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Author(s): Elmeligi, Wessam; Khattab, Mona

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Virtual Catharsis: Decoding Empathy in VR Refugee Narratives in the UNVR Films

Wessam Elmeligi, *University of Michigan-Dearborn, United States*

Mona Khattab, *University of Vaasa, Finland*

Among recent attempts employing newer methods of communication with more user engagement is the use of Virtual Reality (VR) to produce immersive experiences centred on the plight of refugees. With the features of the VR environment designed to induce more immediacy and participation, VR videos are produced targeting audience empathy through virtual proximity to the dire living conditions of refugees. This chapter poses the following questions: How far have psychological and literary elements of catharsis informed the use of VR technology and to what degree has VR redefined catharsis as a mode of empathy delivered via an audio-visual and spatial immersive media experience? Adopting immersive media narrative analysis, this study examines films produced by the United Nations in a project known as UNVR to present various humanitarian causes. Focusing on two UNVR films, *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), and *Life in the Time of Refuge* (2016), the chapter examines the potential for empathy through the intersectionality of VR technology and narrative in the light of the concept of virtual catharsis.

Keywords: Immersive media; Empathy machine; Virtual reality, Refugee crisis

Introduction

The refugee crisis is among the most serious and pressing humanitarian, socioeconomic, and political issues of our time. As it is a disaster of international dimensions, it crosses borders, both physical and cultural. It involves decisions made on higher levels and addresses individuals on a much broader level. Such characteristics place the refugee crisis within a communication context. As decision making procedures and reinstating displaced groups necessitate the engagement of large numbers of people sometimes on a daily basis, it has become imperative to reach out to the public about the refugee crisis. This has already taken place in various venues, whether deeply polarised political campaigns or charitable requests for donations. Each group attempts to depict the crisis according to its goals and its audience. The impact has been a plethora of images about refugees that, at times, may complicate and cloud people's perspective of what the actual experience of this crisis is from the perspective of a refugee.

In order to reach out to various communities, as well as individual members of each community, presentations about the refugee crisis started to break the metanarrative of refuge into individual narratives of refugees (Cox 2009; Khattak 2007; Vemuru et al. 2016). This aims at personalising the tragic refugee status by focusing on authentic stories of single refugees, thus making them, and therefore the larger issues they represent, more relatable. Having arrived at the significance of narrative strategies as a vehicle for communicating the refugee crisis, the methods of recounting such narratives varied across media (Woods 2020). Consequently, the search for new means of communicating the refugee crisis has consistently drawn on diverse platforms, not only to facilitate communication but also to leave a more immediate and lasting impact on the recipients of information about the crisis. Among the most recent attempts to involve newer

methods of communication that aim for a more engaging experience is the use of Virtual Reality (VR) to produce immersive experiences centred on the plight of refugees.

With the features of the VR environment designed to induce more immediacy and participation, VR videos about refugees are produced in order to target audience engagement and virtual proximity to the dire living conditions of refugees. VR videos are capable of presenting a powerful and realistic visual (and spatialised) narrative of the refugee crisis, allowing the viewer to navigate the setting, thus contextualising the refugee narrative and situating the viewer central to the crisis. VR videos of refugees, therefore, combine three elements. First, they use narrative strategies to weave together an engaging and smooth account of refugee life. Second, they employ a specific format to present such narratives with the potency of selecting perspectives, allowing viewers to choose direction, thus increasing the impact of the narratives. Third, they aim at eliciting empathy from viewers, hoping to inspire their participation, shape their views, and motivate them to action. The role of VR in inciting empathy has not been without controversy. In our article we explore this aspect of the impact of VR, as it generated interesting discussion on a wide range of support and critique regarding its connection to empathy. Estrada Villalba, San Martín Azócar, and Jacques-García (2021) acknowledge the connection established between empathy and VR in recent scholarly works and apply it to educational development using what is referred to as PTVR, for Perspective-Taking Virtual Reality. Young, O'Dwyer, and Smolic (2021) also designated that PTVR highlights the notion of a flexible identity that can be shaped by mediation. The role of VR videos of refugees builds upon the rising recognition of the significance of VR narrativity in fostering an empathic response among viewers. Such response is further enhanced by paratextual information such as the stories leading to the making of VR videos, media coverage, and press releases.

