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CHANGING HUMANITARIANISM FOR THE BETTER?

Virtual Reality and the Representation of the Suffering 'Other' in Humanitarian Communications

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ABSTRACT

Virtual Reality (VR) 360-degree videos are gaining popularity in the field of humanitarian communications. In particular, VR is hailed as a revolutionary medium which will change humanitarianism for the better by crafting a relationship of care and solidarity with the suffering 'Other' in the 'global South'. After an exploration of the changing humanitarian field and of the theoretical underpinnings of the problem of representing the 'Other', this dissertation explores the potential risks associated with the use of VR in humanitarian communications, focusing on the concepts of 'framelessness', empathy and 'proper distance'.

Through an audio-visual and semiotic analysis of two 360-degree VR productions produced by humanitarian organisations charity: water and the Milaan Foundation in association with Oculus, this dissertation applies the theory explored in the literature review chapter on the videos in question to explore whether they manage to represent suffering 'Others' in their humanity. Finally, it considers ways in which VR, if differently conceptualised, could provide 'small acts of repair' (Sanyal, 2017: 6) to the problem of representing the 'Other' in humanitarian communications. While refraining from assessing VR's material efficacy in terms of fundraising outcomes, this dissertation seeks to problematise the tendency in contemporary humanitarian discourse to uncritically position VR as the best-placed medium to change humanitarianism for the better. Such tendency, this dissertation argues, relies on inadequate conceptions of mediation, empathy and 'proper distance' and is therefore unjustified. Crucially, if not differently conceptualised, VR risks impoverishing our understanding of the 'Other' by concealing the structural imbalances which characterise the relationship between the 'West' and the 'global South'.

INTRODUCTION

The field of humanitarian communications is increasingly characterised by a turn towards immersive media and Virtual Reality technology. Used to raise awareness and boost fundraising, Virtual Reality (VR) is often hailed as a revolutionary medium which bears the potential to change humanitarianism for the better by providing a better way to represent the suffering 'Other', thus crafting a more meaningful connection between viewers in the 'West' on the one hand and 'global South' subjects on the other. Focusing on the analysis of two 360-degree videos, charity:water's *The Source* (2016) and The Milaan Foundation's and Oculus' *Girl Icon* (2019), this dissertation will consider whether VR does, indeed, differentiate itself from other media through its potential to 'fundamentally reframe the relation of knowledge, ethics and agency' (Bystrom and Mosse, 2018: 94), or whether, conversely, it risks impoverishing our understanding of the 'Other'. The literature review starts with an introduction to the concept of 'othering' and with an outline of the changes which have characterised the field of humanitarian communications in the last decades. Then, I will analyse the medium of VR, focusing on two issues in particular: firstly, I will consider its problematic construction as a 'frameless' medium able to faithfully reproduce reality, highlighting the reasons why VR productions are far from unmediated, as well as the consequences this might entail for our understanding of the suffering 'Other'. Secondly, I will focus on VR's designation as an 'empathy machine' (Milk, 2015) and Roger Silverstone's concept of 'proper distance' (2003, 2006) to consider where VR's mediation of the suffering 'Other' could be positioned along the axis of proximity-distance proposed by Chouliaraki (2011: 363). Looking at VR technology from these two angles will shed some light on the kind of affective connection which VR seeks to build between 'Western' viewer and 'global South' subject, as well as on the medium's risks and potentialities in constructing a better understanding of and relationship with the suffering 'Other'. After outlining the methodology used to analyse *The Source* and *Girl Icon* in chapter four, chapter five applies the considerations made in chapters three and four to provide an analysis and discussion of the 360-degree videos. By analysing the videos firstly through the lens of framing and mediation choices and secondly through the concept of 'proper distance', chapter five will consider whether the videos succeed in proposing new narratives which subvert dominant understandings of the suffering 'Other', or whether they end up perpetuating the problematic narratives and attitudes towards instances of suffering which characterise the field of humanitarian communications. Finally, I will consider under what conditions VR productions might, indeed, pose a challenge to such problematic narratives by opening up a subversive space for alternative narratives to form – narratives capable of fostering a relationship of care and solidarity between 'Western' benefactors and suffering 'global South' subjects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representing the 'Other' in humanitarian communications

The question of how to represent the 'Other' in their humanity is a long-standing issue spanning fields such as media and communication studies and humanitarian communications, but also post-colonial, development, cultural and gender studies. Conceiving of or representing someone as an 'Other' means relegating them to a residual category: while the 'One' represents the dominant and positive category, characterised by attributes such as order, rationality and masculinity, the 'Other' is associated with chaos, irrationality and femininity, and is generally constructed as evil (Al-Saidi, 2014: 96). Furthermore, there is always a hierarchisation involved in the 'Othering' process, whereby the 'Other' is always constructed as inferior to the 'One'. In the field of humanitarian communications, critics have analysed how 'global South' people tend to be 'othered' in humanitarian messages and appeals (see Orgad, 2012; Silverstone, 1999; Wilson, 2011). As Hall argues (1997: 232, cited in Orgad, 2012), the way in which images of suffering are constructed and communicated in the media is rooted in racialised 'regimes of representation'. Crucially, the 'othering' of 'global South' people does not remain confined to the representative realm of the media, but rather affects the physical world: Representations, in Hall's words, perform a certain 'work' (1997). They do not simply reflect reality, but rather are crucial to 'the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged' (ibid: 15) and 'have consequences for how we see and live in the world' (Silverstone, 1999: 138). Gillian Rose (2016: 2) goes as far as to argue that representations can influence the material world by 'structuring the way people behave'. To find a way to rightfully represent the 'Other' in their humanity, as well as to form an audience of cosmopolitan citizens with a willingness to relate with the Other' (Hannerz, 1996: 103), has therefore been a recurring question in academia. It is a question of utmost importance particularly in the humanitarian communications field, working as it does precisely with finding ways of representing the 'Other' which might succeed in fostering an emotional connection between the 'Western' observer and the sufferer in the 'global South'. In fact, referring to humanitarian communications, Cohen (2001: 176) argues that 'responses to distant suffering will depend on how its component images are presented'. This suggests that the way in which VR is used, its form and content, as well as the interrelation between the two, can have decisive – symbolic and material – consequences on how 'global South' sufferers are imagined.

