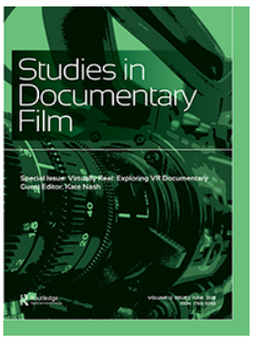

Studies in Documentary Film

ISSN: 1750-3280 (Print) 1750-3299 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsdf20

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To cite this article: Kate Nash (2018) Virtual reality witness: exploring the ethics of mediated presence, Studies in Documentary Film, 12:2, 119-131, DOI: 10.1080/17503280.2017.1340796

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2017.1340796

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STUDIES IN DOCUMENTARY FILM
2018, VOL. 12, NO. 2, 119–131
https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2017.1340796

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Virtual reality witness: exploring the ethics of mediated presence

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ABSTRACT

The notion of immersive witness underpins much of the exploration of virtual reality (VR) by journalists and humanitarian organisations. Immersive witness links the experience of VR with a moral attitude of responsibility for distant others. In accounts of media witness, the ability of the media to sustain an experience of presence has played an important, albeit often implicit, role linking the spectator spatially and temporally to distant suffering. However, the concept of media witness has to date assumed that the media represent, that news stories and documentaries present to their audiences images and sounds that communicate *something of an event*. VR, in contrast, seeks to simulate, providing the audience with *something of an experience* that is linked in various ways to the experiences of others. It is this simulative function that is seen as fundamental to VR's moral address. This paper explores the moral potential of VR suggesting that while there is much to recommend VR as a platform for humanitarian communication there is an inherent moral risk attached: the risk of improper distance. The United Nation's VR work serves as a case study for exploring VR's moral potential and the risk of improper distance.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 12 February 2017
Accepted 7 June 2017

KEYWORDS
Virtual reality; humanitarian communication; ethics; proper distance; empathy

In his 2015 TED talk titled 'How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine', Entrepreneur and Immersive artist Chris Milk described the UN's virtual reality (VR) project *Clouds over Sidra* in the following terms:

> You're not watching through a screen, you're sitting there with her [Sidra, the principal character of the documentary]. You're sitting on the same ground she is sitting on, and because of that you feel her humanity in a deeper way; you empathise with her in a deeper way.

VR, he argues, is an experiential medium that by virtue of its ability to immerse the user in a different environment profoundly changes their response to the testimony of the other. On one level Milk's claims might be dismissed as techno-hype, but the potential for VR to produce forms of 'immersive witnessing' (Gregory 2016) is currently driving production in both humanitarian and journalistic contexts. As Gregory (2016) argues, the capacity for embodiment and first-person experience, feeling as though you are someone or somewhere else, is seen to be particularly productive of a moral response grounded in empathy, understood as the ability to put oneself 'in the shoes of another'. While our

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current social 'obsession' with empathy has drawn criticism (Pedwell 2014) a belief in the connection between immersion, empathy and a moral orientation towards distant others is fundamental to much VR production.

Immersive witnessing links claims about VR with media witnessing as a framework for conceptualising morality in the relationship between spectator and distant other (Frosh and Pinchevski 2011). In accounts of media witness, the ability of the media technologies to sustain an experience of presence has played an important, albeit often implicit role, linking the spectator spatially and temporally to distant suffering. In their ability to present audiences with 'something of the event' in ways that carry an 'imprint of reality' (Ellis 2012, 128) media technologies are thought to facilitate an attitude of responsibility. In contrast, VR witnessing is tied to its ability to simulate *something of the subjective experience* of the other for an audience.