This chapter poses the following questions: How far have psychological and literary elements of catharsis defined the use of new VR technology? And to what degree has VR redefined catharsis as a mode of empathy delivered via an audio-visual and spatial immersive media experience? Studying the psychological and narrative elements of the works, together with their screenplays, the chapter unpacks the components that can produce effective storytelling communication. In so doing, this chapter investigates how several variations of contemporary and current expressions are in fact actualisations of the notions and principles of cathartic experiences that function as agents of empathy in narrative structure. This research explores ways in which Aristotelian approaches to screen story, shape and structure have been revived for the considerations of screenwriting for VR media. In analysing the narrative trajectory from fear and pity to catharsis, it is proposed that this new model of VR screenwriting has the capacity to facilitate social change, via empathy, and in the case of refugee narratives, may help to foster a wider engagement with the global refugee crisis.

Adopting immersive media narrative analysis, the chapter examines films produced by the UN in a project known as UNVR to present various humanitarian causes. The paper focuses on two UNVR films, *Clouds over Sidra* (2015) and *Life in the Time of Refuge* (2016). Our analysis of the films, which address the refugee crisis in the Middle East, sheds light on their potential for psychosocial empathy as examples of the intersections of VR technology and narrative in the light of the concept of catharsis. The rationale behind the selection of the two films rests on the similarity of narratorial voice, as first-person narration, and the Middle East as the geographical origin of refugees in the films. In addition to immersive media analysis, we highlight the language used to describe these films, underlining the concepts of catharsis in different terms, as this becomes evident by looking at how filmmakers refer to themselves and to

their work, and how festivals, organisations, and reviewers write about them, focusing on their emotional appeal and their drive for social change.

Catharsis

Catharsis is typically framed as a literary term. Originally a Greek medical term, *katharsis* was initially popularised when Aristotle used it to express the significance of dramatic and poetic performance on the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Medically, *katharsis* indicates purification, a process of eliminating impurities (Britannica n.d.). Aristotelian catharsis builds upon the same notion to describe emotional responses of the audience to literary exposure.

Aristotle defines tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is elevated, complete, and of sufficient length” (Aristotle 2022, 35). This self-containment, according to Aristotle, is not narratable, but showable. In other words, tragedy is more conducive to dramatization. The reason behind Aristotle’s preference for dramatic form is that it “evokes pity and fear” which “brings about a catharsis or purging of emotions” (Aristotle 2022, 36). Arguing that tragedy induces the two main reactions of pity and fear from the audience, Aristotle draws attention to the connection the audiences make with the protagonists of a literary work by first feeling pity for the suffering character, then fear for themselves as they imagine themselves in the same dire circumstances as that character. Such powerful responses result in a purification of the audience, as their connection with the protagonist moves them beyond an impure state. At this point, critics have argued about interpretations of Aristotle’s intention behind purification. In modern terms, it is possible to see Aristotelian catharsis as a form of release, a de-stressing process whereby the audience displaces their stress as they viscerally witness the tribulation of other characters. Another interpretation is ethical, as the audience, by feeling pity for the protagonist, achieve a

moral stance whereby they understand the suffering of others, which might even lead them to act upon their new realisation and perhaps even form new convictions. In short, the audience develops an empathic response to the protagonist, leading either to psychological release, moral decision, or both (Aristotle 2022).

Studies have attempted an understanding of Aristotle's catharsis in relation to screenwriting. Brenes (2014) discusses the misinterpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics*, especially the limitations of focusing on its didactic elements when incorporating his theories in screenwriting, referring to Syd Field's 1979's *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. Brenes (2014) suggests a wider reading of Aristotle's work that also includes his philosophy. Khalili (2018) also refers to Field's important work in a study of Aristotle's dramatic unity, perceiving an interesting overlap between Aristotle's two-act structure and Field's three-act structure. Another study by Kallay (2010) offers an interesting contemporary perspective on what Kelly terms "cyber-Aristotle," examining the role of Aristotle's theories in interactive screenwriting for digital narratives.

The impact of catharsis stems from relatability. The audience responds emotively to relatable characters. This is achieved by the inclination to identify with the central characters in a story. However, while the audience's tendency to identify enhances a cathartic culmination, it is challenged by barriers that impeded relatability. It is possible to recognise that such barriers rise as stories are shared across borders and thus carry unfamiliar cultural and societal contents. The audience from the classical age would probably be able to respond more emotively to a narrative of homogenous cultural context and values, even if the characters, setting, and events were fictitious and fantastical. Epics and tragedies that involved ancient deities would still be received

by the audience as relatable since they still fell within the cultural framework that the audience was familiar with at the time.