The longest-standing criticism to the field of humanitarian communications regards its tendency to represent suffering subjects in the 'global South' as victims who are devoid of agency. In particular, this communicative mode has been condemned for being damaging to the dignity of distant sufferers, for de-contextualising their suffering and ultimately contributing to the portrayal of the 'global South' as a 'theatre of tragedy and disasters' (Cohen, 2001, cited in Orgad, 2012: 143). Moreover, the pervasiveness of representations highlighting the status of 'global South' people as victims is understood as one of the causes of 'compassion fatigue'. According to Moeller (1999), compassion fatigue refers to the process whereby 'Western' spectators have become anesthetised to the images of distant suffering which their mediated environment constantly bombards them with, leading to what Luc Boltanski (1999) describes as a 'crisis of pity'. As a response to such criticisms, humanitarian communications have turned towards more 'positive' portrayals of people in the 'global South' which, as Shani Orgad (2012: 143) comments, aim at highlighting the 'empowerment, agency and resilience' of distant sufferers. Nevertheless, this communicative mode has also received criticism. In particular, critics have warned that the absence of negative images risks 'sanitising and distorting reality' (Orgad, 2012: 144; see also Sontag, 2003) by failing to communicate the seriousness of the suffering, and that failing to reproduce realistic imagery might lead to 'moral sleep and historical amnesia' (Taylor, 1998: 6).[2] Finally, as a response to persisting criticisms to humanitarian communicative practices, whether in terms of overemphasising victimhood or agency, a new humanitarian communicative style has emerged, which Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) terms 'post-humanitarianism'. Post-humanitarianism is characterised by a change in how moral action towards distant others is conceived (ibid). After the 'ethics of pity' which marked the previous decades, 'Western' spectators are now becoming, as Chouliaraki (2013: 1) puts it, 'ironic spectators of vulnerable others'. What characterises the move from an ethics of pity to an ethics of irony is humanitarianism's increased tendency to

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[2] For further discussion on the 'positive turn' of humanitarian communications, see Koffman and Gill, 2013:90; Rajaram, 2002; Wilson, 2011.

> 'explicitly situate the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action, thereby rendering solidarity a contingent ethics that no longer aspires to a reflexive engagement with the political conditions of human vulnerability' (ibid: 4).

Post-humanitarianism, as Chouliaraki suggests, is therefore not as subversive as it purports to be – in fact, it does not lead to a 'reflexive engagement' with the reality of distant suffering, nor with the structures of inequality which enable and preserve that reality. Instead, it can be understood as complicit with the contemporary neoliberal logic which celebrates an individualist morality and promotes the adoption of corporate techniques and styles in the field of humanitarian communications (Orgad and Seu, 2014: 929). Therefore, like the humanitarian advocacy styles preceding it, post-humanitarianism too ends up failing to build a relationship of care and solidarity between 'Western' benefactors on the one hand, and suffering 'global South' subjects on the other. How does one, then, represent the 'Other' in their humanity? How does one mobilise humanitarian communications in order foster a relationship of understanding with and care for the 'Other' – following an ethics of care which, as Chouliaraki and Orgad comment (2011: 341), begins by recognising unfamiliar 'Others' as 'Others' with humanity? According to Chouliaraki (2013), a way to craft such relationship would be by discarding the contemporary 'ironic solidarity' model to foster instead an Arendtian 'solidarity of agonism', that is, a solidarity characterised by the 'persistent pursuit of the meaning of justice' (Chouliaraki, 2013: 24). Such conception of solidarity abandons the preoccupation with the 'Western' self and is, instead, characterised by 'other-oriented, rather than self-oriented, expressions of solidarity' (Chouliaraki, 2011: 374). The crucial feature of agonistic solidarity is its ability to make the structures of injustice underlying humanitarian calls to action visible and explicit, problematising them as 'a question of global injustice, collective responsibility and social change' (ibid).

The promise of Virtual Reality

If one considers the current 'hype' around Virtual Reality (Rose, 2018) in the light of the debate introduced above, VR appears more and more as the long-sought-after solution which, by sidestepping the representational problems related to distant suffering, would enable the field of humanitarian communications to craft an 'other-oriented' relation of solidarity with 'global South' subjects. In fact, while initially conceived of as a gaming platform, VR technology is increasingly used in non-fiction genres such as documentary (Rose, 2018), journalism (de la Peña, 2010) and humanitarian communications (Bystrom and Mosse, 2018; Nash, 2017). In recent years, several humanitarian campaigns have relied on VR technology to raise awareness of and increase engagement with instances of suffering in the 'global South'. From the videos produced by the United Nations immersing viewers in, for example, everyday life in a refugee camp (*Clouds Over Sidra,* UNVR 2015) to immersive productions by Oculus' VR for Good and by humanitarian organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross' *The Right Choice* (2018) and Amnesty International's #360Syria: *Fear of the Sky* (2016), VR is gaining increasing popularity in the humanitarian field. As a broad definition, VR can be understood as a technology which 'makes use of sensory devices to either virtually modify a user's environment or completely immerse them in a simulated environment' (Statista Research Department, 2020). However, the term is characterised by definitional uncertainty, partly due to the fact that it is often used interchangeably with other terms such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR), partly because it can refer to different degrees of immersion, ranging from three-dimensional navigable worlds to 360-degree immersive videos shot with an omnidirectional camera. While three-dimensional navigable worlds enable viewers to move spatially inside a virtual world, in 360-degree videos the images are pre-rendered, the timeline is fixed, and viewers' interaction is limited to 'spinning around' to look at the captured environment (Willis, 2016: 153). As the most accessible – both in terms of production and audience accessibility – kind of VR production, 360-degree video is the medium which humanitarian organisations tend to employ more often,[3] and will therefore be the analytical focus of this essay.

The next paragraphs will consider two different arguments associated with VR's potential to do good by fostering a relationship of solidarity and care towards suffering 'Others' in the 'global South'. I will begin by exploring VR's supposed capacity to bypass mediation and represent reality 'as it really is'. I will then analyse VR through the concepts of empathy and 'proper distance' (Silverstone, 2006), complicating the question of whether VR can foster relations of empathy between 'Western' viewers and distant sufferers, and exploring where VR productions' mediation of distant suffering might located on the axis of proximity-distance (Chouliaraki, 2011: 363).

