Humanitarian VR Documentary and Its Cinematic Myths

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It is often assumed that witnessing atrocity compels a moral response. Since the advent of photography extricated the witness from the confines of space and time, visual media have played a decisive role in this equation. When the Ottoman government started deporting Armenians into the Syrian desert more than one century ago, the humanitarian response began almost immediately. The formation of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief inaugurated a new paradigm of humanitarian organizing, reconfiguring the philanthropic economy to implicate people of many classes, not only the wealthy (Near East Museum 2016). Media's role changed alongside it, representing human rights abuses to hail viewers into what documentary scholar Leshu Torchin (2012) calls 'witnessing publics.' In her examination of the film Ravished Armenia (1919), Torchin describes how charitable organizations deployed visual media to "transform feeling into immediate action" by making faraway suffering "legible and palatable," thereby instilling into witnesses a sense of moral responsibility (2006, 215, 217). Torchin marks the Armenian Genocide as a transitional period when photographic media were being "developed alongside a discourse of international human rights enforcement" (215). Humanitarian crises catalyzed the development of new techniques in photography, designed to make the events they depict feel immediate and urgent.

In recent years, as images of atrocities in Syria pervade our media landscapes, efforts to hail a witnessing public have exploited media-technological developments that might afford immediacy to distant abjection. One medium that has been trumpeted far and wide, from Hollywood to academia, from the United Nations to the New York Times, is virtual reality (VR). In this context, VR describes a mode of photorealistic moving image production in which multi-directional camera rigs record images that are later stitched into a digital sphere. A head-mounted display enables viewers to virtually inhabit this sphere and to determine where to look from a fixed position in its center. The image's correlation to viewers' head movements produces an illusion of sensory immersion, bolstered by stereoscopic depth and ambisonic headphones. The prevalent rationale behind humanitarian uses of VR is that it supplies an experience of verisimilitude which asserts the reality of a situation. Widely touted as an "empathy machine," VR is said to deepen empathy and understanding, thereby surpassing the ability of other media to induce transcontinental care (Milk 2015a). Proponents attribute VR's empathic potential to a novel sense of immersion that the technology produces. I want to interrogate the supposed novelty of this practice by understanding its historical lineages. Therefore, in the spirit of this issue's call to transgress the boundaries between film and media studies, this paper asks what film theory and history can tell us about humanitarian VR.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously argued that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium," describing a process by which a reigning medium's form becomes incorporated into an emergent medium's content—thus, speech becomes the content of writing, the written word becomes the content of print, which is the content of the telegraph, and so on (1994, 8). Many have situated VR in a similar trajectory, as an evolutionary development that absorbs cinema into an expanded new medium. Without endorsing the teleology of progress presumed by such a view, I want to think through this relationship's genealogical characteristics by suggesting that VR has inherited some of cinema's key myths.

In recent years, popular discourse around VR has extolled it as a prophesied medium capable of transcending the limits of representation. The sense that VR was somehow foretold evokes film theorist André Bazin's myth of total cinema: the aspiration to a complete representation of reality that underlies the entire history of mechanical reproduction. However, the predestined quality of this total realism paradoxically returns to something primordial: to cinema's infancy and the myth of credulous spectators deceived by the illusion before them. These two myths—one chasing the elusive horizon of total representation, the other looking back condescendingly at those who believed we had reached it—are entwined in the promises that VR makes today. By unraveling these two myths through VR's discourses of immersion and empathy, this article interrogates the politics of virtual humanitarian witnessing. Recognizing that cinema's first spectators were attracted to an aesthetic of astonishment, to the illusion itself, I argue that cinematic myths continue to enchant discussions about VR in a technologically deterministic manner that misrepresents the medium's political potential and fetishizes empathy as a revolutionary sentiment. By contextualizing this emergent medium in the history of film, I demonstrate that while an aesthetics of astonishment grants VR its groundbreaking status, the constitutive asymmetry of the documentary encounter endures uninterrupted from early cinema's foreign views to contemporary humanitarian VR.