Familiarity is solidified as the result of shared experiences, which in turn would facilitate relatability. Interestingly, sharing stories is directly proportional to improved communication. However, as means of communication development, stories travel further across borders, thus undergoing a complex structure of cultural barriers. The persistence of stories in spite of such barriers can be explained in part adopting a Jungian approach. Carl Jung's archetypes (1968) are the products of a collective unconscious. Taken as a repository of experiences shared collectively by groups as large as the entire humanity, the collective unconscious displays shared elements that cross tempo-spatial boundaries. The formation of psychological archetypes as shared imagery provides valuable communicative tools that literary and cultural production can use to bridge otherwise impeding barriers such as geographical locations, for example. In addition, archetypes may be seen as the basic fabric of storytelling more than stereotypes, a point that McKee (2010) makes. McKee argues that archetypal stories address a universal human experience within a cultural form. Therefore, while each story is articulated to the screen in its unique way, storytelling as a form remains the same in its universality. This concept, McKee (2010) expounds, can extend to the universality of values, and, in so doing, to truth. Based on the role of archetypes in creatively materialising collective experiences, it is possible to bring about a cathartic response from an audience exposed to a less familiar narrative by engaging them in aspects of that narrative that address archetypal connectivity. The shared collectiveness of archetypes, therefore, can make up for the lack of spatial, temporal, and even cultural homogeneity. In other words, archetypal imagery can causally elicit a relatability, or at least a

metaphorical or even illusionary relatability, that sparks enough identifiable empathy necessary for a cathartic response.

While archetypal symbols and images help in overcoming cultural barriers and bridging temporal gaps that impede relatability, one element remains of vital significance to a cathartic experience: immediacy. Catharsis relies on “the power of vicariousness, of being elsewhere (in another time or place), of imagining differently, experiencing the world through the eyes of strangers” (Kearney 2007, 52). The notion of catharsis originated from Aristotelian observation of dramatic works, which was based on audience experience of Greek dramatic presentation. It is safe to assume that Aristotle’s theory relies on direct exposure to performance, which garners an immediacy of response that may result only from physical proximity. It is interesting to note that as catharsis has become a literary concept over the centuries, immediacy seems to have become actualised even more with social media, live streaming, and VR, as instruments of a more real time experience that requires less effort as well as more immersive modes of perception from the audience as opposed to reading books or watching recorded or filmed material, for instance.

Virtuality

The digitality and virtuality of the VR experience seen in the films we examine highlight proximity as a central component that is perhaps uniquely characteristic of VR storytelling. The positionality of the audience where the narratorial voice is placed shifts the perspective of the audience as recipients, bringing them visually closer to the narrative components of setting, characters, and events, thus elucidating a more potent emotive connection with the story (Bucher 2017). The proximity offered by the VR filming and 360-degree technologies can provide an illusion of immediacy, which is, while not more temporal than traditional films, is perceived as

more physical and spatial. A new significant element accorded specifically by the features of a VR viewing is control. A semblance of audience control is elucidated by the selectivity of the viewing experience. A VR audience has noticeable agency over the content they are exposed to, as the 360-degree feature enables viewers to navigate the perspective and move in all directions while the narrative takes place around them. The digital mobility within the visual narrative enhances the sense of control that the audience could feel as they navigate the narrative (Haolun and Ziyao 2019).

From a narratological perspective, the 360-degree flexibility offers a narratorial fluidity that is rarely offered in what might be called a spatially normative narration. In other words, the VR environment makes it possible, indeed even relies on, the overlapping of narratorial roles. The narratee, in this case the audience as the recipients of the narration, visually and spatially assumes the position of the narrator when they select different perspectives through 360-degree and VR. What is more, the audience/narratee has the power to view perspectives that are not necessarily present in the voiceover narration that represents the narrator. Therefore, the visuality of narration is controlled by the audience/narratee even as the oral narration is dominated by the narrator. This shared control of narratorial voice not only grants hegemony to the audience, but also gives them enough access to the narrative to elicit emotive responses that may eventually shape the cathartic experience.

Narrativity

Catharsis and empathy are interconnected in this study as trajectories of narrativity enhanced by the VR experience that supplies the dramatic element. Narrativity as it is used in this study refers to narrative “not just as a sequence of events, but as the *representation* of it” (Zeman 2018, 7).

To examine the UNVR films, specific elements of catharsis are highlighted in the analysis.