Bypassing mediation? VR's construction as 'frameless' medium

Contemporary discourse around VR tends to construct it as a 'frameless' medium able to bypass the process of mediation, thus reproducing reality in a non-mediated manner – that is, reproducing the world exactly as it is. Describing the potential of VR technology, Milk (2015: 05:30-05:51) comments that '[i]t's a machine, but inside of it, it feels like real life, it feels like truth.' Such ability to bring the reality of suffering directly to viewers is often named as the reason why VR could represent the solution to compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999). If 'Western' spectators are tired of watching scenes of distant suffering unroll before their eyes in the media, VR's status as the ultimate 'armchair Columbus' (Orgad, 2012: 328) will solve the problem by managing to immerse viewers in the reality of suffering, thus heightening viewers' engagement with it. In contemporary discourse, VR is often described as a 'frameless' medium (Manovich, 2013: 179; Milk 2015), a quality which is often simply assumed. Milk (2015: 04:45-05:09), for example, describes his journey towards becoming a VR creator as motivated by the desire to reach 'framelessness', but never questions VR's construction as a frameless medium:

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[3] See, however, the work of de la Peña (2010) Bailenson (2018) and Slater et al. (2019) as examples of 'navigable environment' VR used for humanitarian and ethical purposes.

> 'I mean, all the media that we watch – television, cinema – they're these windows into these other worlds. And I thought, well, great. I got you in a frame. But 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, in the world, inhabiting the world'.

Nevertheless, the assumption of 'framelessness' can be questioned in two ways: firstly, it can be argued that, even assuming that VR is indeed closer to getting rid of mediation than other media, it will always mediate reality to some extent. As Ainsley Sutherland (2016) comments, while VR can reproduce the physical conditions that influence a person's internal states, it cannot reproduce the internal states themselves. This is also tied to the fact that, contrarily to the 'global South' subject represented in VR humanitarian appeals, 'Western' viewers have the possibility to take off their headset at any time – as Kathryn Hamilton (2017), writing in *The New Inquiry*, observes, in VR experiences the user is immersed in a space, but does not face any of the consequences of such immersion.[4] A similar point is highlighted by Andrejevic and Volcic (2019: 6), who argue that, no matter how convincingly VR technology might replicate someone's sensory experience, there will always be an 'unbridgeable gap to cover', namely 'that of the other's history, experience and relations; their subjectivity.' This has led critics to argue that VR risks overemphasising the importance of the physical environment: referring to VR productions aimed at representing refugeehood, Paul Bloom (2017) argues that, by maintaining that spatial immersion will replicate someone's experience of suffering, VR forgets that what makes the refugee experience awful is 'the fear and anxiety of having to escape your country and relocate yourself in a strange land', rather than the 'sights and sounds of a refugee camp'. Secondly, even the assumption that VR is closer to getting rid of mediation than other mediums should be treated with caution: in fact, the VR production process is marked by numerous, if less evident, representative choices. Just like films, VR productions are staged, undergo a heavy visual editing process, including decisions about casting, screenwriting, mise-en-scène, the placement of the 360-degree camera and so forth. As VR Director at UNIT9 & The Guardian Anrick Bregman, interviewed by Jones and Dawkins (2019), argues, '[e]verything is pre-arranged and carefully orchestrated – not the most natural or spontaneous way of filming.' For these reasons, VR's claim to framelessness has been widely criticised. For example, Matthew Lombard and Theresa

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[4] For a similar argument applied to the use of VR to raise awareness on disabilities, see Flower et al. (2007).

Ditton (1997) conclude that VR only creates a 'perceptual illusion of non-mediation', and Mandy Rose (2018: 135) stresses that VR's 'framelessness' is, in reality, only apparent.

Considering the above it appears that, rather than being close to eliminating mediation, VR productions take part in a series of representative practices which, as discussed above, are never innocent – they inevitably perform a certain representative 'work' (Hall, 1997), affecting how and through what narratives specific issues are framed and presented and excluding alternative ways in which they could have been represented. Therefore, an analysis of the revolutionary potential of VR should look at the representative choices the medium has – advertently or inadvertently – made. The conceptualisation of VR as a frameless medium, on the other hand, tends to deflect viewers' attention from its status of mediated construction. As such, it might contribute to the creation of an uncritical attitude, whereby viewers assume that what they are shown is reality, unmediated. For this reason, chapter five will analyse and highlight the ways in which 360-degree videos *The Source* (2016) and *Girl Icon* (2019) are marked by representative choices, and will explore how such choices affect viewers' relationship with the suffering 'Other'.

VR and proper distance: between empathic proximity and post-humanitarian self-distance

The second argument through which contemporary dominant discourse around VR seeks to frame it as a revolutionary medium regards its conceptualisation as 'empathy machine' (Milk, 2015). The medium's ability to 'generate' empathy (de la Peña, 2016), so the argument goes, means that it has the potential of forging a deep emotional connection between 'Western' viewers on the one hand and 'global South' subjects on the other; a connection that older kinds of media are unable to forge and which will change humanitarian communicative practices for the better. As Jones and Dawkins (2017: 309) emphasise, the idea that VR enables viewers to 'step into the shoes of another' has almost become a truism amongst those who study immersive video production: it can be found not only in speeches by industry professionals (Burmaster, 2016; Cuneo, 2017) and in the press (see, for example, Cimons, 2016; Constine, 2015; Jauhar, 2017), but also in academia (Bailenson, 2018a: loc. 1038; de la Peña, 2016; Oh et al., 2016) and scientific research (Carey et al., 2017; Loon et al., 2018). For example, journalist and VR pioneer Nonny de la Peña (2016) stresses the medium's ability to 'generate intense empathy' and to 'wring from the audience the intense emotional connection that these stories deserve'. Moreover, Oculus' Head of Partner and Experience Marketing Paula Cuneo underlines the power of VR to allow viewers to 'step into someone else's shoes, to feel something different, to meet someone [they]'ve never met and to be in a place [they]'ve never been before'. The assumption behind this reasoning is that it is the proximity enabled by VR technology which leads to the 'generation' of empathy. An example of such causal connection between physical proximity and empathy can be found in a statement by Milk (2015 07:40-08:03, my emphasis) who, referring to his 360-degree video creation *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015), observes that: '[w]hen you look down, you are sitting on the same ground as she is on. *Because of that* you feel her humanity in a deeper way. You empathise with her in a deeper way'. The words 'because of that' clearly show that, in Milk's view, empathy is a consequence of immersion. Such reasoning, however, is far from self-evident. In particular, critics stress that empathy is a much more complex phenomenon which cannot be explained by proximity alone (Bollmer, 2017: 64). Amy Coplan (2011), for example, argues for a narrower conceptualization of empathy through the adoption of the concept of 'empathy proper', which she defines as arising from a feeling of being both close enough to experience a 'simulation of other persons' emotions' and distanced enough to be fully aware that those emotions are not their own (Coplan, 2011, cited in Sánchez Laws, 2017: 3). Discourse around VR, on the other hand, tends to mistake immersion for empathy (Alsever, 2015. See also Bystrom and Mosse, 2018: 95), thus failing to address the complexity of empathy as a concept (Agüera Reneses, 2020: 12) and resting instead on a simplified version which neglects to rightfully communicate the condition of distant suffering.

