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The two sides of VR utopias

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At the center of Lazzaretto Vecchio, the immersive island of the Venice Film Festival, there is an open social space where directors, producers, press, volunteers, and festival visitors can gather together to grab quick drinks, meet old and new friends, and sit down for interviews and/or business talks. The community space offers a relief from physically exhausting virtual reality (VR) experiences and invites festival participants to network. The vibrant and collaborative spirit of the centerpiece social space reflects what Michel Reilhac, one of the programmers of Venice Immersive 2023, claimed during the press conference:

We have this incredible privilege that in this community that we are, we are actually supportive of each other, understanding of each other in an incredible diversity of styles and genres [...] Sometimes I feel like we are utopian society, utopian model for how the world could be, if everyone was like immersive community.

As one of the 'privileged' who could experience the program last September and as a researcher who has been traveling to VR programs at different international film festivals since 2015,[1] I think Reilhac's description of the immersive program and its community being 'utopic' was not hyperbole. The strong sense of collaboration, openness, and appreciation for new forms and ideas has overwhelmed the exhibition floors of immersive programs. In contrast to the ritualised film screenings at festivals, there are no standing ovations or fancy red carpet events for VR screenings. The creators, the audience, and the press can easily run into each other while roaming around the exhibition area and commence casual conversations. Throughout recent years, film festivals – the primary sites of exhibition, recognition, and negotiation of the past, present, and future of cinema – have

fostered the emerging VR ecosystem through support for production, education, and exhibition. Although VR technology and its emerging industry still remain in a liminal state among multiple media predecessors, yet to be 'actualised' as an 'essential' medium, the capitalising force from the film industry has been strengthening since the 2010s through the entrance of VR to the institution of film festivals. The transnational infrastructure of film festivals[2] has facilitated developments and collaboration of the VR community across the continents. As exemplary of 'expanded cinema', VR programs at film festivals have been blurring the disciplinary boundaries between the black box of movie theaters and the white cube of art galleries.[3] This progressive and hybrid 'festival within a festival'[4] space is full of different desires and hopes for the possible futures of VR.

Although the ethos of VR programs at film festivals may have been utopic in a positive sense, the underwritten history of the precarious state of VR at film festivals during the past decade implies how the idea of utopia can be also used for its original Greek etymology of being 'no place'. [5] Despite the considerable media attention on the immersive 'trend' at festivals over the past decade, VR programs have remained on the fringes of film festivals both physically and conceptually. In the case of Venice, Lazzaretto Vecchio, which used to be a leper quarantine, is separated from the main festival island of Lido and is only accessible with a short boat ride, and only for accredited attendees. The high expense, technical expertise, and the international collaborations required for VR programming have challenged the format's existence at certain festivals, especially during crises such as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.[6] The potential of VR as an emerging cinematic medium may have been an asset for film festivals to capitalise on in order to attract increased press coverage and new visitors, but it has been a challenge to sustain its value amidst the tension among the diverse institutions involved.[7] In the aforementioned press conference, the programmers underscored the generosity of the Biennale in continuing their support for the immersive program, while drawing ambivalent boundaries towards its responsibility in VR market distribution. VR programs at film festivals have often been highlighted yet marginalised.

In the following article, I offer a brief historical overview of the emergence of VR at international film festival networks, surveying the recent appearance and disappearance of VR programs at multiple festivals. This article aims to study transnational relationships among festivals in their endeavor to mobilise the future of VR. I claim that there is value in examining the circulation of VR in international film festival networks because it is through these movements that new cultural values accumulate and relationships materialise. Here, I extrapolate Marijke de Valck's theory of film festivals as 'sites of passage'[8] and 'value adding processes'[9] involving interdependent processes and relationships of multiple entities, as I consider VR films, VR creators, VR industry experts, and enthusiasts as new

'actors' entering the geopolitical networks of film festivals to validate and expand the ephemeral medium's significance in the cultural realm.



Fig. 1: The social place on Lazzaretto Vecchio. Photo by Da Ye Kim.

