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The Key: Abstraction, Embodiment, and Proper Distance within the Virtual Home

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Abstract: *The emergence of virtual reality (VR) humanitarian filmmaking as a genre over the past ten years has generated a large body of critical debate around the efficacy and ethics of VR as a tool for generating empathy towards marginalised communities. Whilst numerous studies have indicated the potential for VR to impact empathy levels of end users, there have been recurrent critiques of the power dynamics of VR production, as well as the value of empathy as a means of producing social change. Lacking in these discussions has been a detailed consideration of VR aesthetics and the extent to which stylistic strategies impact audience positioning. Through the example of the animated VR experience* The Key *(Celine Tricart, 2019), this article will explore experience design in the context of ethical debates around humanitarian VR. As an interactive, narrative experience that addresses themes of loss and displacement,* The Key *can be productively analysed in relation to both VR ethics and wider cultural understandings of home and belonging. Responding to ethical debates around proximity within immersive experiences, the article will examine aesthetic strategies within* The Key *for ensuring what Roger Silverstone has labelled "proper distance" between the user and the virtually represented space. Through its use of visual abstraction and simplification, as well as the limited physical interaction it affords with its virtual world, the virtual home of* The Key *will be understood as a site of resistance to universalising narratives of home, one which invites critical reflection on the factors that determine our access to shelter.*

The emergence of virtual reality (VR) humanitarian filmmaking as a genre over the past ten years has generated a large body of critical debate around the efficacy and ethics of VR as a tool for generating empathy towards marginalised communities. Whilst numerous studies have indicated the potential for VR to impact empathy levels of end users, there have been recurrent critiques of the power dynamics of VR production as well as the value of empathy as a means of producing social change. To this point, the methodologies applied to the study of VR have largely come from the social sciences, with a focus on viewer testing and the measurement of attitudinal changes. Lacking in these discussions has been a detailed consideration of VR aesthetics and the extent to which stylistic strategies impact audience positioning. The emphasis within scholarly discourse on presence, transparency, and immediacy as the defining features of VR has hindered critical focus on how the viewer's encounter with the immersive world is framed by aesthetic choices.

Through the example of the animated VR experience *The Key* (Celine Tricart, 2019), this article will explore experience design in the context of ethical debates around humanitarian VR. As an interactive, narrative experience that addresses themes of loss and displacement, *The Key* can be productively analysed in relation to both VR ethics and wider cultural understandings of home and belonging. Responding to ethical debates around proximity within immersive experiences, the article will examine aesthetic strategies within *The Key* for ensuring what Roger Silverstone has labelled "proper distance" between the user and the virtually represented space. Through its use of visual abstraction and simplification, as well as the limited physical interaction it affords with its virtual world, the virtual home of *The Key* will be understood as a site of resistance to universalising narratives of home, one which invites critical reflection on the factors that determine our access to shelter.

VR Filmmaking and Empathy

The purchase of virtual headset maker Oculus by Facebook (now Meta) for $2.3 billion in 2014 marked the starting point of what has been labelled "VR 2.0", following on from the technology's previous moment of cultural prominence two decades previously (Nakamura 47). Whilst VR technology first entered popular consciousness in the 1980s and 90s, partly through its appearance in science fiction films such as *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), the state of the hardware available at the time limited its widespread application. Since that time, however, uses of VR technology have multiplied across the fields of gaming, pornography, healthcare, and corporate and military training, as well as in therapeutic treatments for trauma and anxiety. Within the area of documentary production, there has been a marked turn towards immersive forms of filmmaking over the last decade, with the potential for 360-degree film to act as "a witnessing platform" seeing it adopted by filmmakers and organisations seeking to produce social or attitudinal change (Nash 122). In 2015, for example, the UN launched its United Nations Virtual Reality Series with *Clouds Over Sidra* (Chris Milk), a film that locates the viewer within the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan to tell the story of a twelve-year-old Syrian refugee. On the UN website, the film's capacity to enable viewers to "experience life within a refugee camp" is emphasised, as well as the power of VR to generate empathy towards the vulnerable communities who live there ("Syrian Refugee Crisis"). The website goes on to document the efficacy of the film in fundraising efforts for the Syrian crisis, outlining how it was screened at high-level donor meetings across a campaign that ultimately raised 3.8 billion dollars. In making these claims for the film, the publicity material reproduces some of the key assertions that have been made about VR since its re-emergence as a topic of interest within popular and scholarly discourse. In particular, the connections drawn between viewer experience and donor behaviour echo a wider set of claims regarding the potential of VR to produce attitudinal change by immersing viewers within the lived world of its subjects.

