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VR on the film festival circuit: IDFA & IFFR 2017-2019

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In this review I discuss the recent embracement of VR by film festivals. In less than a half a decade VR emerged as a central phenomenon in the global film festival circuit, turning from a technological gadget in its initial development stages to a prominent visual exhibition form. In 2014, only few film festivals were exhibiting VR as part of their regular programming. VR was a novel technology still underdeveloped, presented mainly in professional conferences examining its function through technological perspectives. [1] By 2020, however, the festival submission platform *FilmFreeway* listed no less than 1,249 festivals that include VR in their programs. [2] By the same year, most of the major festivals, including the three leading ones – Cannes, Berlinale, Venice – have not merely incorporated VR but also have presented extensive programmes, events, and conferences focusing in the medium. [3] The fact that all three major festivals, as well as leading festivals which followed, have acknowledged VR in such capacity and velocity can indicate that VR has managed to infiltrate the festival circuit as a phenomenon bound to set a deep impact on the scene. [4]

How do film festivals program VR? And what types of VR-experiences are afforded by virtue of their exhibition at festivals? I will address these questions by looking at VR's inclusion at IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival) and IFFR (International Film Festival Rotterdam), two of the leading Dutch film festivals, highly influential both in the Netherlands and in the international film festival circuit. While IFFR features various genres and mediums, its focus primarily lies with fiction and new works by emerging talents. IDFA screens documentaries exclusively, with a diverse and wide program. Both festivals hold a keen eye for cultural trends and technological innovations. Their central position, and the fact they each include a different

focal point, can thus provide insight not only into how these festivals are currently incorporating VR but also into the ways in which other festivals will further follow and operate.

Despite its rapidly growing availability VR is still a novel medium to many, including professionals. As a commodified product, VR headsets are still not very accessible due to their high costs, and their domestic use is focused on games rather than ‘cinematic’ content. This presents an opportunity for film festivals to offer unique experiences simply through the provision of access to VR. Loren Hammonds, programmer of Tribeca Film Festival’s section for interactive media, highlights the advantage for festivals:

We don’t have the Netflix ‘problem’ yet of losing audiences to their living rooms, mostly because the majority of people haven’t adopted headsets for at-home usage yet. What we’re offering are premium experiences that simply can’t be duplicated at home. [5]

Approaches to VR programming

IDFA and IFFR each take a different approach to programming VR that matches their vision as well as their position on the international festival circuit. IDFA is the largest documentary film festival in the world. [6] The festival presents VR as part of DocLab, its extensive seven-day programme for new media and interactive media. As one of the first distinct curated programmes introduced by a film festival for digital media, DocLab has aimed to position itself as a leading event for innovative digital media since its establishment in 2007. [7] While DocLab includes a diverse new media program spreading further than VR, the medium still occupies a substantial part of its annual editions. [8] IDFA was then one of the first festivals to exhibit VR using the Oculus Rift headset in 2014. [9] The festival’s pioneering inclusion of VR aligns well with DocLab’s aims – ‘[to] showcase ... new digital art-forms that successfully push the boundaries of documentary storytelling in the age of the interface’. [10] This frames the interest of DocLab in VR as a novel phenomenon as a core element of its mission to present technological and cinematic innovations.

Caspar Sonnen, head of DocLab, states:

I think last year [2017] was peak VR ... it’s just the thing that everybody sees or looks for ... over the last two years, in the new media space, we have been slightly unable to keep our eyes off VR ... Is this balloon going to grow? Will it pop? [11]

This view is symptomatic to VR as a great deal of the discussion and ‘hype’ surrounding it still relates to its potential and premise – ‘what it will be able to do’, rather than its current function. In Sonnen’s words, we can recognise the allure VR holds as a new phenomenon, an experience that is not yet understandable and that drives a curiosity of both the audience and the professional industry. It is based less on the content or the aesthetic qualities of VR films and more on the opportunity for the audience to witness and experience the new medium in action. The fascination with VR’s ‘innovativeness’ echoes what Tom Gunning, in his influential study of early cinema, has called ‘the cinema of attractions’. Gunning highlights the exhibitionist character that was present in early cinema, as a technological attraction of one that ‘shows views’ instead of ‘telling stories.’ [12] ‘Early audiences went to the exhibition to see machines demonstrated (the newest technological wonder [...]), rather than to view the films.’ [13] DocLab is indicative of the curiosity of festivals for VR as a novelty. It represents festivals’ fundamental interest in new phenomena and innovation, what Thomas Elsaesser calls ‘the obsession with new-ness’. [14]

IFFR is one of the largest festivals in the world, offering a program of over 500 films every year, attracting more than 300,000 visitors. [15] IFFR began exhibiting VR in 2016 in collaboration with the Amsterdam VR annual event VR Days. Approximately four projects are exhibited annually in Cinemart, IFFR’s co-production market, to match them with potential partners and finance opportunities. [16] In what can be seen as an attempt to reinforce the artistic relevance of VR, festival director Bero Beyer seeks to undermine the technological aspect of the medium and denies programming VR just because of its novelty.