In this paper, I suggest that the moral potential of VR is best explained in terms of its ability to promote an imaginative transportation to another time and/or place, 'an "as if" of imaginative world-making' (Frosh 2011, 59). However, I suggest that this ability comes with an inherent moral risk: the risk of 'improper distance' in which the other becomes 'indistinguishable from ourselves' (Silverstone 2007, 172). Drawing on the work of Lily Chouliaraki (2013, 2011) this risk can be described as a form of ironic morality in which 'truths about ourselves' are elevated above the experiences of others (2011, 373). I suggest that VR's ability to foster a moral response to distant others is neither impossible nor guaranteed, rather that it depends on the way that VR experiences are designed. The United Nations' growing VR output, which represents one of the most sustained programmes oriented towards 'immersive witness' will serve as a case study for an exploration of the risk of improper distance.

Media witness and media technology

The concept of witnessing has currency across a range of disciplines and contexts. In relation to the media, it has referred simultaneously to the 'appearance of witnesses in media reports, the possibility of the media themselves bearing witness, and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events' (Frosh and Pinchevski 2011, 1). In thinking about VR and the possibility of immersive witnessing it is largely the latter sense of witness that is at stake, the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events, or witnessing t*hrough* the media. Witnessing through the media brings to the fore questions about audiences' moral responses to the events they encounter through various forms of mediation.

Witnessing as a moral response to media content has been variously conceptualised. Ellis (2000, 2012) regards the experience of witness as mundane, with the mass media routinely placing viewers in a position of both complicity and powerlessness with respect to what they see. We 'cannot say we didn't know', he argues, but at the same time, the impossibility of action leaves us with only 'an aching sense that something must be done' (Ellis 2000, 11). Audiences occupy a position of detached observation and judgement because of the simultaneous proximity and distance established by the mass media. For scholars focusing on images of suffering, the content of media representation assumes a greater significance and the attitude of witness is seen as demanding something more than a sense of responsibility (although this remains foundational). Varying degrees

of (public) response-ability (Tait 2011), a willingness to respond in some way to images of suffering is seen as fundamental to witnessing. Zelizer (1998, 10) argues that images of atrocity demand an act of 'bearing witness' in which the significance of the events is acknowledged through a collective 'paying heed'. Further, witness involves an assumption of responsibility that she conceptualises, following Sontag (2003, 86), as reflection on 'how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering'. Tait (2011) draws on Boltanski (2004) to conceptualise response-ability as a form of empathetic articulation, an act of speaking about what has been seen. Chouliaraki (2006, 30) similarly picks up on Boltanski's notion of a 'whisper in their own minds' as a minimal moral requirement for a public ethical life to suggest that in thinking about moral responses to images of suffering it is necessary to take into account the mundane acts through which the reality of suffering is acknowledged as something that deserves to be seen and heard by others.

In the context of documentary moral response-ability has been particularly important, frequently serving as a justification for representation (Rabinowitz 1994). With 'poor, suffering characters' (Winston 1988) staple subjects of documentary representation, the audience's potential for responsive action has been morally necessary. Without such justification, Sontag (2003, 34) argues, we are inevitably situated as 'voyeurs whether or not we mean to be'. To see audio–visual media as documentary, is to experience the 'ethical charge of the real'; to feel physically, emotionally, and morally tied to what is seen and heard (Sobchack 2004, 258). However, a moral response to the suffering others encountered through documentary cannot be assumed. As Cowie (1999, 30–31) has argued, audiences may choose to identify with the social actors presented in documentary, although they may also feel a sadistic pleasure in 'not being the social actor presented'. Empirical studies of audience responses to media content including documentary (Kyriakidou 2015; Scott 2014) point to complexity with evidence of compassion, indifference, resistance, voyeurism, and enjoyment of the spectacle. The experience of witness as moral response-ability is necessarily fragile.

Media technologies have loomed large in debates about witnessing through the media. There has been a concern to understand the 'moral affordances' (Frosh 2016, 4) of various media technologies. Chouliaraki (2006) has noted that debates about the moral potential of media technologies tend towards polarisation. Optimistic accounts of the role of technology in producing an attitude of witness foreground the ability of the media to bridge the spatial and temporal distance between audiences and others. More pessimistic accounts focus on the limitations of technology (television in particular) in mediating human sensation, its anaesthetizing effects and the distance that separates the zone of suffering from the viewer's zone of safety.

