills.

Go to the liquor store, buy some vodka or gin.

Buy a bunch of carrots (maybe something else).

Some cleaning products, a small sponge.

Ask the man in the store to film you.

You film him.

The man at the register.

Film yourself walking home.

Come home, fix yourself a drink.

Two ice cubes.

Wash and peel the carrots.

Boil them.

Do everything very precisely.

Very neatly.

Look out the window.

Go to the computer.

Look carefully at some of the girls.

Really look at them.

Maybe eight different girls.

Study them.

Consider them.

Go to your closet and think of something to wear.

Decide not to wear anything.

Just be you.

Practice as if you were on FreeCams.

As if you were talking to someone.

Once you have done this—we will meet, talk, and if you feel there is something here for you—

I would love to make another work with you—we'll keep going.

I miss you, Raimonda—let me know how you feel about the above—and in what and any way I can be more helpful. Marc
I like the beauty of you and the everyday, the banal, the routine.

“When we see her dress and leave the house, it is in a man’s tuxedo. With her short hair and almost boyish body—although feminine through and through—we are witness to a certain twilight of fixed gender, a place of becoming where labels will not stick hard or fast.

“The gaze that would fix her as woman-object has been multiplied. If John Berger finds woman nude in the fixed point of the Renaissance gaze, Lafia finds her naked, criss-crossed with thousands of gazes. Indeed, the film performs this: we see her seeing herself be seen, the film’s camera often behind her computer, which itself is both camera and screen. The gaze has been proliferated and, with it, identity.”

“There is no doubt a great loneliness here. But to reduce her to lonely is to miss so much of what’s happening. Because as users of Chatroulette discover, once the metanarrative of identity disappears—once we stop naming ourselves, stop declaring our social status, our taste, our social tethers such as work and education—we discover something else. Face to face—or screen to screen—with a stranger, free of all metadiscourse that would prefigure the interaction, we discover incredible intimacy. All there is is this encounter, these desires, this moment. Within the presumed mediation of the screen, we discover the immediacy of the encounter.”

—Daniel Coffeen