Catharsis occurs when the two specific cathartic emotions are induced in the audience because of the narrative they are following: fear and pity (Aristotle 1996). Aristotle emphasises the importance of structure over spectacle, acknowledging that spectacle, or the visual impact of events, is more powerful, thus he argues that to be able to move the audience with the events as well is an even more profound level of catharsis,

It is possible for the evocation of fear and pity to result from the spectacle, and also from the structure of the events itself. The latter is preferable as it is the mark of a better poet. The plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudder and feels pity at what happens; (Aristotle 1996, 22)

The fear and pity Aristotle introduces have a purging impact. Psychologically, such purification can be seen as therapeutic, a form of healthy discharge of excess emotions (Scheff 1979). Another interpretation of catharsis adopts a moral stance, whereby catharsis can lead to a better understanding of the plights of others, and, therefore, instil a more humane attitude in the audience. Within the framework of catharsis, fear functions as a motivator, initiated mainly when the audience starts assuming the characters' positions and feeling their pain as members of the audience imagine themselves suffering the same negative experience. Pity is the expected result of fear, enacted when the audience realises that the pain the characters are undergoing deserves an empathic reaction, a realisation that can only take place after the audience has experienced fear due to identifying with the characters' suffering. Contextualising cathartic pity in films on the refugee crisis, the notion of pity is better described as an empathic response that lends itself to a clearer and perhaps more compassionate understanding of a plight that is not directly one's own. Such cathartic pity results from fear, which in turn, in the context of the UNVR films and similar creative works about the suffering, can be defined as a discomfort or even an anxiety

caused by the viewers' identifiability with a suffering they have not necessarily experienced personally but understand due to recognisable emotive features displayed by characters and other elements they are exposed to in a given narrative (Georgiva and Georgiv 2019).

Empathy

One definition of empathy stipulates that there is a similarity between one's feelings and those of others (Decety and Jackson 2004). One argument is that human empathy can be felt for any target but needs social interaction to develop (Decety and Jackson 2004). Empathy as a psychological concept is divided into three core components as follows,

(1) the ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others via facial expressions, speech, or behavior (gestures, body language); (2) an affective responsiveness, meaning sharing of emotional states with others or the ability to experience similar emotions as others; and (3) a cognitive component, also referred to as perspective taking, describing the competency to take over the perspective of another person, though the distinction between self and other remains intact. (Derntl and Regenbogen 2014, p. 70)

Empathy, in other words, needs to display three components: recognition, sharing, and perspective. The cathartic experience leading to empathy is an enactment of the therapeutic function of catharsis. Empathy compensates for the negative emotive experience initiated at the onset of exposure to witnessing a tragic incident. Empathy can lead to action, a positive outcome. In that respect, it represents hope. This equation of a poignant experience yielding hope is a rewarding outcome that imparts a positive therapeutic feature on immersive cathartic viewing. In the UNVR films, the three components are actualised through the visuality of VR and the fluidity of perspective of 360-degree viewing. Each film also combines hope with pain, as the refugees filmed, or at least the central characters among them who are the focus of the narrative,

make noticeable progress away from danger and devastation to various forms of safety and potential healing.

Recognition of emotions is a powerful instrument in the films. Facial expressions, speech, and gestures that, according to Derntl and Regenbogen (2014), lead to recognition of emotions in others. Through visual representation of characters and the narratorial voiceover in each VR film, the emotive content in the refugees' plight is potently and poignantly visible and recognisable. The sharing of emotional states, which is key to a cathartic response, is made possible through the immersive immediacy of the VR viewing experience. The perspective taking, a process necessary for the cognitive component of empathy, is especially emphasised in the VR environment, as the selectivity and the narrative control afforded by the 360-degree viewing experience make perspective taking an integral part of the films.

Affect as a method of research underlies the role of human emotive interaction with the surroundings of an individual. In that sense, it is possible to interpret it as a psychosocial means of communication. Affects, in their plural form, are, therefore, modes of communication that manifest the human capability of interaction. Kathleen Stewart defines affects as the "surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergencies" (2007, 1). Affect theory is traceable to Silvan Tomkins' psychological categorisation of human emotive responses to the stimuli of everyday life. According to The Tomkins Institute, the nine affects are either positive, described as inherently rewarding; negative, described as inherently punishing; or inherently neutral. The affects are double-termed, thus reinforcing the affect. The nine affects are:

- Distress-Anguish: The cry for help (inherently punishing)
- Interest-Excitement: The pull toward mastery (inherently rewarding)
- Enjoyment-Joy: The social bond (inherently rewarding)
- Surprise-Startle: The reset button (inherently neutral)

Anger-Rage: The demand to fix it (inherently punishing)
 Fear-Terror: The signal to flee or freeze (inherently punishing)
 Shame-Humiliation: The self-protection signal (inherently punishing)
 Disgust: The need to expel (inherently punishing)
 Dismissal: The avoidance signal (inherently punishing)
 (The Tomkins Institute, n.d.)