For VR there is an additional element that for the last couple of years in particular, or actually from the moment VR became a thing, it was hip for festivals to say, ‘Hey look here’s our VR section.’ We don’t care.[17]

Distinguishing IFFR’s approach to VR from other festivals can also be read as a promotional strategy to uniquely position VR. Nevertheless, according to Beyer, VR is programmed like any other format in the festival, as long as it is in line with the artistic cinematic criteria of the festival. [18]

This perspective is also what drove the festival to focus on the development stages of VR during production, prompting a focus on the artistry of the VR works. On the international circuit, IFFR is acknowledged as a festival dedicated to the development and production process of films and talent

through Cinemart, the Hubert Bals Fund, and other initiatives [19]. Thus, the facilitation of VR productions contributes to the strengthening of IFFR's position in the global festival circuit. These central outlooks of the festival on VR – aspiration for original artistic qualities, and focus on developmental aspects – reflect the festival's mission to integrate the two.

Festival-VR experience

Cinema, as argued by many, has wandered beyond the theatre to our living room, train, airplane, or almost anywhere we can get a hold of a screen. This process, what Francesco Casetti calls *relocation*, undermines the exclusivity of cinema theatres and invites unique characteristics for every viewing setting. [20] The ubiquity of cinema therefore gives rise to festivals' motivation in maintaining the cinema-festival experience as exclusive. The VR festival-experience emerges as a possible strategy serving that ambition.

I will use the VR exhibition in IDFA's DocLab in November 2018 as an example to examine the unique characteristics of VR in the festival experience. During DocLab 2018, 34 interactive media works were presented, including ten VR projects. The primary location of the exhibition of VR films was a greenhouse-like structure referred to as a 'VR cinema' (see Fig. 1). However, as the space differs greatly from a cinema, it enables us to discern the distinct qualities of VR-experience in festivals. While production limitations and various reasons could influence the use of the greenhouse, this unusual choice of placing a technologically innovative platform within a three-hundred-year-old agricultural invention calls for further analysis of the VR dispositif in the festival.

Casetti argues that the presence of the big screen defines a space as being 'for' cinema, 'the screen ... constitutes space'. [21] The absence of a screen in the greenhouse, therefore, prevents the space to fully transform into a cinema. The greenhouse also lacks the isolation the theatre suggests – interestingly, its transparency encourages almost the opposite – implying it is not a prerequisite for VR. This highlights the mobility of VR and its lack of dependency in a screening space. Contrary to cinema, where the theatre offers conditions that are technologically far superior to the viewing experience anywhere else, the experience of VR at home or elsewhere is not so different from the technological point of view. Festivals, therefore, are attempting to provide a quasi-cinematic space for a platform that does not require one.

What festivals are then seeking to add to the experience of VR concerns less technological dimensions and more social, contextual, curatorial, and ‘eventful’ factors. The unusual nature of the greenhouse is useful in generating a sense of ‘unfamiliarity’. As a location that is difficult to compare to common spaces of exhibition for media or film, it becomes a source of attraction in itself. The greenhouse is then instrumental in (literally) framing the experience as unique, both physically and conceptually, within the festival’s context; responding to the impulse to ‘strive for exclusiveness’ that relocation provokes.



Fig. 1: DocLab VR Cinema, 2018. Images: Niv Fux, Nichon Glerum.

The VR cinema operation leads visitors to an awkward conflicting position: they are required to plan their visit in advance, but can only reserve seats on-site and on the same day, leading to extensive time gaps between one film and another which cannot be foreseen (due to availability restriction). The impossibility of formulating a planned schedule for the visit to the festival and the gaps that are formed between the reservation of the films can encourage a spontaneous festival experience. Janet Harbord argues that festivals require contingency to sustain the relevance of their singular occurring, providing room for different ‘scripts’ for the ‘unexpected’. [22] Here, in the gaps that are formed between the VR slots, the visitor deals with an ‘uninhabited’ timeframe, leading to a more dynamic experience in the festival’s space. Within this time, visitors may explore other elements of DocLab’s program

that take place continuously: they can take part in conversations, meetings, films, or events they did not plan to attend. Whether or not this is an intentional strategy of IDFA, in this way VR both ‘grounds’ the visitors to the festival’s physical space and time by making their presence essential for the experience, and also encourages them to engage more with the festival’s content.

Adding to the complex dispositif of VR in festivals are the preliminary actions required before the viewing. One cannot simply ‘begin’ a VR experience in festivals. Upon entering the VR Cinema in DocLab, the operator helps the visitors to ‘connect’: wearing a headset and headphones that have to be adjusted and adapted. This process can take several minutes, depending also on the visitor’s level of acquaintance with VR. Only then a screening can be ‘activated’. This electronic configuration binds the viewer to the site and experience. His/her movement is limited due to the connection to the headphones and the VR headset. After the connection has been made one cannot simply leave, because that will require a reversed process of ‘disconnecting’. These cumbersome processes are actually useful in making the viewer committed to the experience even before it has started.