At stake in debates about audience response is the media's ability to produce a sense of 'liveness immediacy and co-presence' (Frosh 2011, 52) in other words, presence. The experience of mediated presence, understood as the sensation of 'being there' in a mediated environment (Steuer 1992) or, alternatively, the 'perceptual illusion of non-mediation' (Lombard and Ditton 1997), has been an important, if often implicit, concept in accounts of media witness. In spite of his own scepticism about the possibility of mediated witness Peters' (2001/2011) seminal article on witnessing provides a way of understanding the significance of presence. For Peters 'being there' constitutes the paradigm case of witnessing. Being there matters, he suggests, because it is precisely the experience of physical and temporal proximity to an event that both attests to its veracity and

calls for active response rather than contemplation. An attitude of moral responsibility becomes more difficult to sustain the more distant people are to the event in time and space. Media audiences, who in the case of documentary are generally distant in both time and space, are therefore at the farthest remove from the position of witness.

Peters' argument for the importance of 'being there' is a response to Ellis (2000) for whom presence is understood as a technical achievement of the electronic media. For Ellis, the primary characteristic of the electronic media is its 'super-abundance of information' (2000, 12). The ability to see in the image not just what the camera sought to capture, but a million other 'incidentals of life' (2000, 20), creates an illusion of non-mediation. This illusion allows media audiences to experience 'something of the event' and be addressed by the 'imprint of reality' (Ellis 2012, 128) and it is this illusion that provides a foundation for both knowledge and motivation. Where Peters is focused on the fragility of an event reduced to discourse, Ellis' focus is on the referential excess of the image and the force of the illusion of spatial and/or temporal connection to what is seen.

The experience of presence remains central to conceptualising witnessing through digital media. In one of the few studies of digital witness Frosh (2016) considers the interface in terms of its potential to foster a response to Holocaust testimony. He proposes an ethic of kinaesthetics, highlighting the way in which a moral response to distant others might be enacted in the habitual and volitional gestures that characterise our engagement with digital interfaces. While Frosh notes that tendency of digital interfaces to disperse attention, he also draws attention to the potential for a haptic engagement with virtual objects which, he suggests, may foster relationships of connection to what is seen as well as foster forms of public action. While VR as a platform offers moral affordances that differ from the kinds of digital interfaces described by Frosh, his analysis points to the potential emergence of new forms of presence that have implications for our moral response to distant others.

From representation to simulation: the moral affordances of VR

The significance of presence for producing an attitude of witness suggests the value of VR as a witnessing platform. VR is a medium that has been defined, at least in part, by its ability to produce an experience of presence (Steuer 1992). It is a medium designed, as Bolter and Grusin (2000, 21) argue, to disappear. The 'superabundance of information' described by Ellis now surrounds the user and the ability to control their own visual exploration adds a layer of interactivity that further supports the illusion of non-mediation. The result is a strong experience of spatial presence frequently described as a form of 'place illusion' (Slater cited in Popat 2016, 368; see also de la Peña et al. 2010) the 'strong illusion of being in a place in spite of the sure knowledge that you are not there'. As Popat (2016) has shown, place illusion in VR is produced through a foregrounding of embodied engagement. Proprioception, an innate awareness of embodiment, works in VR to foreground the corporeality of space, blurring the relationship between the virtual and physical even to the extent of producing a rush of adrenalin in response to perceived danger (see also Bolter and Grusin 2000, 164–165). This heightened sense of embodied response to VR, including the illusion of physical vulnerability, addresses Peters'

claim that 'being there' produces a moral response by virtue, at least in part, of the fact that it carries inherent risk.