Ever since the director of *Clouds Over Sidra*, Chris Milk, acclaimed VR as the "ultimate empathy machine" in a 2015 Ted Talk, both industry discourse and academic studies have repeatedly returned to the potential of immersive film to produce social change by generating empathy towards marginalised communities.[1] In 2016, the Facebook-owned Oculus launched its "VR for Good" initiative, which provided development support for *The Key*, and which aims to "harness the unique capabilities of VR to create human-centric stories that promote empathy and empowerment". In launching the initiative, Oculus referenced *Clouds Over Sidra* as an example of VR's potential to produce social change, emphasising the impact on potential donors of "step[ping] into the life of a young girl" ("Introducing").

It is this "stepping into" that distinguishes the viewer experience within immersive film from traditional documentary practices. As Jamie McRoberts argues, the *raison d'ètre* of VR filmmaking is to provide the audience with a sense of presence within the documentary's setting that is not available within the third-person experience afforded by 2D film or television (101). Chris Milk has described this sense of presence as an eradication of the frame through which television or cinema presents a perspective on another world. As Milk puts it, "I don't want you in the frame, I don't want you in the window, I want you through the window, I want you on the other side." The possibilities for direct, unmediated presence that Milk ascribes to VR exemplify what Mark Andrejevic and Zala Volcic describe as "the fantasy", evident in discourses surrounding the medium, that VR can bring us into a direct relationship with reality, "bypassing the 'language character' […] of representation (303). Here, there is a direct relationship assumed between the embodied immersivity of the VR experience and the capacity to experience the world emotionally and cognitively from the perspective of another. Yet, as

Andrejevic and Volcic go on to insist, in desiring to escape the limitations of framing, such discourse misunderstands frames as obstacles to perception, imagination, and empathy when, in their words, "they are the conditions of possibility for all of these" (307).

In Frames of War, Judith Butler insists on the ethical dimension of framing as a means of making the personhood of others visible to us. Writing on the question of grief, Butler describes framing as an act of power that determines the extent to which we are able to apprehend another's loss as grievable. Here Butler draws a direct connection between the visual framing of the other and our recognition of an ethical duty towards them: "The 'frames' that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot […] not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject" (3). Butler's argument implies that we should understand utopian rhetoric around empathy and presence as denials of the relationships of power that continue to frame our encounters with the other within virtual immersive environments. Instead, we should turn our focus to the visual language and conditions of reception through which VR stages asymmetrical interactions between the physical and virtual worlds.

A critique of the power disparity between viewer and viewed within immersive experiences is offered by Lisa Nakamura, who argues that humanitarian VR documentaries offer a source of pleasurable identification whereby the viewer, in "seeing as" a refugee, a prisoner or some other socially marginalised position is simultaneously immersed in virtue as well as pain through the pleasures of "feeling good about feeling bad". She describes such experiences in terms of a "toxic re-embodiment", in which the undercommons are put to work, "providing empathy content" for the privileged viewer (53). In fact, she argues, it is the suffering of marginalised communities that becomes the unique selling point of immersive film:

> It is precisely because Black teenagers are shot, because transgender people are attacked and left with physical disabilities, and because homeless people suffer violence, fear, and pain that VR creators want to depict their experiences. (56)

This critique has been extended to consider the extent to which empathy itself is complicit in such unequal social relations, with Sonia Childress suggesting that using film to build empathy for marginalised groups works to normalise categories such as whiteness as the lens through which the experiences of such groups are understood and judged. As Eszter Zimanyi and Emma Ben Ayoun have pointed out, the fact that most VR screenings take place in broadly inaccessible spaces such as museums and festivals means that audiences who have access to such experiences tend to be socially and economically privileged, thereby further reinscribing relations of dominance and marginality within the acts of producing and exhibiting immersive film (156). The critique here levelled at VR is one that has been directed at documentary filmmaking more generally, that whilst its affective force may move the viewer to feel concern or outrage, this does not necessarily translate into a structural analysis of the problems described, or, in the words of Jill Godmilow, "the useful self-knowledge required to change anything" (92).