The visual component of the films, enhanced by VR and 360-degree techniques only reinforces the powerful impact of affects (Marín-Morales et al. 2020). Facial expressions as they are perceived on characters in the films become even more glaringly intimate when viewed through VR devices.

It is possible to see the potential for the empathic core of such films to grant illusionary gratification. One study argues that “co-suffering and shared hope create the illusion of cooperation, equality on a human level, bonding, and care about an unfortunate Other” (Gruenwald and Witteborn 2022, 156). Perhaps the empathic technique has lost its power and can no longer challenge the political and economic roots of the human crises (Gruenwald and Witteborn 2022). This eventually turns global citizenship into individual gratification (Gruenwald and Witteborn 2022).

One analysis of VR considers it as an empathy “engine” and cites *Clouds Over Sidra* as one of the examples of how VR is the brave future of integrating art with empathy (Herson 2016). A supportive study of VR as a vehicle for enhancing empathy among students playing a video game about cancer suggests the potential VR might have as a tool to enhance empathy (Louie et al. 2018). One aspect of research acknowledges the significance of VR in relation to empathy for educational purposes, but recommends further studies to what is deemed inconclusive (Estrada Villalba et al. 2021). Another study examines the ethical boundaries of guided-empathy, but concludes that setting clear motivations for empathy through VR can have moral advantages (Rueda and Lara 2020).

The notion of the VR as an empathy machine is not without its critics. Critique of this notion relies on certain aspects. The first is digitality. One argument posits that human agents are analogues, our world is analogue, and, therefore, the digital world of VR is an inadequate substitute for the analogue world that is not equipped to relay significant issues such as those VR and digital media claim to present (Hassan 2020). The second is representation and transparency. This critique is sceptical of the role of ideological structures as well as economic and political power hierarchies involved in producing VR that might overshadow true representation (Irom 2018). The third critique is about the type of empathy generated by VR. VR seems to stimulate emotional rather than cognitive empathy. One distinction between the two types of empathy suggests that emotional empathy can be aroused by stimulation while cognitive empathy requires hard work to acquire. In other words, empathy through VR may train users to respond to visual and graphic images but might not necessarily result in changes in perspective. Therefore, VR might not result in increasing empathy on a larger scale among users but limit it to increasing their empathy towards the subject matter of the VR content they experienced (Martingano et al. 2021).

Regardless of the support or critique of the concept of empathy machine, some studies dive deeper in this issue looking for limitations and possibilities rather than adopt either an approving or a dismissive approach. This attempt is evident in interrogating the interventive role that VR might play due to its immersive impact. Such impact, they argue, relies on the extent of the immersive experience that can lead to a feeling of psychological presence, without which there is no viability of VR as an intervention method to increase empathy (Bang and Yildirim 2018).

Clouds Over Sidra

Clouds Over Sidra (2015) is the result of a collaboration between three entities, the UN SDG Action Campaign, UNICEF Jordan, and the U.S. based studio Vrse. The VR film is the creative work of two American filmmakers, Gabo Arora and Chris Milk. Arora is a Johns Hopkins professor, UN diplomat, and owner of a production studio, Lightshed, based in Brooklyn, New York. Milk is a music video director and photographer. Milk is interested in experimenting with new media filmmaking and photography, and also owns VR media and film companies, Within, and Here Be Dragons in Los Angeles. The film premiered at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in December 2015. The film follows Sidra, a Syrian refugee relocated at the Zaatari camp, where it is entirely filmed. The Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan is where over 80,000 Syrians fleeing war in Syria are relocated. According to UNVR, half of these refugees are children, which makes introducing the main character and narrator as a child an adequate representative of the refugee camp community, not to mention a potent element to garner empathic support.