A brief history of the New Frontier(s)

This section explores the three key moments in the history of the presence of VR at film festivals: the initial hype in the 2010s, the 2017 development, and the impact of the pandemic leading into the 2020s. Although there are debates about which film festival was the first to initiate a VR program, Sundance Film Festival, the largest independent film festival in the United States, has frequently been credited as the earliest pioneer in the field of expanded cinema curation since 2007, with its signature program, New Frontier. Nony de la Peña's *Hunger in Los Angeles* (2012) was the first VR documentary to be presented at Sundance,[10] and the festival website proudly asserts that its 2012 program incited 'the beginning of the multi-billion dollar "gold rush" among the technology, gaming, and film KIM

industries to bring viable virtual reality to the masses'.^[11] The description positions Sundance as the leading contributor in transforming VR into a mass medium and declares the festival's active participation in shaping the future of VR. It even evokes colonial desires towards the new frontier of potential economic gains.

Following Sundance's lead in 2012, international film festivals have assumed the role of key locations for VR. The second decade of the twenty-first century, often referred to as the period of the 're-emergence' of VR,^[12] is critical in VR history because the technology finally moved out of scientific, military, and academic labs and entered public spheres with the arrival of more affordable apparatuses.^[13] Since 2015, the year following Meta's acquisition of Oculus, the entrance of VR into festival networks has become more pervasive, from A-list international film festivals to popular independent film festivals, to local and regional genre film festivals. By 2018, more than 30 major international film festivals were hosting VR programs. Niv Fux's research shows that more than 1,249 festivals were accepting VR submissions by 2020.^[14] As of January 2024, more than 50 film festivals have their own versions of annual immersive programs.^[15]

In the midst of multiple festivals' race to conquer the VR frontier, the critical turning point in the cultural legitimization^[16] of VR took place in 2017, at the Venice Film Festival. Venice was the first to launch an official VR competition program with juries and three categorised awards.^[17] Repeating the narrative of how the prestigious art Biennale 'discovered' cinema as a new art form with the establishment of the first recurring film festival back in 1932, the 2017 Venice VR program emphasised the historical value of its official 'acknowledgment' of VR. The older institution of cinema embraced VR as the 'next cinematic medium'. In his acceptance speech for the first Best VR award, Eugene YK Chung, the director of *Arden's Wake* (2017), thanked the festival programmers for 'inviting and taking a chance and a leap of faith in virtual reality', and he highlighted how VR was at the point where cinema was a hundred years ago.^[18] Liz Rosenthal, one of the programmers of Venice VR since its inception, pointed out that 'the irony is that Venice, the oldest film festival in the world, is by far the most forward-thinking in terms of recognizing new art forms'.^[19]

In 2017, the Cannes Film Festival, another of the so-called 'Big Three' international film festivals, used a different method. In addition to having an expanded VR program at its own Marché du Film, Cannes funded and hosted the world premiere of Alejandro González Iñárritu's VR film/installation *Carne y Arena* (2017), attracting much media attention. Although only those with exclusive credentials could access the exhibition venues, the excessive press reports and reviews contributed to the public presence of VR beyond the festival space. In 2017, at the two prestigious film festivals of Venice and Cannes, VR and VR creators publicly appeared as critical actors imbricated in the political networks of

international film festivals.[20] Exhibition at established film festivals allowed selected projects and their creators to launch into the larger international festival networks, traveling to other festivals, and later into the commercial market, accumulating more cultural, social, and economic value.

When the pandemic broke out in 2020, film festivals were no exception to its severe impact. The SXSW (South by Southwest) festival's last-minute cancellation of its 2020 program in March signaled a series of delays and cancellations among film festivals. Unable to host on-site events, festivals had to quickly move to online platforms. For VR programs, virtual platforms such as Museums of Other Realities (MOR), VRrOom, and VRChat became key exhibition sites.[21] The sudden virtual migration resulted in varying consequences depending on each festival's existing infrastructure and connections to other festivals. The implementation of virtual VR programs remained demanding even for well-established festivals. Transitioning to virtual platforms also meant fewer audiences, because virtual exhibitions were only accessible to individuals with necessary skills and equipment. Consequently, in 2021, Venice collaborated with fourteen art galleries around the world[22] for its satellite exhibitions to resolve the access issues. Film festivals began constructing sub-networks to salvage VR programs from dissolution and to broaden the audience pool. In 2021, Cannes, Tribeca, and NewImages festival organised a collaborative exhibition 'XR3' on MOR.[23] In Asia, the pandemic strengthened regional collaboration among VR-committed festivals, such as the three pioneers in the field: Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BIFAN), Kaoshiung, and Sandbox Immersive Festival. The inclusion of the XR3 program in the 2021 BIFAN illustrated another layer of transcontinental collaborations.