This is reinforced by the ‘absorption’ of the viewer in the experience. VR can ‘encapsulate’ the viewer as s/he is not able to view or hear anything else that is outside of the VR world. VR is not something we can simply ‘take our eyes from’. Once viewers are ‘immersed in the experience’ they are led to another domain, completely dominated by the experience of VR film. In this way, it annuls the distraction that usually characterises the domestic viewing of cinema, or even in a cinema. There are also no other ways of multitask viewing or consuming other types of media as we occasionally do in other types of settings. The encapsulation and isolation then promote our total attention and involvement.

Conclusion

The rising prevalence of VR in festivals should be considered within the context of recent technological transformations. The increasing availability of films and cinema-like experiences through the provision of different platforms and mediums in our daily life produce settings that can potentially compete with festivals. In these turbulent circumstances, the VR-festival experience arises as a strategy to maintain the festival experience as exclusive,

and to sustain the relevance, status, and appeal of festivals. How does this process take place? First, as festivals incorporate VR they align themselves with a highly popular trend in media culture, seen as a source of great interest and curiosity by the public. Second, from its early stages VR was granted the aura of a medium that can change film culture and perhaps may even replace film. As such, it responds well with the inherent ambition of festivals for discoveries and novelties. Finally, because of its relatively limited availability to the public, VR can be instrumental in producing experiences that remain exclusive to the festivals' physical settings and cannot be 'relocated'.

Through two major film festivals, I have demonstrated different approaches for VR, reflecting their interest in exhibiting the medium in a manner correlating with their mission. As a possible reaction to the 'VR hype' among the festival circuit, IFFR aimed to place the focus less on the technology aspect of VR and more on its artistic qualities, like any cinematic form, and by this distancing itself from VR's novelty aspect. By contrast, in the case of IDFA's DocLab the novelty of VR aligns with the program's vision for cinematic innovativeness. In DocLab the dispositif of VR seems to warrant unique settings for the VR-festival experience that are time and site-specific to the festival. From these cases we can infer the *modus operandi* that will characterise festivals in introducing new mediums or measures in their future endeavours to remain unique and to embrace technological transformations.

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Notes

- [1] Technologies allowing a viewing of the 'virtual world' through Head Mounted Devices already emerged in the late 1960s, but the popularity of VR in media culture rose significantly with the development of Oculus Rift HMD in 2012. See Williams & Mascioni 2014.
- [2] <https://bit.ly/2XbVDWo>(accessed on 28 April 2020).
- [3] In 2017 Cannes initiated a five-day conference (Next) dedicated to VR, Venice introduced the first VR competition in an international film festival (Venice VR), and the Berlinale held a VR conference (EFM VR NOW Summit) and screenings.
- [4] Since 2017 many major film festivals were seen to introduce VR in their program, such as Sundance, Tribeca, SXSW, Toronto, Raindance, AFI, Tallinn Black Nights, Sheffield Doc/Fest, Locarno. See: <https://veer.tv/blog/top-vr-film-festivals-to-attend/> (accessed on 2 March 2020).
- [5] <https://www.wired.com/story/film-festivals-move-to-make-vr-marquee-events/> (accessed on 3 March 2020).
- [6] <https://publications.idfa.nl/idfa-2019-a-year-in-review/welcome/> (accessed on 25 May 2020).
- [7] <https://www.idfa.nl/en/info/about-idfa-doclab> (accessed on 21 February 2020).
- [8] Since 2014, when VR was first introduced in the festival, approximately one-third of the works are dedicated to VR every year. See <https://www.idfa.nl/en/info/about-idfa-doclab> (accessed on 21 February 2020).
- [9] https://issuu.com/idfa/docs/idfa_program_guide_2014 (accessed on 3 August 2019).
- [10] <https://www.idfa.nl/en/info/about-idfa-doclab> (accessed on 21 February 2020).
- [11] <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/idfa-doclab-caspar-sonnen-we-can-no-longer-just-blame-technology-everything-1202618786/> (accessed on 21 February 2020).
- [12] Gunning 2009, p. 58.
- [13] Ibid., p. 57.
- [14] Elsaesser 2005, p. 83.
- [15] <https://iffr.com/en/who-we-are> (accessed on 17 February 2020).
- [16] <https://iffr.com/en/blog/iffr-and-vr-days-join-forces> (accessed on 10 March 2020).
- [17] Beyer 2019.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] <https://iffr.com/en/hubert-bals-fund> (accessed on 3 March 2019).
- [20] Casetti 2015, pp 28-32.
- [21] Casetti 2015, p. 132.
- [22] Harbord 2013, pp. 78-79.