The Myth of Total Cinema

Chris Milk and Gabo Arora's *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015) is a live-action VR documentary that is emblematic of the emergent mode of humanitarian VR. In 2014, Milk, a music video director who aspires to be VR's "first auteur," and Arora, a Senior Advisor at the United Nations, brought a 360-degree camera rig to the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan where they documented the life of a twelve-year-old Syrian refugee named Sidra (Fig. 1) (Fox 2015). Sponsored by the United Nations and premiered at the World Economic Forum, *Clouds* is the inaugural work in a wave of VR pieces intended to "bring the far-flung crises of the world to the people in power" (Arora and Milk 2015). Like the humanitarian media developed during the Armenian Genocide, *Clouds* uses media technologies to hail a witnessing public. It leverages VR's enhanced capacity for perceptual realism to counteract our inurement to images of suffering.

Fig. 1 Watching *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015) with a head-mounted display creates a sense of presence, as though we are in Sidra's room.

To better understand what is novel about VR, we must analyze the realistic experience it affords alongside its historical precedents. The quality of immersion extolled in ostensibly 'new' media is not new, but rather has a long history that can be traced through centuries-old exhibition sites such as the cathedral, the museum, the planetarium, the panorama, and the amusement park. Like VR, these spaces induce cognitive dissonance by striving to erase mediation and to cultivate a sense of presence in a scene despite the spectator's awareness of in fact being elsewhere.[1] VR documentaries link this experience of immersive spectatorship to photographic veracity. Accordingly, these documentaries claim the real on two complementary levels that are often conflated: they make the epistemological claim of indexing a more complete reality, and they afford a more realistic phenomenological experience for spectators encountering that reality.

These two registers of actuality correspond to the two types of indexicality described by pioneering semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce in his influential taxonomy of signs: the iconic index that bears a likeness to its referent, attesting to the object's singular existence; and the symbolic index that refers to the deictic shifter—signs such as 'I,' 'me,' 'here,' and 'now' that afford a sense of presence and are only referentially meaningful in context (Peirce 1932). While the former notion of 'index as trace' has been a foundational concept in film studies, especially documentary theory, the concept of 'index as deixis,' which "emphasizes not just existence but presence and immediacy," has "received considerably less attention" from film and media scholars (Malitsky 2012, 246). VR documentaries such as *Clouds Over Sidra* strengthen both of these semiotic registers, aiming to surpass cinematic realism on their bases; the VR image's panoramic scope indexes a more complete trace of the profilmic event, while its interactive properties incorporate the spectator as the referential "I" who animates the image. The sense of immediacy afforded by the latter is tethered to the truth claim of the former, as deictic indexicality affords an experience of phenomenological realism through which the image's documentary value is apprehended. These two premises to VR's enhanced realism—the multi-camera rig's ability to capture a more complete image of the photographed event, and the sense of immersion afforded by the display's correlation to the spectator's movement—have cinematic histories.

The goal of immersion into a whole evokes what André Bazin described as the myth of total cinema: the yearning for "a total and complete representation of reality" (2004a, 20). According to Bazin, all technological advancements in mechanical reproduction and artistic innovations in realism have pursued this foundational goal. Just as 3D cinema's stereoscopic glasses invoked the fantasy of achieving "a phenomenography of life," popular discourse about VR places it snugly in Bazin's trajectory, as a messianic arrival that achieves total representation (Lippit 1999, 213). VR dissolves the frame, encompasses peripherals, and generates perceptual conditions that surpass the realism afforded by cinema. The frame is no longer a static rectangle, but instead mimics the phenomenological experience of reality by immersing viewers in 360 degrees of visual excess that they navigate by choosing where to look. The popular rhetoric circulating around VR—phrases such as "the future is here," "VR has arrived," and "tomorrow's future today"—invoke it as a preordained arrival, as though it were fulfilling a prophecy.[2]

Many celebrate the notion that, like total cinema, VR provides transparent access to reality. Virtual realism is said to offer an immediate experience of witnessing unadulterated by the creator's intervening hand. Speaking about *Clouds Over Sidra*, Milk marvels that VR documentaries are "taking out the middle man in [journalism], and making you feel as if you were actually there" (quoted in Dredge 2015). Similarly, Bazin describes total cinema as a perfect representation of the world "unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time" (2004a, 21). By ostensibly eliminating any mediating force and capturing a complete, interactive reality that conquers time, VR seems to realize the myth of total cinema.