The VR film progresses steadily to formulate an emotive impact on the audience. The opening scene reveals a vast desert expanse with the voice of a young girl describing how she walked with her family across the desert from Syria to reach Jordan. Before introducing herself, the first personal detail we hear from the girl as the first-person narrator is that her kite was stuck on a tree in their yard and comments, “I want it back” (*Clouds Over Sidra* 2015, 0:30). This detail establishes the first personal connection with the audience while simultaneously symbolically represents the loss of the luxury and the loss of playfulness and freedom associated with the safety of home, represented by the stuck kite. The central character/narrator then introduces herself as Sidra, the title name. A 12-year-old who fled the war in Syria and moved

with her family to the Zaatari camp in Jordan, Sidra starts describing the camp and her family's situation. The narrative becomes visual immediately, as the VR and 360-degree technology enables the viewers to follow the other people Sidra refers to in her narration, essentially making her a voiceover while the viewers circle the space where she is located and focus on members of her family and members of the camp community. The film focuses repeatedly on Sidra's face and the faces of her siblings and other children at the camp. Their facial expressions clearly display some of Tomkins' affects. Sidra, for instance, exhibits the features characteristic of distress when she remembers her home in Syria (Fig. 1). Later on in the film, her expressions gain more positive expressions, mainly enjoyment. Sidra's younger brother, an infant, however, cries repeatedly, bringing in Tomkins' first affect, that of anguish, which is typical of infants at birth and after. More positive expressions are shown by other members of the camp, such as two adolescents who mock-fight while playing games, showing excitement as they play. The initial stage of emotional recognition is visible in Sidra's emotional responses as they shift from sad to joyful, for in the beginning she covers her face in sadness, then gradually wipes her tears, and she even smiles happily at the end of the film. The second stage of affective sharing and spreading of emotions is seen in the array of faces as the members of the camp are seen smiling or arguing or talking. The third element, perspective, hinges on the viewers' ability to move around the refugee camp. It takes us to desertscape then inside the camp, a training space for youth, a school, and even a gaming space. The viewers feel the immediacy of exposure to the camp as they navigate selectively from one part of the camp to another.



Figure 1. Sidra showing distress.

The empathic responses directed by the film address the two Aristotelian cathartic components of fear and pity. Fear of being forced to leave home is enhanced by Sidra's attachment to home. This emotion is underlined when we learn that other members of the camp are also attached to their dream of return, "Many of the men say they exercise because they want to be strong for the journey home" (*Clouds Over Sidra* 2015, 3:57). She recounts how even the clouds that dominate the skies over her are described by her teacher as Syrian clouds and how they, too, are one day going home, just like Sidra. This strikes a note of hope, varying from vague to concrete and real, depending on the narrative. The cumulative empathic result based on alternating scenes of fear and hope lends itself to pity towards the end (Figure 2). This is seen in the final title text that suddenly appears on the screen after the last scene, claiming control from viewers, "3.7 million Syrians have fled war in their country. The Za'atari camp in Jordan is home to 82,000 refugees. No one knows when it will be safe to go home, nor what will be left for them when they return" (*Clouds Over Sidra* 2015, 7:29).



Figure 2. Sidra showing hope.

In a TED Talk, Milk describes VR as the “ultimate empathy machine” (2015). In this talk and a subsequent interview, Milk pinpoints the evolving nature of VR, as a medium that not only answers questions, but, just as importantly, poses new ones (Milk 2015; Dredge 2015). Milk is a firm believer in the potential of VR, an agent that is capable of change, which Milk sees on a psychological level and on a global and collective dimension: a change of “human consciousness” as Milk puts it (Dredge 2015). This notion of VR as an ‘empathy machine’ has become one of the primary hinges for industry discussion and scholarship about the medium (Bollmer 2017; Fisher 2017; Harrera 2018). The scholarly attention, however, has looked at the connection of VR and empathy from a controversial lens, with studies supporting the concept of the empathy machine and others questioning its validity (Hassan 2020).

The narrative of *Clouds over Sidra* (2015) develops steadily from the standpoint of fear to the potential of pity. It is worth mentioning here that pity in its Aristotelian sense completes the cathartic experience. To result in an empathic reaction, it is possible to view the VR practice as an instigator of immediacy and interactivity that contribute to the formation of empathy. This is accomplished by building upon a narrative that employs virtuality to enable the viewers to

have more narrative control, and uses affective visual details of characters to create a more relatable experience that leads to a potential empathic response. A measure of the success of the film is evident in how well it fared internationally. According to UNVR,

...it was screened at a high level donor meeting prior to the Third International Humanitarian Appeal for Syria in Kuwait in March 2015, which eventually raised 3.8 billion US dollars. The UNICEF education team has used it to showcase the need to support children's education in crisis situations at important education forums in the lead up to the post-2015 summit. (UNVR n.d.)

