

Webcam

No way to watch Canal Plus at that time. I discovered porn very late. It was very exciting. I used to wake up at night to watch the first video I downloaded. A penetration. Indisputable. Simplified by the night-mode black and white of a mini DV. I was ruling time. I could come at precise spots by sliding the lozenge of my VLC media player along the remaining-time display. I knew I could edit this video with an editing software. Select my favorite positions, endlessly look at the actress's body's bits that aroused me the most. Instead of undertaking this painstaking erotomaniac task; I downloaded more videos. I watched them until I exhausted their erotic powers. Or rather my own, since digital videos are never exhausted — which is part of their odd charm. My .avi lovers are stuck in a motionless time.



When streaming arrived at the end of the 2000s, I could access the complete repertoire of sexual preferences. I discovered, experimentally, my type of woman and my favorite situations. At least I thought I did, since my digital sex life had become independent — for instance, I never touched myself on a beach but I enjoyed beyond reason some stealth videos taken on the seaside. I could have become a specialist, a specialist of myself. Known actresses' names, made screen grabs, bookmarked certain pages. I didn't. The surprise of a beautiful face, an oval tummy, of miraculously real breasts was too pleasurable. The mild taboo on viewing porn prevented me from undertaking certain types of actions with my browser; I was in privacy mode, somehow outside of time, leaving no history behind me.

I don't know whether that makes me the typical porn buff. But I do know that as a painter, Thomas Lévy-Lasne's path was diverging from mine. He was becoming a professional. He had files in his computer — he didn't like to lend it. From a strictly erotic point of view, I believe this collector's approach is counterproductive. Too distantiated, too fetishistic. Unlimited streaming started to bore me. I was slowly toppling over into a quantitative approach. For instance, I looked for trio scenes. Outdoors. With brunettes. Without tattoos. I found them. And when I went online again, I resumed my search. In *The Library of Babel*, Borges imagines a library gathering all books of the world. Such a metaphysical and platonic approach seems somehow depressive to a writer. The same thing was now available for porn buffs.

Thomas first told me about Cam4. He was clearly in search of something: a few years earlier, he had eagerly explored escort sites. He also told me that as a child, he would make all humanity parade in front of him, stark naked, and that in middle school he had monopolized the market for dirty magazines. As a student at the Paris Beaux-Arts, he had attentively followed anatomy classes. However, despite an obvious vocation, the nude was not a major component of his work. He painted one a year, so it wasn't really compulsive. Until he discovered Cam4.

Cam4 was a genuine revolution for online porn buffs. A breath of fresh air. Though they had been widely available for over fifteen years, webcams had not yet yielded their maximum erotic potential until then. Tiny spider bites in teenage girls' intimacy, they were mostly off-line and harmless.

Exhibitionists gave pixelated appointments on adults-only blogs. Some scandals came out when it was discovered that perverts had equipped dressing rooms with them. Then Skype generalized the type of mutual exhibitionism seen in the great erotic scene of *American Pie* (1999). But Thomas Lévy-Lasne's generation had no direct access to these troubling, defiant images. The spells of the Harry Potter generation remained out of reach. The streaming sites offered our aging generation feeble simulations. As webcam exhibitionism became a full-fledged genre, we tried to believe it was for us these people undressed. My generation had become a public, with known preferences. We worried a bit about Californian legislation and hoped that the girls we liked were a bit younger than 20 rather than over-21. But our icons were getting older. We were embarrassed to mention Pamela Anderson as the recurrent target for our past meditations. Kate Moss was just about the only one to withstand the debacle. At night, we stumbled across Thallia or Vanessa Demouy's breasts without daring to imagine what they had become in real time. The videos we preferred were often digitized VHS tapes. There was Clara Morgane's first video at the Cap d'Agde and, some ten years earlier, Tabata Cash's first casting. She was adorably vulgar. There was also a video of Julia Channel in a wool dress that unraveled as she spun around. We had become unmoored from the real world of virtual sex.

Initially, Cam4 was a complete regression. The tiny image was of very poor quality. The full-screen key opened a window inviting us to take a premium subscription. Otherwise, the image would often freeze. Couples were also frozen in endless foreplay, refusing to frolic outside the private room; girls' tee-shirts never lifted enough to display a breast. Cam4 required great patience. Some live shows lasted several hours. The Argentinean girl must have sucked her partner many times: his cock was wet and hard, but she still had her panties on. It was impossible to rewind or fast-forward to moments of grace. There was no timeline. Only the thrills of anticipation and the disappointments of live. Used as we were to perfect instants, we caught ourselves enjoying the fleeting sight of a nipple under a translucent sheet.

Thomas Lévy-Lasne hung on much longer than the rest of us. As a regular non-paying visitor, he tried to reach stages reserved to premium visitors. He saw randomly granted penetrations and the arousal that foiled the mean economic calculations of a Spanish couple. He saw the man who held his wife by the neck like a tall glass of water so that her mouth would quench his thirst, and the one who got his thumb bitten as though it could make him come. He saw the man who dove between a wife's open thighs as though he was jumping into the void and as though his fall would never end. He saw the man and the woman who tried to hold their awkward position as long as possible. He saw a girl staring absentmindedly into the camera while her nipple was sucked, as though her erogenous zones were deported several thousand kilometers away from her. Thomas Lévy-Lasne saw all this and grabbed it. Command-Shift-3. Hundreds of hours and thousands of images. In this way, he managed to recompose a world probably as varied as in the major porn streaming sites. He stole something from time.

Then he gave it back in spades by drawing what he had taken. Slowly, in all their details, fragments of code became images. Images, not snapshots. He had to reproduce each lozenge of the fishnet bodysuit, each line of the zebra print. He had to shade skins with wide strokes for shadows and small strokes for private parts — if wide hatching could render the curve of a newly-freed breast, nipples required more elaborate work and several curlicues. Conversely, a mere dot left blank was enough to represent the shininess of a penis. Pencil strokes are even more delicate when he must render the translucent silk panties of the girl with her back turned to show us her buttocks — as though the girl had grown up too quickly, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley are staring at us from a poster on her bedroom wall.

No one posed for Thomas Lévy-Lasne and I'd like to believe that he didn't use the chat function to ask for special positions. No one posed, because time did it for him.

Aurélien Bellanger (2012)

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