Of course, this romantic interpretation overlooks the medium's mediacy. Despite the panoptic camera's expansion of the frame, VR presents an inevitably subtractive interpretation of reality. Choice of subject, camera placement, title cards, editing, subtitles, and non-diegetic sound are just some of the interventions that practitioners make in fashioning their virtual accounts of the real. Nonetheless, VR does attain a heightened realism, and one that resembles Bazin's ideal of total cinema. A more measured analysis might recognize that while VR does not achieve the "complete illusion of life" that Bazin yearns for, it approaches it, and does so in correspondence with his conceptions of cinematic realism (2004a, 20).

Bazin does not traffic in Milk's hyperboles, but rather acknowledges that artistic realism is para-doxically contingent upon artifice (2004b, 26). However, he distinguishes between "directors who put their faith in the image" and those who "put their faith in reality," commending the latter for an "adherence to actuality" epitomized by the Italian neorealists (2004a, 24; 2004b, 20). For Bazin, neorealism surpasses other realist aesthetics by restoring a sense of totality to its subject matter (2004b, 93-101). All representations of the real bestride a fundamental contradiction in which the creator must subtract from the reality they seek to preserve. The myth of total cinema dreams of a future when this subtraction will no longer be necessary. It is a fantasy in which realism and reality converge. VR eliminates this subtraction on the compositional level insofar as the panoramic camera no longer imposes a frame that slices reality into a rectangle. VR remains, of course, selective in other regards. But while neorealism inevitably subtracts from reality, "the selection that does occur is neither logical nor psychological; it is ontological, in the sense that the image of reality it restores to us is still a whole" (Bazin 2004b, 98). For Bazin, successful realism keeps the world's complexities intact, preserving their sense of wholeness.

The cinematic restoration of a whole achieves Bazinian realism not through any faith to an ante-cedent actuality, but by creating perceptual conditions that generate an experience of the real. Bazin ex-plains: "Neorealism is a description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole. Neorealism […] is not so much concerned with the choice of subject as with a particular way of regarding things" (2004b, 97). This particular way of regarding is phenomenological, describing a way to *regarder*, to look. Using deep focus and multiple planes of simultaneous action, realist filmmakers such as Jean Renoir and Roberto Rossellini refrained from directing the viewer's look according to the caus-al flow of Hollywood continuity. Instead, they provided an abundance of visual information that allowed the viewer to decide what to focus on.

Similarly, VR empowers its viewers to decide where to look. For example, when sitting with Sidra in her classroom, we can focus on her, her classmates, her teacher, or their temporary shelter, but the scene's totality necessarily exceeds one's field of vision (Fig. 2). In this way, VR restores a sense of totality to the image. Something always remains beyond or behind the viewer, allowing them to apprehend reality in a self-directed manner. Immersive witnessing is thus realist not because it indexes a more complete historical reality, but because it affords a realistic perceptual experience. Rather than eliminating the 'middle man,' as Milk describes, VR positions viewers in that mediatory position. It empowers us to navigate this spherical totality through the sovereign authority of our look, obfuscating the other ways in which reality has been selectively interpreted. In this sense, VR approaches total cinema not by capturing more reality, but by situ-ating viewers in an experience that feels more real.

Fig. 2.1 A 360-degree video of *Clouds Over Sidra* depicts the entire panoramic image.

Fig. 2.2 In contrast to the panoramic image in Fig. 2.1, watching *Clouds Over Sidra* in a head-mounted VR display enables us to choose where to look, but prevents us from seeing the entire image at once.

VR's perceptual realism grants immediacy to distant circumstances, and in doing so is said to affirm their actuality. Proponents of this view echo Bazin's conviction that technologically mediated realism inspires a revolutionary humanism, which in turn provokes action. But the aforementioned excitement that the future has arrived, that VR fulfills the prophecy of total cinema, circles us back to the primordial days of early cinema and what film historians André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning have called the cinema of attractions.