The Home and Improper Distance

If the ethical and ontological debates around VR have centred on its capacity to reproduce the perspective of marginalised others, then the home offers a space within which

the power relations of VR production come forcefully into view. The claims for VR as a gateway into another's lived experience imply the significance of the home as a setting, with many of the humanitarian VR documentaries that have been the focus of critical debate being at least partially set within the subject's domestic space. The house, in the words of phenomenological philosopher Gaston Bachelard, offers privileged access to the "intimate values of inside space" (3), as the site in which we are supposedly most at ease, able to most authentically "be ourselves". Yet, writing on the recurring use of the home as setting in VR documentaries, Nakamura describes the virtual presentation of such spaces as a failure of intimacy, arguing that VR renders all space as public and ensures that for the subjects of such films, "private space does not exist" (57). Regardless of the motivations behind these films' production, she argues that they inevitably invoke a touristic gaze, offering privileged viewers the opportunity to enjoy the intimate site of another's suffering.

The intimacy of the home as a setting allied with the immersivity of the VR experience demands, therefore, that we consider the extent to which virtual reproductions of domestic space facilitate what Roger Silverstone describes as "proper distance". For Silverstone, drawing on Levinas, proximity to the other does not guarantee recognition or responsibility towards her as an autonomous subject, but can equally lead to incorporation, so that the other becomes "indistinguishable from ourselves" (*Media* 172). A proper, or ethical, distance, he writes, is one that preserves separation so that a shared identity with the other is allied with a recognition of her "irreducible difference" ("Proper Distance" 475). Kate Nash explores this quality of proper distance as it operates in humanitarian VR, utilising the work of Lily Chouliaraki to warn against communication practices that collapse the distance between the spectator and the other and thereby reaffirm the privileged viewing subject as the site of meaning (125). The home, in its intimacy and recognisability across cultures, facilitates this collapse of distance by presenting what geographer David Seamon describes as an elemental "at-homeness", a universal quality that transcends any individual configuration of domestic space (90). The home, that is to say, offers a frame through which the other's experience becomes comprehensible and their losses grievable. When we are positioned as viewers in the bedroom of twelve-year-old Sidra in *Clouds Over Sidra* or sit with an Iraqi family as they take their afternoon meal in *Home After War* (Gayatri Parameswaran, 2018), the spaces and experiences resonate as recognisable from our own domestic lives. The home becomes a site of empathy, where the viewer can emotionally connect to the familiar experience of everyday acts. This ensures that when the traumatic histories of these spaces are shared within the VR environment, they are, in Butler's terms, "recognizable" to the viewer as traumas that deserve recognition (6). Yet, as any history of domesticity reveals, far from being a universal experience of belonging, the home is a highly contingent space that exists within a historicised and localised set of social and spatial structures. The ethical imperative governing representations of home, therefore, becomes not the inclusion of the other within existing norms, but, to draw on Butler once again, the consideration of how "existing norms allocate recognition differentially" (6).

Considered in these terms, the challenge for VR producers who utilise the home as a setting is to design an immersive experience that facilitates emotional connection with its subjects whilst requiring the viewer to interrogate the social, economic, and geographical structures that determine the possibilities for belonging. This article will consider the possibilities for new representational aesthetics of the home in VR via an animated immersive experience that deploys domestic space to explore issues of displacement, exclusion, and loss. Specifically, it will argue that the use of abstraction and interaction in *The Key*, an award-winning VR experience released in 2019, disrupts the dynamics of incorporation that Silverstone

warns us of and allows an experience of home to emerge that solicits empathy and identification whilst sustaining proper distance between the viewer and subject. Through the use of abstraction and physical interaction, it will be argued that the virtual home within *The Key* becomes a site of resistance to normalising modes of seeing and understanding the domestic space.