As of March 2024, most of VR festival programs are back in-person on the festival sites – but the pandemic has reorganised the constellations of the new frontier of VR festivals, revealing that there is no one single leader in the field. Three months before its opening of the first in-person festival since the pandemic, Sundance announced that there would be no New Frontier program for its 2023 edition. Without specifying when the program would return and in what fashion, Shari Frilot, who has been leading the program since its inception in 2007, asked the creators to stay open during the program's 'period of reimagination'. [24] After a year-long hiatus, the program is partially back in 2024, with a new focus on AI.[25] While the original New Frontier diminished in its scope, the utopic hype surrounding VR and institutional efforts to expand its ecosystem have transferred to other festivals through persistent programming endeavors, including regional festival collaborations and programs beyond the original festival sites.

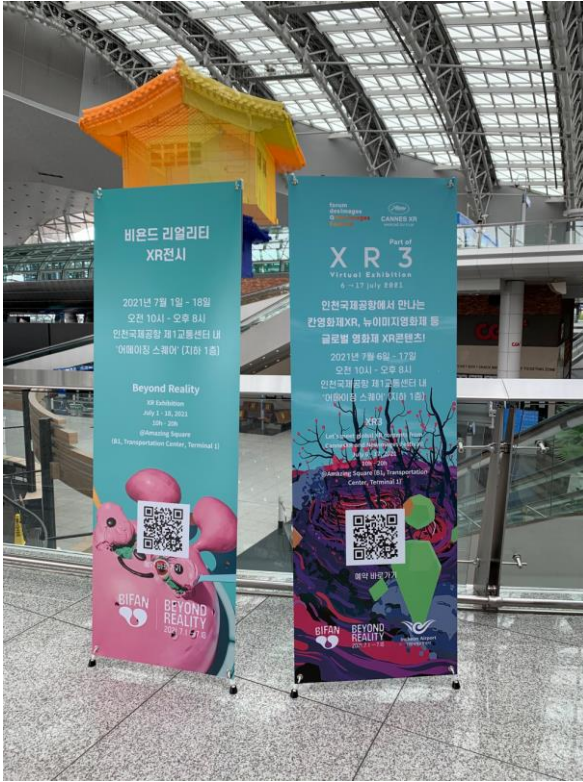
Reterritorialisation beyond reality

The evolution of BIFAN's Beyond Reality program demonstrates the reterritorialisation of the VR festival scene. It has evolved from a local festival event into a pivotal hub in international festival networks by forming multiple connections with other festivals. BIFAN, a regional genre film festival that takes place in July in Bucheon, South Korea, was the first film festival in the country to launch a new media program in 2016, at a specialised venue named VR Village.[26] While Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), a more recognised film festival in the country, discontinued its VR Theater program in 2019 after two years of experimentation, BIFAN persevered and sought additional sources of support outside the country.[27] In 2019, the festival joined the Fantastic 7,[28] a program organised by Marché du Film, and entered the exclusive international circuit[29] of genre film festivals. Although it is unclear how much impact it made in BIFAN's expansion of XR programming, BIFAN updated its immersive XR (extended reality) program the same year and re-named it Beyond Reality and has continued spearheading XR exhibitions in the country and beyond.

The festival strengthened its connection to French institutions with a collaboration with the French Embassy for its special off-site presentation of Beyond Reality at the deserted Incheon International Airport during the pandemic. The first edition in 2020 included 15 interactive projects,[30] and the second edition the following year exhibited an unprecedented scale of 80 XR projects,[31] becoming one of the largest XR events that year. By taking over the site of the international airport, the exhibition introduced VR experiences as 'a new type of travel'[32] and promoted VR as a technology to create new relationships between the virtual and the real, the narrative space and the experiential space, and between the festival site and the visitors. At the new location, about an hour drive from the festival city of Bucheon, anyone with online reservations could access the virtual program. With the addition of the XR3 program in its 2021 edition, the festival further reified the 'travel' metaphor attached to the space of the airport. The festival visitors could use VR headsets to take a flight to the virtual exhibition co-curated by Cannes, Tribeca, and New Images Festival.[33] Although the French involvement with Beyond Reality can be interpreted as an example of 'power from a distance'[34] in securing European control over the international VR network, the new relationship was mutually beneficial because it allowed the program to proceed and grow during the pandemic.