In taking account of the moral affordances of VR, however, it is crucial to acknowledge the shift from representation and simulation. While accounts of media witness to date have assumed that the media represent events, VR is very often described as a medium of simulation rather than representation (Gunkel 2000; Manovich 2001) with this shift seen as fundamental to VR's moral force. For the purposes of this analysis, simulation indicates a shift in the relationship between image and reality productive of distinct semiotic relationships and rhetorical possibilities (Frasca 2003; Giddings 2007). Manovich's (2001, 183) account of spatial simulation in which the scale of the representation matches that of the world such that forms of spatial exploration are foregrounded and the boundary between real and unreal is blurred is relevant. Similarly, Frasca's (2003, 223) definition of simulation as 'the modelling of a (source) system through a different system, which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviours of the original system' is helpful in conceptualising the first-person address of VR simulation. Baudrillard's (1983) description of simulation as productive is also helpful in this regard. The person who simulates an illness experiences symptoms such that it becomes impossible to describe the 'illness' as either true or false. Thinking about simulation in the context of factual media such as documentary it might be described as a move toward subjunctive representation (Wolf 1999) or an 'if.. then' communicative structure (Elsaesser 2014), a shift in focus from what *is* to what *might be* that can be situated within documentary's prosthetic project (Giddings 2007).

The moral force of VR is strongly attached to its ability to simulate. In VR the user experiences a fundamental freedom to explore the virtual world and in this operational freedom Bolter and Grusin (2000, 224) locate VR's moral potential. The ability of the user to explore different viewing positions, they suggest, epitomises an attitude of cultural relativism with its inherent challenge to singular or privileged viewing positions. Occupying another's point of view, for Bolter and Grusin, becomes a way to experience 'what it is like' to be another and it is this that provides a foundation for moral engagement. Imaginatively occupying the other's position, the user comes to understand that her position is only one among many and that she is immersed in the world rather than separate from it. In describing the experience of situated viewing Bolter and Grusin (2000, 166) argue that VR allows us to put on 'new selves' as we take on new visual perspectives. In this way, they suggest we can imagine 'what it is like' to 'be a gorilla, a dinosaur, a molecule'. VR invites the exploration of alternative possibilities, even at times inviting the user to 'do' the impossible (Popat 2016) and for this reason is 'necessarily hard-wired into politics' (Gunkel 2000, 58).

How then can VR as simulation be aligned with accounts of witnessing through the media? One way in which to approach this question is through Frosh's (2011) account of the way that witnessing texts 'work'. In engaging the debate between Ellis and Peters and the question of the possibility of witnessing through the media, Frosh makes the case for approaching the question from 'the wrong end', looking at witnessing as a communicative achievement and then investigating its production in the relationship between the audience and witnessing text. Using the Passover Haggadah and its performance, Frosh suggests that a characteristic of witnessing texts is their production of imagined worlds. Technically and textually, witnessing texts produce for the audience a sense of

presence at the scene of the event that includes fostering an imaginative involvement with the events depicted. Witnessing texts produce an 'as if' mode of engagement a transportation to the scene of suffering through the experience of presence. The 'if.. then' communicative structures of simulation (Elsaesser 2014) align closely with Frosh's 'as if' of the witnessing text. The ability of VR as simulation to foreground imaginative transformation, particularly forms of 'as if' engagement with distant others suggests its particular value as a witnessing platform. Like the Haggadah, VR 'texts' address the audience as an actor in the space of the event, demanding a performative response. The illusion of spatial presence, achieved through immersion and interactivity, together with the embodied response that VR provokes can serve to emphasise audiences' sense of involvement with events. As a form of first-person experience, VR foregrounds forms of direct address (through looks to camera, gestures) and experience that are well aligned with the kind of textual features Frosh identifies as productive of an attitude of witness.