The Key

The Key is a fifteen-minute animated VR, which offers some limited interactive agency to the viewer in its exploration of exile and loss from the perspective of a displaced woman seeking to remember her childhood home. In its original staging at the Tribeca Film Festival, *The Key* offered a room-scale VR experience and involved an immersive theatre element, whereby the user began the experience by entering a room-size installation and interacting with a live actor before wearing a VR headset. The user was told that they would be taken through a series of dreams, gradually revealing the truth of the woman's past. The experience, now available to view on Quest, begins in a washed-out, featureless grey landscape, interrupted only by an animated golden key that floats before us and with which we are invited to interact. As we reach out to grasp the key within our virtual hand, a woman, Ana (voiced by Alia Shawkat), wonders in voiceover as to its significance. As *The Key* progresses, we move through a series of dreamscapes sketched in a simple watercolour palette: dark shapes against luminescent orange backgrounds, looming black monsters, and the aqua blue of an underwater world. We playfully navigate a one-roomed home in the clouds until a storm arrives and the roof and walls disintegrate around us. We find ourselves inside a strange, descending elevator with other huddled, human-like presences. We traipse slowly through a desert-like terrain, part of an unending line of stooped beings that stretches to the horizon. We stand before a form-filled desk, behind which sits a menacing creature, covered in eyes that stare at us inquisitorially. As these dream-like experiences accrue, the truth of this unknown woman's past slowly dawns until, in a final reveal, we return to the house where we began, this time rendered with a jarring realism. We are in the destroyed aftermath of an abandoned home; outside the windows we can see the shattered ruins of buildings and cars. Ana informs us that she finally understands the truth these dreams reveal: she is a refugee and the memento that she carries with her is, like so many other displaced people, the key to her lost home.

Figure 1: A line of stooped figures traipse across a desert-like terrain. *The Key*. Directed by Celine Tricart. Lucid Dreams Productions, 2019.

During its original exhibition, the promotional material around the film made much of the request that viewers not reveal the truth of the woman's past to those who had not yet participated in the experience. The creator of *The Key*, Celine Tricart, has insisted on the importance of Ana's situation remaining a mystery until the latter stages of the experience in order to evade viewer bias and what she labels the audience's "emotional firewalls". As stated, the project was developed as part of the Oculus For Good initiative, in collaboration with a Georgia-based NGO, Friends of Refugees. In designing the experience, Tricart was concerned about the danger of audience fatigue when it came to stories about refugees, caused by a feeling of general helplessness towards their plight. The simplified and stylised aesthetic of the experience, therefore, is intended to elicit empathy by avoiding realistic elements that would locate the people and places encountered in a specific space and time. Instead, the experiences of belonging and loss within the experience take what Tricart describes as "the form of metaphors", anchored in the central spatial metaphor of home. Having been invited at the beginning of the experience to grasp the key and begin our journey, we find ourselves standing within a grey, one-room dwelling that seems to be floating on a platform in the sky, described by Ana as "the house in the clouds". As Ana recounts in voiceover how she dreams of this place often, we catch a glimpse of ourselves in a mirror on the wall: a grey humanoid figure with barely sketched, expressionless white features that mirror our physical movements in the virtual environment. We quickly become aware of a rattling noise that is coming from a mysterious-looking chest standing in the corner. We spring the chest open with our hand, and three glowing, coloured orbs with face-like features, described by Ana as her "little companions", emerge and begin to bob gently around the room. As they do so, the room is gradually filled with colour and light, the muted greens and browns of the furniture illuminated by the glowing red sky outside the window. The setting is revealed as simple but homely: a bed on the floor surrounded by piles of books, rustic wooden beams supporting the ceiling, a series of pictures on the walls that depict humanoid figures, similar to the one we glimpsed in the mirror, alongside the glowing orbs. We are invited to interact with the orbs, to cause them to dance and sing with our virtual caress, their playful responses to our virtual touch causing an instant emotional connection to these tiny animate objects. However, no sooner have we begun to enjoy the beauty of the setting than this dream-like home begins to disintegrate under the force of a coming storm. Books and furniture fly through the open windows as Ana pleads with us to protect her little companions. Regardless of our efforts, we can only hold two of the orbs in our hands and are forced to look on helplessly as the third disappears into a darkening sky. As the walls and roof begin to collapse, we find ourselves thrust back into the desolate, grey landscape where *The Key* began.