In 2023, Beyond Reality established another festival alliance with neighboring Asian film festivals. The XR talk event during the 2023 program featured Jay Kim, the chief programmer of Beyond Reality, introducing the festival's new collaboration with Sandbox Immersive Festival (China), Beyond Frame Festival (Japan), and Kaohsiung XR Dreamland (Taiwan). During the talk, Kim highlighted how immersive programs at film festivals have moved beyond showcasing trendy content, and that through collaborations they have worked to

support and expand the XR ecosystem.[35] These interregional and intercontinental collaborations have established Beyond Reality as a leading program in the global immersive field, facilitating the bridging and expansion of the circulation of selected VR projects within the international network.



Figs 2, 3: Beyond Reality 2021 at the Incheon International Airport. Photo by Da Ye Kim.

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The two varying concepts of utopia encapsulate the past decade of the history of VR at film festivals. It has been emerging and receding on the peripheries of film festivals, often spotlighted as a novel event reflecting the festival's instinctive response to the rapidly evolving cinematic landscape and the cultural market surrounding the technology. While the forthcoming decade may not exhibit the same degree of fervor as the previous one, the ongoing restructuring of networks among old and new, regional and interregional festivals signifies a newfound collaborative potential in reaction to the uncertain future of VR.

Returning to Reilac's emphasis on a utopic immersive community, his remark appears aimed at both fortifying solidarity within the existing network to unite immersive creators, curators, the press, and VR enthusiasts, and serving as a means to promote a positive image of the VR community. Despite its marginalisation, the periphery can be sustained through collaborative networks. While the phase of pioneering the new frontier may be waning, hope endures for a utopian governance of the perpetually evolving VR frontier in the years ahead.

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Notes

- [1] This article incorporates my field research at multiple film festivals including Venice, New York, Tribeca, Sundance (virtual), Busan, and Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BIFAN), from 2015 to 2023.
- [2] De Valck 2016, pp. xi-xiv. In the preface to the edited volume, Dina Iordanova emphasises the transnational 'essence' of film and film festivals.
- [3] Shari Frilot's quote in introducing the New Frontier initiative in 2007 points out how the program was 'a hybrid space drawing from the art gallery scene, microcinema and the seductiveness of the DJ lounge atmosphere': <https://walkerart.org/magazine/new-frontier-at-sundance-film-festival-10-years-of-changing-boundaries>; Writing about two Canadian film festivals' integration of new media exhibitions, including interactive VR projects, Caroline Klimek claims that festival programmers now have to assume the new role of curators (Klimek 2018, pp. 73-76); See also Uroskie's introduction in *Between Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (2014).
- [4] <https://walkerart.org/magazine/new-frontier-at-sundance-film-festival-10-years-of-changing-boundaries>.
- [5] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/utopia>.
- [6] For example, Busan International Film Festival's VR program existed only for three years, from 2017 to 2019. New York Film Festival's Convergence program, a transmedia program featuring exhibitions and talks established in 2012, has been discontinued after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- [7] Klimek 2018, p. 74.
- [8] De Valck 2007, p. 29-31.