The cinema of attractions describes "a cinema that bases itself on […] its ability to show something" (Gunning 2006, 382). This was early cinema's dominant mode of address. Prior to the ascendance of narrative around 1907, viewers came for the illusion of cinema, to experience the apparatus itself. Promotional materials did not advertise the films being premiered, but the marvelous technologies that made them possible—the cinématographe, the Biograph, the Vitascope (Doane 2002, 24). The same is true of VR works circulating today. These short-form, largely non-narrative pieces exist to exhibit the remarkable features of the devices that they inhabit. For spectators of today's VR technologies, the content is usually incidental to their desire to experience VR. Gunning explains that early practitioners, from the Lumière brothers to Méliès, used cinema not to tell stories, but primarily to present "a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power […] and exoticism" (2006, 382). By attending to Bazin's aesthetics of realism, and their aspiration to total cinema, I sought to understand how VR's 'illusory power' produces a realistic perceptual experience. I now turn to early cinema in order to think through the relationship between 'illusory power' and 'exoticism.'

Early fiction films tended to be non-narrative spectacles that centered the same subjects as VR does today, displaying the unique skills of a vaudevillian performer or using special effects to create an illusion. But nonfiction reigned in cinema's first decade, outnumbering fiction films as late as 1907 (Barnouw 1973, 21). These attractions were configured according to what Gunning calls the 'view aesthetic,' which gratified an epistephilic drive to see the world (2016, 52-63). Unlike the documentary, which would later assimilate the 'view' into discursive structures of argumentation, this earlier mode was more descriptive, concerned primarily with the twin acts of displaying and looking. In fact, one of the main reasons that the Lumières' cinématographe gained popularity over Thomas Edison's kinetoscope was its portability; it was light-weight and hand-cranked, which enabled it to leave the studio and travel the world. By the end of the nineteenth century, the world was displaying itself to the cinématographe on every continent except Antarctica and the world, particularly the West, was looking.

Foreign views were immensely popular during this period. Soliciting a voyeuristic gaze, they commodified exotic sites into sights for consumption. VR has enthusiastically revived this tradition. Both the early view aesthetic and today's 'virtual views' circulate as windows into other parts of the world. Relying almost exclusively on individual shots, neither uses sophisticated editing techniques to convey meaning. Instead, they distill the act of looking—often, the act of looking at another, as in *Clouds over Sidra*. During cinema's infancy, these films were advertised as a way to "put the world within your grasp" (Gunning 1997, 125), just as the World Economic Forum now employs VR "to overcome boundaries and distances" (Arora and Milk, 2015) and the United Nations aims "to bring the experiences of vulnerable communities straight to decision makers" (United Nations n.d.). Foreign views reciprocated a demand for exotic images, addressing metropolitan publics who desired visual access to their empires. These images were symbols of epistemic might through which viewers traversed space and time, and gained omniscient access to the colonized other. The intellectual connotations of actualities also attracted highbrow audiences to what was otherwise looked down upon as a philistine attraction (Slavin 2001, 59). Today's rhetoric may not be as explicitly colonial, but it addresses a similar privileged public in the West whose visual access to the Rest connotes mastery. As I will later suggest, the humanitarian discourses in which virtual views are couched may do little more than cloak the naked voyeurism that lurks beneath.

In theorizing the view aesthetic, Gunning comments that "the most characteristic quality of a 'view' lies in the way it mimes the act of looking and observing. In other words, we don't just experience a 'view' film as a presentation of place, an event or a process, but also as the mimesis of the act of observing. The camera literally acts as a tourist, spectator or investigator, and the pleasure in the film lies in this surrogate of looking" (2016, 56). If early nonfiction mimes the act of observing, VR nearly enables it. It offers not only a way of encountering a view, but also of entering it, inviting one to scan and scrutinize as they please, pivoting what was formerly a paralyzed ocular surrogate. With an expanded ability to explore the limits of visual curiosity, the spectator's look in VR roves as never before.

