

A Machine for Viewing

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Abstract

A Machine for Viewing is a three-episode hybrid of real-time VR experience, live performance, and video essay in which three moving image makers explore how we now watch films by putting various ‘machines for viewing’, including cinema and virtual reality, face to face.

Keywords: audiovisual essay, cinema, film, film studies, screens, spectatorship, virtual reality

In 1970, experimental filmmaker Peter Kubelka designed a cinema auditorium for Anthology Film Archives in New York, in which ‘shell-like’ seats and reams of black velvet caused all but the screen to disappear into darkness.[1] He referred to his Invisible Cinema as ‘a machine for viewing’.[2] Though the movie theatre is now just one of many machines for viewing moving images, a trace of the cinematic apparatus can still be found throughout the technologies that have come since – from home cinema systems, through YouTube’s ‘cinema mode’, to Netflix Party.

A Machine for Viewing is a three-episode hybrid of real-time VR experience, video essay, and occasional expanded cinema performance that explores how we now watch films and videos. It does so by enfolded cinema and virtual reality, an old machine for viewing and a new one, within each other. *A Machine for Viewing* uses VR as a tool for engaging with the current state of cinema; its thematic focus on cinema in turn tests the potential of VR to form an effective platform for audiovisual film and media scholarship. The three-part video presented here is a reconstruction of a live performance of the work that took place during Sundance at the Egyptian Cinema in Park City, Utah, on 28 January 2020. It combines documentation of the physical

performance, video capture of the in-headset VR experience, and assorted film clips.

The work emerges from an initial question posed by me to my two collaborators, filmmaker Charlie Shackleton and digital artist Oscar Raby: what might a video essay look like in VR? At a moment when uses of and discussions around VR remain dominated by the ideal of immersion, the explicit aim of our project has been to use VR as a tool for immersion *and reflection*. Throughout its two years of development and production, the project has remained focused on the goal of extending the video essay into VR. But it has also continually changed shape. For example, the initial assumption by both Charlie and I was that we would end up making 360-degree videos. However, early in the development process, Oscar challenged us instead to explore the potential of fully-interactive, real-time VR. Having settled on creating our digital content in ‘true’ VR, we then explored numerous potential modes of presentation ranging from traditional screenings to one-on-one performances and guerrilla interventions. We finally settled on a three-stranded exhibition plan encompassing physical ‘stand-alone’ installation, expanded cinema performance, and online video.

Whenever someone asks what *A Machine for Viewing* is about, or even just what it is, the answer typically requires several minutes. Looking beyond the awkwardness of not being able to deliver the kind of 30-word ‘logline’ that filmmakers regularly repeat and refine as they publicise their films, it has gradually become evident that the work’s indefinability is what most clearly defines it. *A Machine for Viewing* is neither a video essay, nor a VR experience, nor an art installation, nor a live performance, though it variously includes elements of each. It is a work without a native ‘medium’. Indeed, rather than being a creative product existing in a single form, it is an on-going process of remediation. As such, each of its manifestations so far (as an in-headset experience, as an expanded cinema performance, and now also as an online video) are all equal but distinct elements of the same project. None encompasses its entirety, but each – we hope – is individually sufficient to stimulate the mixture of immersion and reflection that the project aims for.

The COVID-19 crisis has now cut short the project’s meandering journey through different media. Future film festival performances seem unlikely, and our planned autumn cinema tour has been abandoned; it is difficult to imagine anyone wanting to put on a headset anytime in the future, no matter how thoroughly scrubbed. With distributors bypassing exhibition, film festi-

vals moving online, and independent cinemas teetering on the brink of collapse, the crisis has also thrown the role of physically-sited cinema into even greater uncertainty. The Invisible Cinema's contradictory desire to combine a sense of belonging to an audience with an individual and isolated viewing experience now seems more pertinent than ever. Kubelka's boxed-in cinema seats again offer a model for the cinema of the future. In this context, the immaculate and unpopulated 3D cinema that forms the site for *A Machine for Viewing* now also has an extra, unintended resonance.[3] Already in some cities, it has become possible for people with enough money to rent our cinema auditoriums for themselves and their friends.

It saddens us that *A Machine for Viewing* may never be experienced in-headset by more than a tiny number of people. I can only weakly assert that those few people who have experienced my own episode (*A Pillow of Light*) in a headset have all found it to be an extremely pleasurable and even meditative experience. We shall also miss the coming-together of cinephiles that our performances have made possible, and the complex networks of watching and being watched that have resulted. But never mind. We are currently planning a live streamed version of the work to take place in an empty cinema, so in a sense its remediation continues. What can also continue is the discussion about contemporary spectatorship within which this work takes place and to which it contributes. Indeed, from our recent experience of exhibiting and presenting the work, *A Machine for Viewing* seems to work particularly well as an invitation to conversation about cinema and the various emergent media that (figuratively, and sometimes literally) frame it. The conversations that have accompanied its exhibition have often felt just as interesting as the work itself. With this in mind, we invite you to watch these three videos not as self-contained and 'finished' works, but rather as imperfect snapshots of an on-going discourse, and as an invitation to reflect anew on the ambiguous place of cinema within contemporary screen media.

[A Machine for Viewing – 1 – A Frame of the Mind](#)

[A Machine for Viewing – 2 – A Pillow of Light](#)

[A Machine for Viewing – 3 – Manual for a Disassembly of Cinema](#)

Authors

Richard Misek is a filmmaker and academic. His feature-length essay film *Rohmer in Paris* (2014) has been shown at venues including the National Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.), Museum of the Moving Image (New York), and the Barbican Centre and BFI (London). He was the most-cited video essayist in the *Sight and Sound* 'Best Video Essays of 2017' poll, and has led two recent UK Arts and Humanities Research Council projects focusing on audiovisual film and media studies.

Oscar Raby is Creative Director of VRTOV, the Melbourne-based virtual reality studio behind *Easter Rising* (BBC), *The Turning Forest* (BBC), and *A Thin Black Line* (SBS). His VR documentary *Assent* has been widely exhibited across the world and named one of the top interactive documentaries of the last decade by IDFA DocLab. It received the Audience Award for Cross-platform at Sheffield Doc/Fest 2014 and was part of Sundance New Frontier 2015.

Charlie Shackleton is a filmmaker and critic, best known for the feature-length essay films *Beyond Clueless* (2014) and *Fear Itself* (2015), as well as the award-winning short films *Fish Story* and *Lasting Marks*. He is a Field of Vision fellow and his work is part of the BFI National Archive.

References

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- Kubelka, P. 'The Invisible Cinema', *Design Quarterly*, no. 93, 1974: 32-36.

Notes

- [1] Hanich 2016, p. 348.
- [2] Kubelka 1974, p. 36.
- [3] The design of our cinema was inspired by the Metrograph in New York, but adapted so that it also evokes the slightly curved shape of a VR headset.