Figure 2: Glowing coloured orbs floating within Ana's "house in the clouds".
***The Key*. Lucid Dreams Productions, 2019.**

The aesthetic choices made throughout this sequence seem designed to elicit viewer empathy and engagement through what comic book theorist Scott McCloud describes as a process of "abstraction" (30). Discussing our relationship with images of the face, McCloud argues that when we look at a realistic photograph or drawing of a face, we see it as the face of another, but when we encounter the simplified facial features of a cartoon world, we experience it as an avatar of ourselves (30–37). Such pared-back facial features are one of the key reasons, according to Malou van Rooij, for the audience resonance of Pixar and Dreamwork animated films, which have sustained an expressive, caricatured approach to animating characters even though the technology has overcome the limitations which first necessitated this. Pat Power describes the disparity in 3D animation between those elements that require a high degree of fidelity to act as signs of realism, such as fluid effects, and our "cognitive sensitivity" to the human form, which enables us to recognise humanity in highly abstract or expressive forms (113). As the example of *The Key* demonstrates, all it takes are eye-like indentations and recognisably human responses to stimuli for us to experience a floating orb as an expressive, intentional being. Furthermore, this stripping back of detail in the visual presentation of the face enables what McCloud labels "amplification through simplification" (30), removing what Power describes as the "poor signal-to-noise ratio" of realist imagery (115). In one of the pictures on the wall, we see the blank, oval faces of two adults and a child waving to the camera: simplified, easily recognisable avatars of family. Floating in our home in the clouds, our attention is not distracted by localised markers of identity; its abstractions unsettle the tourist gaze that Nakamura critiques, as we cannot identify the geographical or temporal setting in which we are located. Instead, we become quickly immersed in the felt experience of home and a simple narrative of companionship, protection, and loss.

In a discussion of the rotoscoped feature film *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater, 2001), Power describes how brain imaging on viewers of the film reveals that expressive animated footage is more likely than naturalistic images to activate areas of the brain associated with emotional reward (115). Key to understanding this emotional activation, he argues, is the function of metaphor. Working within the field of neuroesthetics, which studies the neural basis of aesthetic experience, Power describes the "fusion of similarity and difference" at operation in metaphor as rooted in our fundamental biological and neurological capacities for conjoining distinct phenomena (116). Our capacity for metaphor enables us to experience simplified colour, lighting, or motion cues as expressions of complex inner emotions. This sensitivity to the emotional significance of aesthetic cues is heightened, I would argue, within the expressive context of the home. The idea of the home as metaphor is one that has been articulated across multiple discursive fields. Discussing the spatial segregations of the Victorian house, for example, which strictly delineated between public-facing masculine spaces and the more intimate spaces of feminine activity and inhabitation, Leslie K.Weisman describes the home as a "firmly established" metaphor for gender roles at the beginning of the twentieth century (92). The home, meanwhile, has been understood as both the iconic expression of a broader national belonging (Brickell) and as the "primary metaphor" for the concept of autonomous selfhood that emerged from nineteenth-century liberal individualism (Shamir). However, to understand how the setting of the home amplifies the potency of simplified, expressive imagery, it is necessary to consider how the experience of home is itself one based in metaphor, one which comes into being through the fusion of spatial and emotional categories. Home is, in the words of Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, a space in which "physical location and materiality, feelings and ideas, are bound together", a conjoining of different categories of phenomena within the lived experience of the body (254).