The Myth of the Credulous Spectator

This development constructs a new type of spectator somewhere between a viewer and a user, or what media theorist Dan Harries calls a "viewser" (2002, 171-183). Similarly, early cinema addressed its spectator in a radically different manner than would Hollywood's commercial fiction a couple decades later. For decades, film historians suggested that early cinema's spectators were the gullible inhabitants of an unsophisticated prehistory. They condescendingly framed cinema's first spectators as naïve fools duped by the illusion before them. This myth of early cinema's credulous spectator is illustrated in the famous story of the Lumière brothers' first screening of *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, when viewers at Paris's Grand Café supposedly mistook the Actualité film for actuality, leaping from their seats in terror as the train on screen rushed towards them. While no evidence exists to corroborate the legend, this founding myth has perpetuated a belief that cinema's first audiences did not possess the basic intelligence required to distinguish reality from its representations (Gunning 1997, 129-30).

Milk himself cites this myth in a VR piece entitled *Evolution of Verse* (2015), in which a train rushes towards the viewer—one who was in all likelihood, in 2015, encountering VR for the first time (Fig. 3). When I experienced this work at Montreal's Phi Centre, I noticed viewers often recoil, sometimes even scream, but none of them mistook this virtual event for an experience of reality; they did not actually believe that a train was going to collide into them. This distinction parallels the intervention that Gunning makes in the myth of the naïve spectator. He argues that cinema's first audiences were not powerlessly entranced by an image that they mistook to be reality, but were rather intrigued by the process itself, the magic trick. "Far from credulity," Gunning explains, "it is the incredible nature of the illusion itself that renders the viewer speechless" (1997, 118). These early films attracted audiences to what Gunning calls an aesthetic of astonishment. This aesthetic is exhibitionistic, displaying the technology's chimerical power and soliciting amazement at the illusion itself. The same is true of the VR works circulating today, designed to showcase the technology's astonishing properties.

Fig. 3 A train rushes toward the viewer in Chris Milk's Evolution of Verse (2015).

Gunning describes the cinema of attractions and its aesthetic of astonishment as a "series of visual shocks" (1997, 116). Whereas cinema's origin myth narrates early spectators as credulous, he argues that cinema's attraction of marvels and magic could only have captivated audiences in a world that was becoming increasingly rational. These shocks restored thrill and immediacy to the alienating monotony of urban modernity. Similarly, I want to suggest that VR solicits astonishment to interrupt a contemporary alienation from images of suffering. Through the perceptual realism it affords, VR captures 'astonishing views' that restore shock to images of injustice.

In *Clouds Over Sidra*, the head-mounted display allows us to observe Sidra's life at the Za'atari refugee camp. Stereoscopic images create depth and encompass our peripheral vision, immersing us in Sidra's

milieu of temporary shelters, overcrowded classrooms, clouds, and dust. Attuned to our head movements, the display animates a sense of presence. The medium centers the gesture of the look, embodying the act of witnessing. We know that we are not really there, but encircled by austerity and insecurity, the encounter affirms this to be someone's reality. To be surrounded by such abject conditions is shocking. The *New York Times* describes an ambition "to visualize conditions so that there will be no misunderstanding in the mind of any one about the terrible things which have transpired. It was deemed essential that the leaders, social and intellectual, should first learn the story, but later the general public shall be informed" (quoted in Torchin 2006, 214). This quote comes from a 1919 review of *Ravished Armenia*, but is equally applicable to *Clouds Over Sidra* nearly a century later. Both works mobilize technological advances in verisimilitude to assert the reality of endangered life, to jolt witnesses into humanitarian action. They also prioritize the same spectators: the world's leaders. *Clouds* was premiered at the 2015 World Economic Forum to "close the gap between global challenges and the policy-makers who can affect [*sic*] real change" (Arora and Milk 2015). VR closes this gap by granting immediacy to the crisis of forcible displacement. In its humanitarian mode, virtual realism presents astonishing views to restore shock to mechanical reproductions of factual horror. However, this astonishment is referentially—and politically—ambiguous. Does it respond to images of injustice or to the extraordinary illusions that transmit them?