To delve deeper into what is at stake when VR productions claim to generate a meaningful connection with the suffering 'Other', the next paragraphs will explore Roger Silverstone's concept of proper distance (2006). As Chouliaraki and Orgad (2011: 341) comment, Silverstone deemed our 'relationship to the different, the unfamiliar, the other' to be one of the most significant moral challenges currently faced by the media. Under this light, the concept of 'proper distance' can therefore be understood as a particular 'politics of the representation of otherness', exploring ways in which certain representations might represent the 'Other' along the lines of an 'ethics of care' (ibid). In *Media and Morality* (2006), Silverstone defined the concept of proper distance as:

> 'The understanding of the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated inter-relationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding' (2006: 47).

It follows that, in order to foster a relationship of understanding with and care for the 'Other' – an endeavour which, as Chouliaraki and Orgad comment (2011: 341), begins by recognising unfamiliar others as others with humanity – representations should strive to strike the right balance between being either too distant or too close to the distant sufferer. In this case, distance is understood as difference, and proximity as sameness: while bringing viewers too close to the suffering 'Other' risks collapsing the difference between 'us' and 'them', bringing them too far risks over-emphasising such difference. Instead, as Silverstone puts it (2006: 47), media representations should strive to 'preserve the other through difference as well as through shared identity'. This is because to reach a meaningful understanding of the 'Other', one needs both an emotional connection based on sameness and enabled by proximity and a critical reflection based on difference and enabled by distance. In John Ellis' words (2012: 129), we need both 'the imaginative attempt to feel what they are feeling and the simultaneous knowledge that they are them and we are us.' Several critics have warned against the risk of 'improper distance' (Chouliaraki, 2011) posed by VR technology (see Andrejevic and Volcic, 2019; Bollmer, 2017; Loh, 2011; Nash, 2017). In the next paragraphs, I will consider in turn the problems which arise when VR places 'Western' viewers either too close – the risk of proximity – or too distant – the risk of excessive distance – to the suffering 'Other'.

There are two main consequences which might follow when VR overemphasises the proximity between 'Western' viewers and 'global South' subjects. The first consequence is that it might obliterate the difference between 'Self' and 'Other'. This is problematic because the recognition of difference is essential to enable the recognition of the 'Other' which, as Orgad notes (2012: 310), does not only rest 'on the basis of a shared identity with 'us', but, fundamentally, on the basis of the other's radically different life conditions, beliefs, fears and desires'. This statement closely resonates with Hannah Arendt's argument that recognising that the 'Other' is different from us represents the starting point of moral action (1998, cited in Agüera Reneses, 2020: 11). Therefore, Arendt argues, instead of projecting ourselves onto others, we should learn to 'visit' the 'Other' (ibid). It therefore appears that VR, with its emphasis on bringing viewers as close as possible to the suffering 'Other', risks replacing that 'Other' with the viewers themselves (Loh, 2011) or, in Grant Bollmer's words (2017: 71), risks 'absorbing another's body and experience into one's own when it should be theirs'. The second consequence of overemphasising proximity is that VR risks perpetuating 'intimacy at a distance'. In their 2014 article, Shani Orgad and Bruna Seu describe the tendency of humanitarian communications to construct distant others as intimates (2014: 917). 'Intimacy at a distance' can be understood as a strategy through which humanitarianism attempts to forge an affective bond between 'Western' spectators and distant sufferers by 'asking viewers to become symbolic intimates of distant sufferers', in Silverstone's words (2007: 47). As Orgad and Seu (2014: 922) argue, the communicative practices of humanitarian organisations 'seem to be exploiting intimacy in an attempt to reconstruct and correct their relationship with beneficiaries'. Nevertheless, intimacy as a mode of representation carries with it some complications. For example, while it may promote identification (Peck, 1996), it also turns attention away from the structures which cause the suffering in question (Orgad and Seu, 2014: 918). Moreover, by wanting to 'get closer' at any cost, mediated intimacy risks excluding other ways of knowing the 'Other' in 'less standardised ways' (ibid: 925). With its emphasis on creating an intimate exchange between its users and the represented subjects (Nash, 2017: 126), VR ultimately risks to 'subsume the Other into the same, doing violence to them' (Bollmer, 2017: 74). Moreover, in Debarati Sanyal's words, it risks aligning itself with an 'ethos of capture' (2017: 8) whereby 'global South' subjects are reduced to their suffering and not understood in the humanity and complexity.[5]

Interestingly, Virtual Reality does not only risk bringing 'Western' viewers too close to the sufferer through its emphasis on immersion and proximity: it also risks placing them in a position of excessive distance in relation to the suffering 'Other'. In particular, Kate Nash (2017: 125) argues that VR runs this risk when it 'invites forms of self-focus and self-projection' which privilege the 'Western' self over the 'Other'. In fact, VR has been accused of being a narcissistic communicative mode and, as hinted above, one of main characteristics of post-humanitarian ironic solidarity is precisely its narcissistic focus on 'Western' donors rather than on 'global South' sufferers. VR 'founder' and philosopher Jaron Lanier (2017), for example, argues that while VR would ideally lead to empathy, it 'could just as well become a narcissism magnifier'. This is especially problematic for the issue of representing the 'Other' in their humanity, since the voice of distant others might become subordinated to that of 'Western' donors, thus 'marginalising their cause in favour of our narcissistic self-communications' (Chouliaraki, 2011: 368). This can have far-reaching consequences since, as Nash (2018: 129) argues, in VR productions 'individual feeling becomes the focus for intervention rather than structural inequalities and political exclusions.' In other words, by focusing on the 'Western' self rather than on distant sufferers, post-humanitarian communicative modes end up concealing what Chouliaraki (2011: 374) refers to as 'the structures of injustice which underlie humanitarian calls to action'. As such, we can situate VR as one of those mediums which, in Chouliaraki's words (2011: 368), seek to

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[5] For an article exploring the way in which media tend to reduce sufferers to their experiences of suffering, see Tammas (2019).