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- [9] Ibid., p. 31. Later articulated further in the case study of Venice Film Festival in Chapter 3.
- [10] It is interesting to note how Palmer Luckey, the innovator behind Oculus, was at Sundance in 2012 as Nony de la Peña's intern for the project. Shari Frilot remembers how the team arrived at the festival venue with a headset that was 'more or less duct-taped together with a cellphone inside', because the lab at USC did not allow them to carry the \$50,000 VR headset to the festival. Later the amateur headset became the prototype for Oculus Rift (Frilot & King 2017, p. 51).
- [11] The official timeline of Sundance Film Festival and Sundance Institute: <https://www.sundance.org/timeline/>.
- [12] Evans 2018, p. 16.
- [13] Meta's official purchase of Oculus in 2014 marked the expansion of public interest towards VR. A major markdown of the Oculus Rift in 2017 and the introduction of Oculus Quest in 2019 made the medium more accessible to general audiences.
- [14] Fux 2020, p. 1.
- [15] <https://medium.com/vr-film-review/immersive-filmmaking-calendar-2023-2024-xr-festivals-deadlines-922143d76a79#:~:text=Among%20the%20most%20respected%20VR.Film%20Festival%20and%20many%20more>
- [16] De Valck 2007, pp. 30-31.
- [17] Tribeca film festival had an award section for its Storyscapes before 2017, but it had been something like an audience choice award. The three categories of the first Venice VR awards included Best VR, Best VR Story, and Best VR Experience.
- [18] 'Arden's Wake (Expanded) Best VR Film @ 74th Venice Film Festival': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54dJHCck6E>.
- [19] Brooks 2017.
- [20] In *The Public Life of Cinema* (2020), Toby Lee discusses the complex relationship between the word 'appear' and 'to appear', and that between 'public' and 'publicness'. Lee articulates that appearance goes beyond becoming visible to others, and that it can be manipulated in a particular way to give an impression of being something. Using Hannah Arendt's discussion of the public realm, Lee points out how the co-presence of one's own consciousness of one's appearance and the other's sense of one's appearance, the space of public appearance, and one's political life are connected to each other. Lee writes, 'Arendt understands political life to be impossible outside of collectivity, to the extent that she even defines "politics as the space of appearance" itself. In this configuration, appearance, publicness, and political life are mutually constitutive.' (Lee 2020, p. 73)
- [21] Hyun, 'Interview with Festival Curators', IXI Media. This article (in Korean) features Shari Frilot, Jong Min Kim, and Grace Lee from Sundance, BIFan, and Kaoshiung Film Festival respectively. At the outset of their interview, they discuss the pandemic's impact and mention different virtual platforms that festivals have experimented with, including Museum of Other Realities by Cannes XR and WebXR by Sundance. The 2020 Venice Film Festival website indicates how the festival collaborated with VRrOOm platform to 'shift to a 100% virtual exhibition': <https://www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/2020/venice-vr-expanded-web-section>.
- [22] Mentioned during the 2023 Venice Immersive conference and archived in the festival website: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/2021/venice-vr-expanded-web-section>
- [23] <https://www.xrmost.com/xrmagazine/xr3-cannes-xr-newimages-tribeca/>.
- [24] Kohn 2023.
- [25] <https://festival.sundance.org/program/beyond-film/65773f5b7ea5121548d71952>
- [26] https://beyondreality.bifan.kr/previous_beyondreality; also mentioned in Cine 21's interview with Jay Kim, the creator and the chief curator of the festival's new media program since 2016: http://www.cine21.com/news/view?mag_id=90708 (article written in Korean).
- [27] Interestingly, there is no online archive left of the short-lived VR Theater program at BIFF.
- [28] Introduction to *Fantastic 7* by Marché du Film: <https://www.marchedufilm.com/programs/fantastic-7/#:~:text=Fantastic%207%20Today,of%20fantastic%20and%20genre%20films>. The BIFAN news archive includes a briefing on the festival's inclusion to the program in 2019: https://www.bifan.kr/webzine/news_view.asp?pk_seq=80815&sc_str=%C6%77%55%B8%BD%BA%C6%BD%207&sc_board_seq=12&sc_num=1&sc_top_cond=all&actEvent=view&page=3&

- [29] Here, I use the term circuit instead of network, because Fantastic 7 is an exclusive group, with its detailed financial benefits remaining confidential.
- [30] <https://www.xrmost.com/xr magazine/jean-romain-micol-bifan/>.
- [31] <https://beyondreality.bifan.kr/archive/titles>.
- [32] A phrase used in Jay Kim's introduction to the 2021 Beyond Reality program. The website is no longer available. Here is a longer quote saved from earlier research: 'Maybe what film festivals are seeking to give people is the moment that goes "beyond reality." Although it still feels uncomfortable and unfamiliar, let's focus on these senses that are taking form. The artists that have distinguished between the many layers of what is called "reality" and developed the senses to touch and move what cannot be seen; the artists that first perceived and pictured what lies beyond reality have brought back the records of their explorations, which will once again be presented at Beyond Reality this year. What are the limitations of our senses? How far can you stretch your belief in "reality"? Experience it. Feel it.'
- [33] The 2021 XR3 festival took place twice during the summer. The first edition lasted for twelve days during Tribeca Film Festival in June, and the second edition launched again in July to accommodate Cannes and BIFAN from 6-15 July.
- [34] Stringer 2016, p. 36.
- [35] Translated by the author from Jay Kim's talk at BIFAN 2023 XR Talk 4: What about XR festivals?: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6n-FLnXSs0&ab_channel=BIFANofficial.