Empathy and Understanding

Some might reasonably contend that the astonishment provoked by these virtual views responds to a material reality, not only its technologically sensational mediation. Even so, such astonishment does not inevitably foster the ethics of care to which Milk, the United Nations, and others aspire. They claim to "create solidarity with those who are normally excluded" (Milk 2015b), to explain their circumstances, to produce "deeper empathy, deeper humanity, deeper compassion" (Milk 2015a). Project descriptions, press releases, and reviews even declare that *Clouds Over Sidra* has the "powerful capacity to allow anyone on a global scale to experience life within a refugee camp" (Milk 2015a). In short, many of today's humanitarian VR documentaries aim not only to enchant foreign views with a sense of astonishment, but also to arouse "deeper empathy and understanding" (United Nations 2015). In this regard, they guarantee no success. Empathy, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another," does not inherently issue from the immersion afforded by VR. This new medium may offer a glimpse into Sidra's daily reality, but its perceptual realism does little to advance our understanding of who Sidra is or how she might feel, let alone our understanding of the structures of power and violence that result in global injustice, or our own positions within these structures.

One factor foreclosing 'deeper empathy and understanding' is that Sidra is denied the complexity of personhood. She is less a person than a symbol, enlisted to typify the experiences of displaced Syrians and to perform their transcendent humanity. We may feel sadness or sympathy as we virtually enter the tragedy that she symbolizes, but astonishment at a disaster's severity does not increase one's understanding of it. In fact, the affective intensity of immersion may even serve a cathartic function that alleviates the ethical responsibility of witnessing. For instance, Milk's VR work *Millions March* (2015) places viewers amidst a 2014 rally in New York against police brutality, but despite their virtual attendance, viewers' bodies do not express dissent in the street. Virtual realism here affords a sense of participation in the event, but one that fails to enunciate solidarity in our collective reality. Within a structure of catharsis, witnessing is made to feel like a political act in itself, rather than one that demands further action. *Clouds* may make a call to subsequent action, but if it does, this call is premised upon shock or astonishment—not a deepened understanding of Sidra's circumstances.

In their canonical textbook *Understanding Virtual Reality*, computer scientists William Sherman and Alan Craig remark upon the ability of talented creators to "take us to exotic places and into a life other than our normal daily existence" (2003, 8). They explain that whereas "empathizing with the characters in a radio, motion picture, or television show" is a process of mental immersion, VR is unique because it achieves the mental immersion or sense of 'presence' that enables empathy by way of physical immersion (8-10). VR's sensory feedback mechanisms situate users in a first-person, "egocentric frame of reference"

that facilitates their immersed suspension of disbelief (296). In other words, while Sherman and Craig suggest that VR commands a privileged relation to empathy, they understand empathy to be a product of sensory immersion, of embodied presence—not the process of intersubjective understanding that is usually regarded as being the basis of empathy's political potential. While embodied access to another's point of view might indeed afford an experience of empathy, in *Clouds Over Sidra*, the viewer's first-person position is not that of the titular subject, but of the Western filmmakers encountering an exoticized elsewhere and the symbol of endangered life that inhabits it.