This understanding of home as a conjoining of phenomena that finds its lived expression in the body is captured in phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of the home as a spatial attitude that is retained in the body over time:

> My flat is, for me, not a set of closely associated images. It remains a familiar domain round about me only as long as I have "in my arms" or "in my legs" the main distances involved, and as long as from my body intentional threads run out towards it. (150)

The home, for Merleau-Ponty, does not primarily exist as a visual image, but as a set of physical relations that reside within our body as muscle memories: the distance between the bedroom and the staircase, the bathroom light switch that I reach for in the dark. It is in these retained and repeated physical gestures, such as walking a familiar route, that the spatial (relations of proximity and distance) is transformed into the affective ("this is familiar; I am safe"). Gaston Bachelard similarly describes this gestural foundation of home as a physical inscription within our bodies, suggesting that the gestures associated with our earliest domestic experiences remain particularly alive within us, so that, when it comes to the physical relations of our childhood homes, "the feel of the tiniest latch has remained within our hands" (15). Significantly, in an echo of McCloud's claims for the simplified animated face, Bachelard argues that brevity and simplicity of description are the most effective means of emotionally connecting a reader to a literary image of home. "Over-pictueresqueness", he argues, can conceal a home's intimacy by substituting the exactness of description in the present for the evocativeness of a physically recalled past (12–13). In describing too much, he argues, the author prevents the reader from inhabiting the "oneiric" daydream of her own childhood home: the remembered smell of a bedroom, the feel of a creaking floorboard underfoot. The "virtues of shelter", he writes, are so deeply rooted in our unconscious that the briefest of poetic sketches can recall that "passionate liaison of our bodies" with our first, unforgettable home (12, 15).

In a recent revisiting of the debates around VR and empathy production, Gal Raz distinguishes between utopian claims around VR's power to convey the perspective of another, and the more fundamental capacity of the technology to induce the user into a sensorimotor relationship with a virtual body. Making a comparison to the much-cited rubber-hand illusion, Raz argues that the technological affordances of VR can produce an illusion of body ownership towards a virtual avatar through pre-conscious sensorimotor processes. Describing a form of empathetic embodiment that occurs at a "sub-personal level", Raz outlines how semantic, spatial, temporal, and proprioceptive alignments of real and virtual bodies can "*unprecedentedly induce remapping of the user's body onto a virtual agent*" (1463). This has implications for the debates around empathy, he argues, as even if the technology is limited in its capacity to convey the full psychological state of another human, it can facilitate access, even if only partial, to another's experiential world. He offers examples such as *Notes on Blindness* (James Spinney and Peter Middleton, 2016), which reproduces the experience of walking with sight loss, or *Carne y Arena* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2017), a mixed-reality experience, which sensually conveys the physicality of crossing the Mexican–US border, to argue that VR can lay the ground for empathy by sharing "experiential repertoires" between subject and user. It is through such a shared experiential repertoire, those associated with inhabitation and home, that *The Key* invites its users to empathise at a bodily level with the experience of forced displacement and loss.

If, as Raz argues, the capacity of VR to produce empathy or experiential affinity primarily occurs at the sensorimotor level, then the significance of gesture and embodied memory to the experience of home suggests the potential for immersive reality to activate an

emotional engagement with the virtual home. One review of *The Key* pointed to the relative scarcity of opportunities for meaningful physical interaction within the experience, complaining that the user did not have any real agency or opportunity to change the course of the story (Weiss). However, echoing Bachelard, I would argue that it is the simplicity of the physical interactions within *The Key*'s domestic space, as well as the poignancy of not being able to impact the story's outcome, that connects the physical experience of this virtual home to the "virtues of shelter" that we carry as bodily memories. The restricted range of movements available to the user within the home space, who is able to teleport around the main living area using hand controllers but has only visual access to the outside world through two large windows, reinforces the experience of insideness that is visually conveyed through the warm colours and comforting furnishings. Yet, it is the moment in which the house begins to disintegrate under the force of a storm, whilst Ana pleads with us to protect her "little companions", that physical interaction, and specifically the absence of physical agency, becomes a meaningful component of the VR experience and produces the home as an embodied experience of vulnerability and care.