The risk of 'improper distance'

While VR seems to have particular promise as a witnessing medium, I suggest that as a simulative platform it carries an inherent moral risk: the risk of improper distance. In his account of witnessing texts Frosh argues (2011, 59) that the '"as if" of the witnessing text does not ask participants to suspend or "bracket" their sense of spatial and temporal distance from the depicted world. Rather, it enjoins them to 'split themselves in two'. This split places the audience simultaneously in a performative moment of textual engagement and transportation to the space-time of the event. This 'split' calls on the viewer to imagine themselves in the place of another while also retaining a sense of the 'I' that is not the other. In entering into the projected world of the media text 'one is transported in the abstract, as "he" [sic] rather than as "I"', it is an imaginative engagement in the third person that is grounded in a sense of the distance between experience and reality.

The possibility of mediated witness is grounded in the media's ability to produce *both* presence and distance. As Ellis (2012, 129) argues, to recognise distant others as persons involves both proximity and distance; 'the imaginative attempt to feel what they are feeling and the simultaneous knowledge that they are them and we are us'. The attitude of witness requires both empathy and analysis, if empathy points to an affective response grounded in an imaginative engagement with the experience of the other, analysis calls for a more distanced relationship that recognises the distinctiveness of self and other. Silverstone's (2007) notion of 'proper distance' directly informs Ellis' concept of witness and closely aligns with Frosh's account of the relationship between the viewer and the mediated 'world'. Silverstone (2007, 47) argues that the challenge of fostering moral relationships through the media is one of understanding how much proximity is necessary to foster a duty of care, obligation, and responsibility without subsuming the alterity of the other. He highlights the twin moral risks attached to mediation: on the one hand, a tendency to foreground difference and otherness, focusing on the spectacular and thereby precluding connection and identification; on the other 'the elision of the different to the same' that erases the irreducibility of otherness. Proper distance is an attempt to draw attention both to the importance of the media's ability to foster a sense

of proximity but also the need to contextualise the suffering of others and recognising the distance between us.

In contrast to proper distance Chouliaraki (2011) defines improper distance as practices of communication that subordinate the voices of distant others to those of the West while distancing the Western spectator from their own position of privilege. The voice of the other is marginalised in favour of our own 'narcissistic self-communications' (2011, 368). Across several media fields, Chouliaraki demonstrates how this shift plays out to produce a form of 'ironic' morality in which it is the experience of the self, the Western subject/spectator, that provides a foundation for moral response rather than the situation of the other. It is our own private truths that motivate, justifying action (Chouliaraki 2011, 364). Central to this shift is a collapse in the distance between the spectator and other in which the latter's own emotional experience is foregrounded. Chouliaraki has elsewhere argued (2006, 23) that although empathy is important for a moral public life, there is also a need for distance to prevent a decent into narcissistic emotion.

VR runs the risk of producing improper distance and an ironic mode of moral engagement when it invites forms of self-focus and self-projection rather than a more distanced position that allows for recognition of distance between the self and other. Schulzke (2013) provides an illustration of this form of 'improper distance' in the context of simulation games about terrorism. In spite of the radical potential inherent in the idea of 'playing' a simulation game from the perspective of a terrorist, seeing events from the terrorist's point of view, Schulzke found that most games fostered forms of self-projection that serve the double ideological function of subsuming a terrorist subjectivity while appearing not to do so. His analysis suggests that occupying the point of view of another is no guarantee of moral engagement since there are many ways in which to occupy this position.

While presence has the potential to stimulate the moral imagination, as the proponents of VR witness suggest, it also has the potential to undermine a moral orientation insofar as it works to obscure the distance between the spectator and other and, in doing so, fails to provide sufficient resources to allow the user to judge the predicament of the other. VR further tends toward improper distance where it presents distant spaces and others in an aesthetic mode, inviting a contemplation of the scene as a tableau vivant or spectacle rather than a painful reality (Chouliaraki 2011). Proper distance calls for a combination of proximity and distance; proximity enough to appreciate the reality of the other's situation but also sufficient distance such that the viewer is able to move from a focus on their own affective response to form a view as to why a particular instance of suffering matters and what is to be done about it (Chouliaraki 2006, 221).