Furthermore, as Gunning makes clear, the cinema of attractions diametrically opposes the mechanics of empathy that structure narrative film. He urges us to "recognize that the experience of [early] audiences was profoundly different from the classical spectator's absorption into an empathetic narrative" (1997, 129). The astonishing view, its conspicuous mode of display, precludes an invisible spectator's identification with narrative subjects. For example, throughout *Clouds Over Sidra*, instances of direct address greet the spectator and reproduce the difference between subject and viewer. On several occasions, children at Za'atari point and stare at the viewer, sometimes approaching us (Fig. 4). In narrative cinema, direct address shatters the illusion of identification, pronouncing a distance between spectator and screen, self and other. However, this encounter is one of the central dramas of the actuality film. The novelty of the actuality was not simply its addition of time and motion to the photograph, but also the ways that these qualities transformed the look into a process. These films "allowed the drama of the look to develop a more dialogic relation to its filmed subjects" as it transpired across time (Gunning 2016, 61). The uncanny exchange of looks with the other was one of the defining characteristics—and attractions—of the actuality film. Of course, it was uncanny in part because it was not actually an exchange. In *Clouds Over Sidra*, despite their pointing and staring, the children cannot actually see us. Rather, they are fascinated by the strange sphere of cameras recording their image, so they investigate, reenacting early cinema's emphasis on the apparatus itself. Here, the children's astonishment draws our attention to the nature of the illusion, but like cinema's early spectators, our delight in the illusion is not ruptured by an awareness of it. This encounter with the children can be charming, even moving. The spontaneity of their glances brings a sense of authenticity to the documentary image, while their cuteness is endearing, recalling the canonical works of Italian neorealism. But despite this humanist sentimentality, no exchange occurs here; the viewer's look cannot be consciously reciprocated. We may be endeared to these children—and there can be ethical value to this endearment—but we are no closer to understanding how they feel. We are merely spectral voyeurs inhabiting the body of an alien camera.

Fig. 4 The drama of the look unfolds over time as children greet the camera in *Clouds Over Sidra*.

These virtual views lack the formal sophistication of documentary film, resembling something closer to early nonfiction. With little shot variety and minimal editing, they lay bare the foundations of the documentary encounter. Their view aesthetic provides insight into the primordial desires and power relations that constitute cinematic looking. Documentary film's development of complex semiotic systems, discursive conventions, aesthetic traditions, and editing techniques are all supplementary to the actuality film's foundational act of display that meets the look. Gunning notes that even as film historians began to recuperate the neglected history of early cinema, the history of early nonfiction remained overlooked. Urging that the "motivation for this repression must be carefully examined," he contends that 'view' films must have made those who sought to legitimize documentary uneasy because they "reveal the ambiguous power relations of the look so nakedly" (2016, 61, 62). This provocation submits a history of cinematic nonfiction according to which documentary forms and discourses have been developed in an effort to disguise the asymmetrical power relations embedded in their constitutive act. Despite VR's technological sophistication, it returns us to the bare bones of the view aesthetic, the distilled schema of the documentary encounter.

My emphasis on the encounter at the heart of documentary resonates with film scholar Stella Bruzzi's definition of the documentary as a performative act "whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming," at the dialectical "juncture between reality and filmmaker" (2006, 9, 10). While Bruzzi's definition implies a level terrain, this juncture has always been lopsided, tilted at the expense of the subject under scrutiny. Therefore, if, as Bruzzi convincingly argues, documentary is performative in the linguistic sense of an illocution that enacts what it describes, we can add that its asymmetry is also performative—that the documentary encounter performs the hierarchies it claims only to document. This is particularly true of media espousing a humanitarian mission such as *Clouds Over Sidra*, because such media are existentially indebted to the hierarchies that they simultaneously depict and perform.

When documentary form began to elaborate the view in the 1920s, it gave rise to a set of discourses about what the documentary is. For John Grierson, who coined the term 'documentary' and famously defined it as "the creative treatment of actuality," documentary was a pedagogical device, a tool of propaganda that could call attention to urgent social issues (2016a and 2016b). After nearly a century of documentary film, the mode has clearly remained committed to this goal. Documentary scholar Brian Winston observes that the Griersonian tradition's favorite subject—the victim—remains a subject of choice in contemporary documentary film and factual television (2016, 763-775). Promising to grant immediacy to distant suffering, VR practitioners have taken up this tradition with enthusiasm. While the mission of 'representing the victim' might seem noble on account of its humanist connotations, Winston is duly suspicious of the exploitative nature of such an encounter, noting that representations of victimhood seldom reduce "the number of victims left in the world as potential subjects" (768). What they do, though, is provide an alibi for looking. They refine the crude voyeurism solicited by the view through the more dignified lenses of educational inquiry and humanitarian care. By invoking these values, documentary discourse authorizes the radical asymmetry of looking at distant suffering.