Writing on the question of user agency in participatory media, Janet Murray defines agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (126). As critics such as Sybille Lammes have pointed out, however, this model of agency, evident in much video game play, reproduces colonialist models of spatial mastery, whereby user pleasure emerges from the discovery and ordering of previously unmapped space. This is a mode of user interaction that is clearly inadequate for the experience of forced displacement being communicated with *The Key*, where spaces are repeatedly encountered as incomprehensible and hostile. Instead of producing an experience of mastery, therefore, the limited options of the VR here "served to reinforce the helplessness of the narrative", as another reviewer has described it (Hurler). Specifically, when exhorted by the voiceover to protect the three coloured orbs that we had to this point been interacting playfully with, the user's simple gesture of attempting and failing to gather them into their avatar's arms produces a sensorimotor experience of helplessness that precedes any cognitive process of sense-making. Here the specific affordances of VR produce a physical experience of the failure to provide protection, whilst the simple but evocative domestic space invites us to experience this failure within the context of home and family, and the embodied understanding of those concepts that we carry within us.

Conclusion

Whilst a large body of critical writing has been generated by the surge in humanitarian VR production over the past decade, very little attention has been paid to the representational aesthetics through which immersive experiences frame the user's relationship to the virtual environment. In the recurring debates around the capacity of VR to generate empathy and the ethics of appropriating the lived experience of disenfranchised communities as content, it is important to consider the mode of engagement that specific stylistic approaches invite. Despite the utopian rhetoric of transparency and presence surrounding VR, the user relationship to virtual content continues to be framed by the formal properties of the medium and the director's stylistic choice. It is only through attention to the visual language of humanitarian VR that we can critically assess its success or otherwise in producing "proper distance" between the viewer and the content viewed.

If one of the critiques of VR surrounds the loss of this proper distance when appropriating another's experience as content, then the home would seem to be a representational space in which this risk becomes particularly heightened. The danger in any representation of home is that we make sense of it through our pre-existing understandings of belonging and shelter without reflecting on the ways in which our own relationship to these experiences may differ from those of the communities represented. As Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty assert in a different context, progressive assertions of unity and inclusion have too often involved "adding on difference without leaving the comfort of home" (294). On first consideration, *The Key* might seem to leave itself open to such a charge, given that it deliberately activates the user's pre-existing affective relationship to home as an interpretative frame, without providing any social context within which to make sense of the experience it produces. Through the aesthetic approaches of simplification and abstraction, the home space that we encounter in the virtual environment becomes a universal one, not identifiable in time or space. Yet, as its creator insists, this collapsing of distance between user and experience is a deliberate strategy to prevent the user from emotionally disassociating from the protagonist's narrative of displacement. The voiceover narration explicitly invites us to understand the experience of loss within *The Key* as one that belongs to the protagonist, even if we ourselves feel the bodily anguish of our failed attempts to provide shelter to those we are charged with protecting.

Crucially, *The Key* returns at its conclusion to its emotionally charged space of the home, only this time it is rendered through photogrammetry as a recognisable and specific site of postconflict ruin. If our emotional relationship to the virtual home was activated through its seemingly universal, and preconscious associations with belonging, protection, and loss, we are retrospectively required to make sense of those emotions within the very specific context of violence, war, and displacement. This dynamic of similarity and difference activated in our relationship to the abstract and concrete homes of *The Key* introduce a proper distance, so that we can both recognise a common desire for shelter that we share with the protagonist and understand the possibility of shelter as one determined by wider socio-political forces. In such a way, the virtual home of *The Key* can act as a site of resistance to both universalising narratives of home that erase relations of power and difference and to the touristic gaze of humanitarian VR, which makes a spectacle of the site of another's private suffering.

Note

[1] In their meta-analysis, Martingano et al. identified 130 articles that considered the relationship between VR and empathy. In 2020, the *Journal of Visual Culture* ran a special issue on "Virtual Reality, Immersion and Empathy" (Belisle and Roquet).

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