> 'represent human vulnerability in innovative ways that break with the 'objective' certainties of pity and, in so doing, they depart from a morality of 'universal' proximity towards a morality of self-distance as a more pragmatic basis for imagining our relationship to distant others'.

However, in so doing, they risk decontextualising and dehistoricising distant suffering, thus failing to construe 'global South' sufferers as 'historical figures who struggle to come to terms with their own predicament and, hence, as figures that deserve our empathy and care' (Chouliaraki, 2011: 371).

Keeping in mind the risks described above relating to VR use, one ought to remember that these risks should also be assessed on a case-by-case basis, depending on how the VR experience in question is designed (Nash, 2017: 120). This will depend on what narratives the VR production rests on, as well as how it represents the 'Other' discursively. VR advocate Jeremy Bailenson himself (2018b) contends that the efficacy of VR productions depends on whether they create 'carefully crafted' quality content. To conclude, this chapter sought to bring attention to some risks which VR productions run in terms of representing the suffering 'Other' in the 'global South', and to cast doubt on VR's conceptualisation as an innovative medium which will change humanitarianism for the better by enhancing our relationship with such 'Other'. Depending on how it is used, as well as on the content of each production, it is submitted that the use of VR in humanitarian communications runs the risk of impoverishing our understanding of the 'Other'.

METHODOLOGY

Research question

In the next chapters, I will concentrate on two 360-degree humanitarian appeal videos, charity: water's *The Source* (2016) and The Milaan Foundation's and Oculus' *Girl Icon* (2019). I do not seek to assess the material efficacy of humanitarian Virtual Reality productions in terms of help and donations raised.[6] Instead, I will explore the videos' representation of the suffering 'Other' in the 'global South' and seek to answer the following questions: Is VR a revolutionary medium which carries the potential to fundamentally change the field of humanitarian communications for the better by representing the 'Other' along the lines of an 'ethics of care' (Silverstone, 2006) and a solidarity of justice (Chouliaraki, 2013)? Does the use of VR in *The Source* and *Girl Icon* manage to 'fundamentally reframe the relation of knowledge, ethics and agency' (Bystrom and Mosse, 2018: 94) associated with dominant representations of distant suffering? Does it manage to 'preserve the other through difference as well as through shared identity' (Silverstone, 2002: 770)? Or, conversely, does it end up impoverishing our understanding of the 'Other' by perpetuating problematic narratives which fail to expose the 'structures of injustice' (Chouliaraki, 2011: 374) underpinning the humanitarian field?

Rationale for the methodology used

To answer the questions formulated above, this dissertation relies on audio-visual and semiotic analysis. This approach lends itself particularly well to an analysis of Virtual Reality 360-degree videos because of the videos' reliance on auditory and visual materials to convey meaning. Moreover, audio-visual analysis is suitable to deal with 'questions of representation' (Van Leeuwen, 2001a: 92) and can be applied to all kinds of visual materials (Bignell, 2002). Finally, as methods, audio-visual and semiotic analysis resonate well with the theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation, basing itself as it does on the acknowledgement that in all societies there are 'inequalities in the distribution of power and other goods' (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 3) and that such 'structures of domination' (ibid) are reflected in visual representations in the form of symbolic power. Texts[7] can be understood as sites of struggle where different meanings compete for dominance (see Chandler and Munday, 2020). By analysing how the visual reflects such structures of domination, audio-visual and semiotic analysis possess the ability to 'lay bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful' (Rose, 2016) or, in other words, to expose the hierarchies and differences which certain visualisations naturalise (Fyfe and Law, 1998: 1).

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[6] In fact, some studies, such as the ones conducted by Jeremy Bailenson (2018), point to VR technology doubling the amount of donations.

Sampling strategy

As regards the sampling strategy, I used purposive sampling (Mason, 2002: 124) to select the materials analysed in this dissertation. My selection was based on the relevance of the materials to my research question (Ibid), as well as on how conceptually interesting they were (Rose, 2016: 110) and on their potential fruitfulness for the purposes of my analysis. Therefore, the choice to focus on *The Source* and *Girl Icon* rested on my belief that these videos could meaningfully contribute to a discussion around the representation of the suffering 'Other' in humanitarian communications. Moreover, the fact that both videos focused on exploring the daily lives of two young girls in the 'global South' also influenced my choice, as I deemed it could open up possibilities to draw valuable comparisons. The choice of purposive sampling was made with mindfulness of the limitations of such sampling strategy, in particular the danger that it might lead to biases in the analysis due to the 'cherry-picking' of materials it encourages (Sriwimon and Zilli, 2017: 136), issues which I tried to address through researcher reflexivity.

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[7] I am using the word 'text' here in its broadest sense, as referring to a 'semiotic accomplishment' (Chouliaraki, 2006:70) and therefore including audio-visual material of different sorts.

Conceptual and analytical framework

The research design for this analysis was constructed using the knowledge gathered from the literature on humanitarian communications and in particular on the representation of distant suffering and 'Otherness'. As regards the analytical approach, this analysis bases itself on Stuart Hall's three step approach (1997) and draws on Lilie Chouliaraki's 'Analytics of Mediation' in her work *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006: 70-96) to identify key analytical categories to include. According to Hall (1997), the analysis of visual materials includes three steps: Firstly, the signifiers in the image should be identified at the denotative (descriptive) level, the most basic level of meaning. Secondly, the meaning of the image should be established at the connotative level. Finally, the third step requires looking at the image at the level of 'myths' (Barthes, 1973), thus looking for an interpretation of the image in its entirety and 'in terms of the wider realms of social ideology – the general beliefs, conceptual frameworks and value systems of society' (Hall, 1997: 23). Along with Hall's approach and the emphasis on the verbal, I will use specific concepts proposed by Chouliaraki (2006) regarding the analysis of representations of distant suffering.

A crucial consideration which informed my analysis regards the combination of text and image, which are inextricably entangled (Mitchell, 1986). As Sturken and Cartwright (2009: 33) comment, the text should always be taken into account when analysing visual materials, as it can be used to 'direct the viewer's interpretation to a particular meaning' out of the multiple potential meanings that an image might have. In fact, as Chouliaraki (2006: 77) emphasises, the verbal also performs a fundamental organising and ordering function, organising as it does the spaces and temporalities of events. In my analysis, it will emerge that the verbal often sustains and reinforces the effects achieved by the use of VR technology, thus pointing to a 'substantial referential relationship' between verbal and visual modes (Chouliaraki, 2006: 80). Furthermore, as regards the use of VR technology, I will consider the following questions: 'Which point of view is the 360-degree camera taking? Which angle? Which framing? Which vectors of movement?' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 77). Where is the 'eye level' (Rose, 2016: 68), and does it endorse a position of inferiority or superiority? In fact, camera angles can point to relations of symbolic power (Van Leeuwen, 2001b: 3). As Van Leeuwen comments:

> 'If you look down on something, you look at it from a position of symbolic power. If you look up at something, that something has some kind of symbolic power over you. At eye-level there is a relation of symbolic equality' (ibid).