In the remainder of this paper, I will consider what proper distance might mean in the context of VR. Taking the VR experience as a visual, spatial, and auditory whole, the following analysis aims to capture the ways in which VR mediates proximity and distance in the relationship between the viewer and the other. How does the experience of presence contribute to a sense of being with another in all its intensity and immediacy and how is this experience made morally meaningful? How does presence contribute to making the other's experience of suffering a reality for the VR user? And importantly how is the VR experience contextualised so as to maintain the analytic dimension of media witnessing?

United Nations VR

The UN's VR work is co-ordinated by the Sustainable Development Goal Action Campaign and is oriented towards 'bring the world's most pressing challenges home to decision-makers and global citizens' (United Nations, VR Blog). An extension of its mandate to bring the voices of the marginalised into decision making the UN's VR project can be understood as an attempt to produce forms of 'strategic witnessing' (Ristovska 2016) that target key decision-makers as well as the general public to further organisational goals. It can also be understood as a response to increasing competition in the humanitarian sphere. It is no accident, as William Uricchio (2016) has noted, that VR has inspired such enthusiasm at a time when the competition for attention is particularly acute. The ability to command sustained focus, and ideally engagement, with the UN's organisational message for 7 minutes (the average duration of the UN's VR works), not to mention the value to be gleaned from media coverage of the UN's VR programme is obvious.

At the time of writing the UN has produced six VR experiences, all using immersive video: *Ground Beneath Her* and *First Response Nepal* on the 2015 Nepali earthquake; *Waves of Grace* on the 2014 outbreak of Ebola in Liberia; *Clouds over Sidra* on the plight of Syrian refugees in the Za'atari Refugee Camp; *My Mother's Wing* which tells the story of a Palestinian woman who lost two sons in an Israeli airstrike on a school in 2014; *Beyond the Lake*, a woman fleeing violence in Burundi (this project was removed from the UNVR gear app in January 2017 and could not be included in this analysis). The projects can be accessed via smartphone, head mounted display or as 360-degree video online. The following analysis is based on the UN Gear VR app, which provides a branded interface for interacting with the VR projects. On entering the app the viewer is surrounded by UN branding and the slogan 'from empathy to action' together with the hashtag #UNVR. A 'take action' link provides an opportunity to engage with a Canadian refugee organisation.

The UN's VR pieces are, with one exception, character driven telling the story of a woman or child caught up in a humanitarian crisis. The UN describes the works as building empathy by allowing the audience 'to be part of someone else's story' (United Nations VR blog, VR + Education). As this suggests, the works do not simulate the other's experience or aim to put the user in their shoes directly. Rather, they simulate an encounter, a meeting with the other. In this regard, the UN's use of VR reflects a broader logic in humanitarian communication in which distant others, cast as 'deserving' victims in humanitarian communication (Dogra 2011) and are constructed as intimates that the Western spectator is encouraged to think about as 'friends'. Humanitarian communication typically seeks to create a feeling of 'being there', with the other in a kind of intimate exchange (Orgad and Seu 2014). This is achieved through a simulated transportation to the physical space of the other (spatial presence) and a simulated exchange (co-presence).

Central to each of the UN's works is an attempt to foster an imaginative transportation to the physical space of the subject. *Clouds over* Sidra, for example, takes the form of a 'guided tour' of the Za'atari refugee camp. The opening scene places the user at the centre of a vast desert landscape. As Sidra talks of walking 'for days crossing the desert into Jordan', a connection is made between her journey and the imaginative journey of

the VR experience. The 'tour' consists of a total of 15 scenes that allow the user to experience different physical spaces within the camp: school, gym, bakery, computer room, wrestling class and various outside locations. Similarly, *My Mother's Wing* opens with a sequence of shots that are intended to establish the spatial reality of the Gaza Strip, bounded by the Israel-Gaza barrier on one side and the Mediterranean Sea on the other. There is also an emphasis on domestic spaces – kitchen, rooftop laundry, car, and living room – using immersive video to create the illusion that the user is 'visiting' the main character Om Osama.