In her critique of documentary humanitarianism, cultural theorist Pooja Rangan warns that 'emergency thinking' gives rise to a humanitarian mandate that replaces thought and analysis with action and immediacy (2017, 3). Documentaries operating within this mode respond to emergencies with what Rangan calls 'immediations.' This portmanteau of immediate mediation describes audiovisual tropes that deploy a rhetoric of immediacy to perform endangered human life as an unmediated reality. Virtual views such as *Clouds Over Sidra* are immediations of the first order. Motored by a humanitarian drive, they promise unmediated presence and immersion that must paradoxically be achieved through mediation, and they identify this sense of immediacy as the basis of their potential to change the world. While the immediations that Rangan examines are tropes found in certain documentary texts, the very medium of VR seems to be organized around its immediative properties—those so fetishized in its pursuit of total cinema. The medium itself seems to operate according to the logic of immediation insofar as it foregrounds immediacy to promote an illusion of non-mediation.

Media theorists J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin use similar language to Rangan's in theorizing new media's double logic of 'remediation' (2000). Remediation describes the paradox by which a desire for immediacy erases of all signs of mediation, while this remarkable achievement is celebrated through a hypermediacy that emphasizes the medium. This contradictory concept helps to explain how Chris Milk can at once praise VR's elimination of cinematic authorship and proclaim his desire to be the medium's first auteur. Remediation's seemingly irreconcilable logics are in fact codependent, much like how VR's apparent achievement of total cinema—its unmediated access to a complete representation of reality—is paradoxically signaled through an acute awareness of the medium—of mediation—itself. This is where the myth of total cinema and the myth of credulous spectators collide, as discourse around VR celebrates an immediacy that eradicates mediacy while ironically identifying the medium itself as the cause for this celebration. The teleological pursuit of cinema's destiny continues to reiterate the same cyclical myths, chasing a horizon beyond representation while perpetually reinstating the hierarchical looking relations that have constituted cinematic actuality from its origins.

The goals of immediated witnessing are concerning because the subjects of such representations, like the victims Winston discusses, are called upon to prove their own humanity which in the end only reinforces their status as other. Rangan explains that immediations mobilize humanity itself as a "form of documentary proof" (2017, 5). This obsession with humanity as a transcendent category is entirely at odds with the historical specificity at the core of documentary's claim to the real, and from which its political and ethical potential ensue. Milk's refrain of 'deeper empathy, deeper humanity, deeper compassion' summarizes this humanist ethic that erases the historical contexts that make it necessary for individuals to proclaim their humanity in the first place. By creating an effect of unmediated presence, virtual immediations strive to affirm their subjects' transcendent humanity in a manner that obliterates their subjectivities and their histories. This technique relinquishes the critical potentials of both documentary film and cinematic realism—their ability to provide historical context, to invite analysis and contemplation. Instead, these virtual views privilege action over analysis, fetishize empathy over understanding. Deploying a rhetoric of immediacy, they transform response into a supernatural phenomenon, an automated gesture that emanates directly from the medium. This fantasy renders the spectator incidental. It falls into the trap that Gunning identifies by suggesting a credulous spectator's inability to distinguish reality from its immediation—the spectator's total loss of agency before the image's transcendent power.

This is a consequence of VR's peddling of cinematic myths, and is in no way essential to the medium. With the spherical image's irreducible visual excess, and the perceptual realism through which it is apprehended, VR has a unique ability to keep the world's complexities intact, to supply context and to promote analysis. It could situate its subjects in history rather than demanding that they perform an ahistorical humanity. Its semiotic bond to the deictic viewer might be used to emphasize the causal relation between the privileged West and the subjugated Rest. Its representations of abjection could foreground the urgent need to overturn intolerable conditions without presuming to know what those conditions feel like. My hope is that as we continue to experiment with the possibilities offered by this emerging medium, we can stop fetishizing response and think instead about responsibility.

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Endnotes

1   See, for example, Griffiths 2008.
2   For example, see Ramirez 2016; Rosenbaum 2015; Alfred P. Sloan Foundation 2016.