It is also important to consider how the video positions 'Western' viewers in relation to the images shown (Rose, 2016: 19). In this case, what community of spectators are *The Source* and *Girl Icon* assuming? Are they evoking a community of persecutors or benefactors? (Chouliaraki, 2006: 91) Are they evoking a caring, cosmopolitan audience or one of ironic spectators? Another important aspect which might be revealing in terms of analysing the 'structures of domination' (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 3) and symbolic power imbalances reproduced in humanitarian communications is to look at whether the sufferers are gazing directly at the camera (Chouliaraki, 2006: 89). According to Van Leeuwen (2001: 15), when the people depicted in the screen look directly at the viewer, they 'make contact' with them, thus creating a certain relation with them – a relation where the gaze is 'mutual' (Maoz 2006) rather than unidirectional and asymmetric. Conversely, someone who is depicted gazing away from the camera avoids establishing a connection with the viewer. This is reminiscent of Erwing Goffman's concept of 'licensed withdrawal': in his work *Gender Advertisements* (1979), Goffman argues that women are often depicted in passive attitudes and looking away from the camera (1979: 57). Similarly, according to Van Leeuwen (2001b: 8), representing someone as looking away risks objectifying them as the 'Other', thus hindering identification with the represented subject. Applied to humanitarian representations of distant suffering, representing sufferers from very close but looking away might reproduce unequal power relations by placing the 'Western' viewer in a position of power and further 'othering' 'global South' subjects. Finally, I will consider the category of the 'space-time of suffering' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 85), which examines 'how the reality of the safe spectator encounters the reality of the distant sufferer in different degrees of intensity and involvement'. Being also the category which 'regulates the moral distance between spectator and sufferer' (ibid), employing it in the analysis might prove useful to analyse the question of proper distance, that is to assess whether they run the risk of improper distance or whether, conversely, they manage 'preserve the other through difference as well as through shared identity' (Silverstone, 2006: 47). Further signifying elements which might be of relevance to the analysis will also be taken into account, such as, for example, the use of colour (Rose, 2016: 64).

Epistemology and limitations of the method

Engaging in audio-visual analysis should always involve a 'critical reflection on [one's] own research practice' (Rose, 2016: 216). As regards the epistemological basis, underpinning this dissertation is a reliance on the 'constructionist' approach, according to which representations do not simply reflect meaning but rather take part in the construction of reality. As Hall (1997: 30) emphasises, at the heart of the constructionist theory of meaning lies the 'idea that physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse'. As a result, visual materials should not be understood as having one 'true' meaning, but rather multiple, possible interpretations: as Lacey emphasises (2009: 83), the nature of texts is open and polysemic. Another important factor to take into consideration is the hermeneutical problem, which refers to the fact that researchers will always embark on their research journey carrying certain expectations which might push them towards a particular interpretation, thus potentially creating biases in their analysis. Mindful of this difficulty, this dissertation does not purport to find 'the' correct way into the 360-videos in question, but rather seeks to propose a possible interpretation out of the multiple potential interpretations that could be made.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Having explored the main arguments behind VR's conceptualisation as a medium which will enhance our understanding of the 'Other', this chapter focuses on two VR productions in particular: Charity: water's *The Source* (2016) and The Milaan Foundation's *Girl Icon* (2019). After a brief introduction to the content of the videos, it will draw on the arguments submitted in the literature review to comment on the films' specific use of VR technology. In particular, it will explore how *The Source* and *Girl Icon* use VR technology to represent the 'Other', considering whether they manage to align themselves to an 'ethics of care' (Silverstone, 2006), or whether on the other hand they risk 'othering' the 'global South' subjects represented. Finally, it will discuss how a different use of VR technology could hold the potential to open up a subversive space where the dominant, problematic ways of representing the 'Other' in the 'global South' could be challenged through 'small acts of repair' (Sanyal, 2017: 6).

The use of VR in 360-degree videos *The Source* and *Girl Icon*

Charity: water's *The Source* follows the daily life of Selam, a thirteen-year-old girl from Ethiopia. As viewers follow her through a typical day in her village, as she collects water, takes care of her siblings, performs household chores and goes to school, Selam recounts the negative consequences which the lack of clean water has had on her life, as well as on the whole village. The second part of the video is characterised by a sudden change in the narrative and a more 'upbeat' mood: as Selam's father hears that 'men are coming to drill for water' (4.35-50), viewers witness the emotionally loaded moment as the water drilling machine finally finds clean water, as well as the improvement of Selam's living conditions after she has access to clean water. Following a young girl in her daily life in India, Milaan Foundation's *Girl Icon* epitomises the 'positive turn' of humanitarian communications described above. Instead of focusing on negative details, *Girl Icon* follows Indian quasi-*wunderkind* Rani through her busy daily life as a 'girl icon' in India, as she inspires fellow girls to 'empower themselves'[8] through the Milaan Foundation's 'Girl Icon Fellowship'. In particular, the video aims at raising awareness on the poor girl retention rate which characterises Indian schools, as well as on the importance of girls getting a formal education to become economically independent.

Challenging VR's construction as a 'frameless' medium: Mediation in The Source *and* Girl Icon