The works privilege the visual exploration of space and the illusion of spatial presence. They favour wide shots with a point of view at or just above eye level, an aesthetic that mimics the tourist gaze. While each individual shot is relatively long when compared to film or television images (from 11 to nearly 37 seconds with most between 18 and 20 seconds long) the nature of VR as an invitation to visually explore a 360-degree environment has the effect of producing a sense of urgency to take it all in, a kind of 'whistle-stop tour'. While a number of the landscape shots, in particular, might be seen as an invitation to engage aesthetically with the spaces of suffering there is also an argument to be made for the power of spatial presence as a way of communicating the scale of the humanitarian disaster. The 'sea' of tents that closes *Clouds over Sidra* or an extensive cemetery with wooden crosses stretching into the distance featured in *Waves of Grace*. As Chouliaraki (2006) has argued there is a particular moral value in media reports that render the scene of suffering as a concrete lived reality for those caught up in such situations.

As works that aim to simulate an encounter with another, social presence defined as the illusion of 'being there' with another (Lee 2004) is critical. The works aim to produce the illusion of social presence in several ways. A key way is through forms of direct address such as looks to camera. Generally avoided in film and television production the look to camera is a staple feature in the UN's VR work. The user is often situated as though in the midst of a group of people (children in the case of *Waves of Grace* and *Clouds over Sidra*). Where the look to camera has been traditionally understood in terms of its intrusion into the privileged experience of viewing, confronting the user 'in his or her looking' (Cowie 1999, 27) in VR this disruption is critical to fostering place illusion and social presence.

The Ground Beneath Her, one of the most recent projects is notable in terms of direct address. It is a predominantly 'observational' piece in which the user is positioned primarily as a bystander watching the subject Sabita as she goes about her daily work of rebuilding following the Nepal earthquake of 2015. There is only one moment of direct address in which Sabita looks to camera and reaches out as though to offer the user a flower. This gesture has the effect of brining the viewer into the space, positioning Sabita as someone with whom the user is engaging. However, it is worth noting that this direct gestural address coincides with Sabita's articulation of her hopes for the future. Her gesture is therefore tied to this hopeful discourse, with the user implicitly addressed as a benefactor. The VR experience, and particular the gesture of direct address, can be understood as a remediation of NGO communication in VR. It positions Sabita as a 'worthy victim' and heroic survivor and through her gesture reinforces the position of the Western audience as benefactor (Dogra 2011). This positioning is based in on social presence, the sense of being addressed directly by the VR subject.

Another key technique for fostering social presence in the UN's VR work is to include a scene in which the subject/victim and the viewer are positioned as though seated together on the ground with the former presenting their testimony. In *Clouds*, Sidra introduces herself directly addressing the camera/user. The latter is positioned as though sitting on the floor of the family tent across from Sidra. The ideal of sitting on the floor with the beneficiary of humanitarian aid is a key way that NGOs think about the encounter they want to create between donors and beneficiaries (Orgad and Seu 2014) an ideal that is clearly informing the UN's VR work. *My Mother's Wing* includes a similar scene in which the user is positioned as though in conversation with Om Osama, sitting on the floor. Coming at the emotional high point of the experience Om addresses her two lost sons and at the same time, although indirectly, she addresses the VR user providing a form of testimony. These scenes might be seen as having significant moral potential in that they simulate a face-to-face encounter with the other, calling on the VR user to hear the other speak in her own words as a witness.