Life in the Time of Refuge

In 2016, a second UNVR film was directed and produced by David Gough. Gough has worked with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In 2016 Gough launched the Humanitarian Cooperative Limited, a production company dedicated to humanitarian causes. In the same year that the company was launched, it co-produced *Life in the Time of Refuge* (2016) in cooperation with Nokia, and a Ghent-based production company, Mad Productions, and the UNVR initiative. The film is an account of the story of Omar. Unlike Sidra, the main character Omar is individually the focus of the narrative. He is a 9-year-old Syrian refugee boy who is diagnosed with a hormone deficiency that impedes growth, constituting a disability that is only exacerbated by his refugee status. For three years, Omar lived as a refugee in Lebanon. He was not treated for his condition for the entire duration of his stay, which negatively impacted his medical condition. Omar eventually resettled in 2016 in Finland. There he has been receiving treatment and settling in a new community.

It is possible to argue that the elements of immediacy and relatability that the film attempts through its use of VR narration are significant tools of its claim for cathartic impact aiming at an empathic viewing experience. Immediacy in VR viewing enhances relatability, as it makes the visuality of experience more immersive. Such immersion fosters viewers' perception

of the VR story as relatable. This is clearly seen as an asset in its description in the DOCVILLE 2022 International Film Festival in Belgium, “Have a look around in the refugee camp, follow the footsteps of the refugees and immerse yourself in an apparently hopeless situation” (Docville n.d.). The description relies on inviting expressions that reflect the nature of the 360-degree and VR viewing experiences, highlighting their engaging immediacy. “Have a look around” is a reference to virtuality, specifically the 360-degree technique that enables viewers to roam around, virtually eliminating spatial obstacles, or at least giving the visual illusion of spatial proximity and availability. The film festival description also highlights the narrativity of the film, “follow the footsteps of the refugees,” thus showing the importance of the narratorial sequence of the film. Next, the description elaborates the relatability of the experience, “immerse yourself,” which is achieved through the combination of virtual and narrative elements. Finally, the cathartic aspect is set as the ultimate goal of the experience as the description ends with “immerse yourself in an apparently hopeless situation,” thus expecting the viewers to identify with the suffering of main characters, which is effectively the core of the cathartic experience that leads to empathy.

Life in the Time of Refuge (2016) opens with whistling winds and a distant beeping sound interfering with an Arabic song about home and houses. Suddenly the sound of a rocket overshadows everything as it lands on houses. The next scene is of debris in a destroyed neighbourhood. Visually, the 360-degree experience enables viewers to roam the green mountains of Syria, then indicators display an arrow from Syria pointing to the refugee camp. At this point, the narrator’s voiceover starts by saying, “Being a kid and a refugee is no fun” (*Life in the Time of Refuge* 2016, 1:31). He goes on to explain how much education he missed. It is only then that he says his name is Omar, “Anyway, time to introduce myself” (*Life in the Time of*

Refuge 2016, 1:44). Like Sidra, Omar introduces himself after he establishes the initial emotive basis of his tragic refugee status. This paves the road for viewer involvement with an immediate plunge into an intimate detail of his life. After his name, the story progresses quickly. The initial scene is followed by scenes of the refugee camp, Omar's friend Warda Al-Jawahiry, herself a former refugee but from Iraq, then the Finnish school Omar attends. The flurry of visual details accelerates as we move to the Helsinki train station, then Kuopio train station, symbolically inviting viewers on a journey to Finland to accompany Omar to his new home. Soon after the word Kuopio is announced on the screen, we see Omar running to a woman who hugs and lifts him. They talk in Arabic, with subtitles of Omar sharing memories about his older sister, and his memories in Syria and Lebanon. Also like in Sidra's story had the mock fighting and video games, Omar's story has funny experiences that are shared, such as him remembering when he bit a friend at school when he was young in jest. Such anecdotes add to the growing bond with viewers.