As established in the literature review, the first misconception characterising discourse around VR regards the medium's construction as 'frameless' and somehow bypassing the process of mediation. To expose the mediated nature of VR productions, the next paragraphs will highlight specific representational choices adopted by *The Source* and *Girl Icon* which might influence viewers' perception of the suffering 'Other', thus representing an exercise of symbolic power. A crucial decision made by both videos relates to the choice of protagonist: in fact, both 360-degree videos choose to focus on a young girl from the 'global South' as the main messenger of their humanitarian appeal. The choice to use a young, female subject is a conscious choice which might be problematic in three particular ways: Firstly, it aligns both videos to the current 'Girl Effect' trend which, in turn, might be problematic in terms of rightfully representing the suffering 'Other'. Starting with the Nike's Foundation eponymous campaign, humanitarian discourse has, indeed, become increasingly characterised by an emphasis on the importance of empowering young women in a global economy (Banet-Weiser 2015: 182), importance which is now recognised by international organisations such as the World Bank, the IMF, USAID and DFID, amongst others (Hickel, 2014: 1355). The 'Girl Effect' campaign, along with the increasing popularity of 'empowerment' and 'sisterhood' discourses in the humanitarian field (Orgad and Nikunen, 2015: 14), has led to a phenomenon called the 'girling' (Hayhurst, 2011:532) or 'girlpowering of development' (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Hickel, 2014; Orgad and Nikunen, 2015: 14-5), a discourse which sees 'investing in girls' (Nike Foundation, 2008) as the best strategy to unleash a series of consequences (e.g. no child marriage, wiser spending, more workforce) which, in turn will eradicate poverty on the global level. Such narrative has, however, been widely criticised for relying on a neoliberal logic which ends up depoliticising the issue of poverty in the 'global South'. For example, according to Koffmann and Gill (2013: 86) the 'Girl Effect' narrative supports neoliberal values of individualism, entrepreneurial subjectivity and consumerism, yoking those values together with a rhetoric of revolution. Similarly, Hickel (2014: 1356) provocatively comments that:

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[8] For a critique of the neoliberal notion of empowerment and its relation to popular feminism and girl power discourse, see Banet-Weiser, 2018.

> 'the story is apolitical enough to be safe for corporations and international banks to promote without undermining their own interests, and compelling enough for them to use as a PR campaign that effectively disguises the extractive relationships they have with the global South'.

Furthermore, the 'Girl Effect' narrative's excessive emphasis on girls' agency risks positioning them as 'disproportionately responsible for ending poverty for themselves and their families, communities, nations, and the world' (Moeller, 2014: 576). We find this reasoning, for example, as Rani recounts how she 'realized that [she has] to change [her] own thinking first, then [her] family will change, then society will change' (4.22). This is problematic, because it risks blaming 'global South' people for problems which are constructed as simply 'internal' and 'out there' (Spivak, 2007, cited in Dogra, 2011: 336), shifting attention away from the involvement of 'Western' countries in the dynamics which create the economic disparities between 'global North' and 'global South' – those very dynamics which humanitarianism purportedly seeks to expose and tackle. As such, the choice of focusing on two young women from the 'global South' as the protagonists of *The Source* and *Girl Icon* already risks situating the videos in a problematic narrative which might have negative effects on how the videos represent the suffering 'Other'. Secondly, the decision of casting young girls also risks perpetuating problematic neo-imperialist notions which represent 'global South' women as oppressed victims in need of saving by the 'white saviour' (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Koffman and Gill, 2013: 85). This is a common representational strategy in humanitarian campaigns: as Anita Dogra (2011: 335) highlights, women and children make up 72 per cent of the characters shown in INGOs' messages. This tendency is especially evident in *The Source,* where Selam is constantly depicted as a victim and never represented as an agent. For example, she reveals to viewers her worries related to drinking dirty water (1.20-1.44) and speaks about the hardship which the loss of her mother has brought on her life (02:24-30). Most strikingly, the video ends with the following statement (7:48-55): 'Today, Selam is healthy and attends school 5 days a week. Yet millions of girls like Selam are still *waiting for clean water*'. Thirdly, through the choice of concentrating on 'global South' girls, *The Source* and *Girl Icon* also risk inadvertently infantilising the 'global South' as a whole (Bystrom and Mosse 2018: 94), thus perpetuating the essentialisation of the 'global South' as a 'feminine and attractive, but also powerless and vulnerable' 'Other' waiting to be saved by a masculine, rational, 'Western' self (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998: 231-2).

Another significant factor which might influence how VR productions craft the 'Western' relationship with distant sufferers regards the text of the videos. In fact, as highlighted in chapter four, the text plays a crucial role in integrating visual materials. An important aspect to analyse when looking at the text is what is mentioned as opposed to what is not: where does the VR video seek to direct viewers' attention? Are there 'significant silences' in Echtner and Prasad's sense (2003: 671) which might disguise the text's exercise of symbolic power? Interestingly, both *The Source* and *Girl Icon* lack precise contextual information about the causes of the suffering depicted. *The Source,* for example, despite providing some information about the risks associated with drinking dirty water, never explores the causes underlying poverty in the 'global South', nor implicates 'Western' viewers in the problem. Similarly, *Girl Icon* limits itself to providing some statistics about girls' retention rates in Indian schools and in the world (5.40-52), but never explores the causes thereof, tending instead to exceptionalise the education system (Khoja-Moolji, 2015: 88). Furthermore, neither *The Source* nor *Girl Icon* refer to the exact location of what is happening in the video. This is especially striking in *The Source,* where viewers can merely assume that Selam's story takes place 'somewhere in Africa'. Similarly, in *Girl Icon,* no explicit reference is made to Rani's region or town in India. This stands in stark contrast with the realism which allegedly characterises VR productions, once again showing that VR videos should not be understood as accurate reflections of reality. Moreover, the failure of both videos to address the causes of distant suffering and to situate them in a specific location risks damaging our understanding of the 'Other' by perpetuating generalisations about the 'global South' which place it 'within a discursive regime of Otherness' (Ogola, 2015: 22). As Bystrom and Mosse (2018: 94), referring to 360-degree video *Clouds Over Sidra,* comment, ignoring the political context makes it difficult for viewers to 'make any connection to the people in the film beyond 'mere humanity''. In other words, if a VR production avoids providing crucial information about the causes and context of the suffering it depicts, it risks representing the 'Other' as less than human, as 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998).