However, I suggest that they provide a good example of the risk of improper distance in these works. In these moments of simulated face-to-face encounter, the user is also being invited to explore a new space. There is an inherent tension between attention to the other and the experience of transportation. The effect is to encourage a profound turning away from the speaking subject. The user's attention is divided but more than that, the physical turning away that visual exploration demands is profoundly at odds with the moral demand of the face-to-face encounter. There is a risk of improper distance insofar as the user prioritises their own experience of transportation and exploration (spatial presence) over engagement with the testimony of the other. Similarly, insofar as the user focuses on their experience of transportation as indicative of 'what it is like' to be in the space of suffering it is possible to speak of improper distance.

Another form of 'turning away' from the subject may be produced by the uncanny experience of proximity in VR. Where the close-up of the face in film and television has been seen as key to our emotional engagement with the other (MacDougall 1998, 51) this becomes more complex in VR. *Waves of Grace* includes a number of scenes that bring the user into a closer relationship with its main character Decontee Davis. Towards the end of the experience, Decontee stands on a beach looking out to sea and the user is located as though standing right next to her as she starts to cry. At 37 seconds it is one of the longest VR scenes in any of the UN's productions giving the user the potential to focus on Decontee in her grief. The experience of being located next to Decontee as she becomes visibly emotional is quite disturbing in its combination of physical proximity and emotion. Unrecognised and unable to offer consolation the user experience becomes uncanny, not unlike the so-called 'uncanny valley' that plagues user engagement with life-like computer generated characters (see e.g. Tinwell et al. 2011). The potential for discomfort in the experience of proximity, again in conjunction with an invitation to experience the splendour of a beach at sunset, has the potential to encourage users to enact a turning away based on the user's focus on their own emotional response. Insofar as it is the user's own emotional response that is their focus of attention such a response might be described as a form of improper distance.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have sought both to draw attention to the moral affordances of VR but also to argue that, as with other media technologies, VR can produce various forms of response to distant others. In particular, I have highlighted what I see as an important moral risk associated with VR by virtue of the fact that it is often deployed as a platform of simulation rather than representation. While much has been written about the moral value of occupying the other's point of view, it is also necessary to draw attention to the potential for a loss of perspective, an improper distance in which the experience of 'being in' VR, a narcissistic reflection on one's own experience, becomes the foundation for moral response.

The argument I have advanced here is conceptual; I have sought primarily to begin an exploration of the intersection between accounts of witness as a mode of audience engagement with media content and a growing body of work on VR. If VR experiences are to work as 'witnessing texts', as Frosh (2011) has argued, they do so by fostering forms of imaginative engagement with other worlds. The risk of improper distance serves as to highlight the need to contextualise the immersive experience so that audiences are supported to link their affective responses to debate about social and political issues, the significance of others' suffering and the viewers' implication/response. It is worth noting here the extent to which the deployment of VR as a platform for immersive witness rehearses neo-liberal shifts in humanitarian communication in which individual feeling becomes the focus for intervention rather than structural inequalities and political exclusions (Rose 2016). This way of thinking about moral response and VR has the potential to foster projects that focus on a maximisation of emotional response through forms of improper distance. The view of VR as a machine for the production of empathy epitomises this narrow and ultimately troubling vision of moral responsiveness.

We know little about the VR audience and the extent to which they may be moved to respond to the UN's work on the basis of self or other-oriented feeling. I have noted in the witnessing literature an awareness that scenes of suffering are productive of a wide variety of audience responses, from those of taking moral responsibility to forms of indifference. While those involved in the field of immersive witnessing, including the UN, point to crying spectators and increased donations, this tells us little about what is going on for spectators and nothing at all about their moral orientation towards the others whose stories they have encountered. The most sustained audience research to date has been that conducted by de la Peña et al. (2010) who does suggest that the experience of VR is one of both proximity and distance, a simultaneous sense of being in a space but also not. How this maps to moral response and the extent to which it is widely true of VR spectatorship will be important questions for future scholarship.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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