The narrative then takes a more tragic turn as Omar discusses his medical condition, a hormonal imbalance that affects his growth. Visually, and spatially, this is enhanced by showing Omar sitting in relatively larger armchairs in front of tall walls, and in natural Finnish scenery. Omar's health quickly becomes centrefold for the narrative. Since catharsis is intrinsically part of exposure to tragic narratives, Omar's dilemma of lack of medical care at the refugee camp is bound to instil cathartic reaction. This is especially true since healthcare is seen as a universal issue, and, therefore, identifiable for most viewers, which falls within the criteria of fear and pity. The fear of being in a comparable situation naturally leads to the pity, or compassion, of needing to see the suffering of the main character of the narrative end. This occurs as we learn of Omar's improved chances in Finland. The immediacy in the film is intensified by the oscillation of

narration and dramatic presentation. The progress of Omar's story alternates from narratorial voice to dialogue among characters. When Omar narrates, he is describing a turning point or supplying information, such as his background before the rocket hit his home, the help he received in Finland, or his medical condition. When there is dialogue, sometimes it is in Arabic, adding more authenticity to the story, with an interesting element of foreignization that might make a non-native speaking audience feel the distance that Omar has had to cross, culturally as well as spatially, to join his new home.

In addition to narration and dramatization, the camera angles also play a significant role in framing Omar at the heart of his story, giving him agency over a story that involves many entities that are more powerful than him. This is achieved by placing Omar at the centre of the different scenes where he is present. Such centrality directs any potential empathic response to Omar as the focal point. The emotive visuality in the film abounds in affective gestures. Facial expressions shift clearly if we follow Tomkins' list in examining the characters. Omar's reactions register surprise/startle when he reaches Finland, indicating a neutral emotion usually present when facing a new unknown situation, expected as Omar moves to a new place with which he is unfamiliar. This changes to excitement in subsequent scenes, on the boat and at school, as he enjoys the new place. The most expressive affects of all are those of his caretaker. She displays joy when she sees Omar and then when his doctor delivers good news that he is expected to respond positively to treatment. The positive affects in the second half of the film sharply contrast with the negative affects in the first half of the film.

Conclusion

The study concludes that a cathartic experience is not only the result of new narrative strategies using technology-based narrative methods such as VR and 360-degree, but it is even actively sought by filmmakers, as seen in the example of Participant media's objective "creating content that stands at the intersection of art and activism" (Participant n.d.). They might adopt different terms, but the essence of catharsis as a creative necessity of involvement is an objective of immersive narratives. Empathy, as an expected result of the emotive tides of fear and pity, is the objective of films that specifically endeavour to accomplish social change. In an interview with Gabo Arora, the director of *Clouds Over Sidra*, Arora emphasises that VR films should address issues that "matter to the world," thus underlining relatability as an innate feature of VR films from the onset of this medium (Gills 2016). In another interview, Arora clearly states that Milk's aim is to "influence decision makers" (Swallow 2015).

The analysis of the films of UNVR project has led to a recurrent motif: hope, itself an Aristotelian trait for the character development of the tragic hero. The passage from bad fortune to good fortune is Aristotelian in that sense as well, as it marks the progression of the tragic hero (Brenes 2014). In both films, hope was always in sight, if not brightly there, as in Omar's promising treatment, to more vague hope such as Sidra's determination to return to Syria someday in the future. This analysis highlights how an Aristotelian approach can underline the role of storytelling for VR films as an integral component of the packaging of Virtual Reality experiences, as the Aristotelian cathartic concepts frame the affective impact storytelling has on such experiences.

The potential that VR films have for social change relies on their ability to guarantee empathic responses. The literary and artistic nature of film as a vehicle for storytelling places it favourably in the classical notions of catharsis. With pity and fear as Aristotle's markers for

audience empathic response to tragedy and specifically the development of a tragic hero, VR films that grapple with the difficult stories of refugee crises seem to exemplify as well as benefit from the alignment of factors of catharsis on the one hand, and social activism through art on the other hand.

The visuality of VR is reinforce features of immediacy and personalisation that have introduced a new and impactful trajectory for film to achieve empathy. By combining dramatization with narrativity, VR and 360-degree may have reshaped catharsis for contemporary and possibly future visual storytelling. In so doing, by acknowledging the power of mediation in viewing in films that are definably produced for activism, the classical notion of catharsis may have found a new application as elements at the intersectionality of artistic expression and social change.

The role of empathy, then, as evident in these films, is to actualise the cathartic experience, ending the journey of fear and pity with a message of hope, and, potentially, a call for action. This level of engagement is all the more possible with immersive narrative strategies such as VR and 360-degree viewing that enable viewers to achieve immediacy and spatial proximity, elements that enhance emotive responses and reinforce visual affects, as images represented in films that facilitate interactive communication through psychological involvement.

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