A further way in which VR's mediation choices can frame our understanding of the 'Other' regards the placement of the camera. Firstly, the fact that the 360-degree camera is often placed in the centre of a vast landscape works to reinforce the assumption about the camera's neutrality and its ability to show reality 'as it really is'. Nevertheless, a decision about where the camera is placed is always involved. For example, does the camera show a rural or an urban landscape? Arguably, placing the camera in a rural setting, as happens in *The Source,* might perpetuate the image of the global South as a mainly rural, underdeveloped place. The case of *Girl Icon*, where the camera is placed in an urban slum, can be criticised along the same lines: merely showing an urban slum filled with garbage can be understood as contributing to negative and stereotyped representations of the 'global South' (Dogra 2007: 169). Moreover, while with 360-degree cameras it might be difficult to speak about a 'camera angle', the decisions as to the height of the camera as well as to its placement compared to the filmed subjects play a pivotal role in how the 'Other' is represented. For example, *The Source*'s tendency to victimise Selam is reinforced by the use of the 360-degree camera, which often films Selam from above – a position of symbolic superiority, as mentioned in the previous chapter. For example, at 3:48 the camera films Selam from a very high angle as she is teaching her brother how to read, making her seem very little and emphasising her status as victim. On the other hand, in *Girl Icon* the camera is often placed below Rani, seeking to position her in a position of superiority and control which resonates well with the current 'girlpowering of development'. This can be observed, for example, as Rani is filmed from below as she reads aloud in front of her class at minute 3:42. In this case, the placement of the camera reinforces the position of authority Rani holds while lecturing the class. At the same time, however, it risks bolstering the problematic tendency to over-emphasise girls' agency discussed above. Therefore, by positioning the camera in specific ways, VR videos risk perpetuating problematic narratives: the narrative of the 'Western saviour', 'gazing at and coming to the rescue of the needy 'Other'' (Orgad and Nikunen, 2015: 9), as in the case of *The Source,* or that of the 'empowered' girl from the 'global South', as in the case of *Girl Icon.*

Finally, as mentioned in chapter four, analysing visual material also includes looking at the use of colour. In *The Source* and *Girl Icon,* colour works as an important branding technique, bolstering the contemporary trend of the branding of the humanitarian field (Chouliaraki, 2013; Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Richey and Ponte, 2011; Vestergaard, 2008). In *The Source,* the men who drill water in Selam's village arrive in a yellow truck, wearing yellow helmets (05:03). Crucially, yellow is also the colour of the charity: water logo. By making it the distinctive colour of one of the most emotional scenes in the video, charity: water aims at generating trust in 'Western' audiences by creating a symbolic connection between the colour yellow on the one hand – and the positive emotions of hope and happiness it signifies in the video – and the charity: water brand on the other. Similarly, *Girl Icon* heavily relies on the colour pink, which is reminiscent of the colour of the Milaan Foundation's logo, as well as a universal signifier for the concept of 'girl power'. In the video, pink is used as font colour (e.g. 0:17), as well as to draw the scene where Rani rides a bicycle (5:34). The choice of branding humanitarianism can have negative consequences on the representation of the 'Other'. Indeed, it can be argued that the videos, instead of focusing on denouncing suffering in the 'global South', are complicit with a neoliberal branding logic which is responsible for the very economic imbalances they seek to address.

Improper distance in The Source *and* Girl Icon

Having explored the choices of mediation which characterise *The Source* and *Girl Icon,* in the next paragraphs I will discuss where the use of VR can be situated along the axis of proximity-distance (Chouliaraki, 2011: 363) in both videos. Firstly, I will explore the risk of proximity by looking at instances where the videos bring viewers too close to 'global South' subjects, thus 'collapsing rather than bridging distance' (Andrejevic and Volcic, 2019: 11). Secondly, I will analyse the videos in the light of the risk of excessive distance, focusing on the implications which privileging the 'Western' self might have on the representation of the 'Other'. As regards the risk of proximity, an important factor to consider regards the positioning of the camera in comparison to the subjects in the video (Chouliaraki, 2006: 86). For example, if the camera is positioned in close proximity to the subjects, the viewer has the possibility to gaze at them from very close. On top of creating improper distance, this also risks perpetuating the power imbalances between the 'West' and the 'global South' by placing the 'Western' viewer in a position of symbolic power. In fact, in post-colonial studies the 'Western' gaze over 'global South' subjects has been described as a 'disciplinary gaze' (Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 120) which places the 'Western' viewer in a position of power and control over 'global South' subjects along an 'ethos of capture' (Sanyal, 2017: 8). This is especially true if the subjects in question do not gaze back, as highlighted in chapter four. Such position of control is further intensified by the heightened degree of control inherent in VR as a medium, which allows viewers to have 360-degree vision and shift their visual focus at will. VR's risk of proximity is especially striking in *The Source,* where viewers are invited to observe Selam from very close, even though she gazes back only rarely (see, for example, minutes 01:42 and 03:16) and rather, tends to 'withdraw' (Goffman, 1979) from the 'Western' gaze. A similar risk of proximity is created when the 360-degree camera insists on penetrating intimate, domestic spaces. This is especially striking in *Girl Icon,* where the camera continuously dwells on showing intimate spaces such as Rani's kitchen and bedroom (see, for example, minutes 02:01 and 02:39), thus producing an 'intimate gaze' (Tyler and Gill, 2013: 80) which runs the risk of perpetuating 'improper distance' (Chouliaraki, 2011).

Correspondingly, when the videos privilege viewers' experience and enjoyment made possible by VR technology instead of focusing on Selam's and Rani's witnessing accounts of suffering, they run the risk of excessive distance. In *The Source,* this is most striking at minute 6:22: As the water drilling machines finally reach the water, a jet of clean water suddenly erupts towards the sky. At this point, while the village inhabitants start to cheerfully clap and dance, the 360-degree camera, rather than placing viewers at their side, places them exactly under the jet of water. Due to positioning of the camera, water splashes start to increasingly surround the viewer, creating a feeling reminiscent of being under a waterfall. The problem with this scene is that, by privileging viewers' enjoyment of the immersion enabled by VR technology, the video 'invites forms of self-focus and self-projection' (Nash, 2017: 125), thus deflecting attention from the suffering in the 'global South'. A similar moment can be found in *Girl Icon* at minute 7:45: At this point, viewers are positioned in the middle of a circle formed by a group of Indian girls holding hands. As the girls walk around the viewer, laughing and dancing, the 360-video induces feelings of inclusion and excitement, but also confusion and dizziness.

In this case, too, the 360-degree video seems to be setting aside its aim of representing the 'Other' in their humanity to instead provide viewers with a 'cool, fun and self-centred activity' which 'foregrounds the pleasure of the (western) spectators' (Orgad and Nikunen, 2015: 17). A further way in which the use of VR in *The Source* and *Girl Icon* runs the risk of excessive distance regards the very construction of 360-degree videos as enabling viewers to explore the surrounding environments in every scene. In fact, in both videos there are several instances of scenes where viewers are left alone with Selam or Rami as they recount their experiences, but are simultaneously invited to explore the surroundings which 360-degree technology has plunged them in. This is problematic because, as Nash comments (2017: 128):

> '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.'

In other words, by encouraging 'exploration'[9] of the mediated 360-degree environment even when viewers are expected to listen to the sufferers' accounts, the videos are encouraging viewers to privilege their own experience over that of the suffering 'Other'. In these cases, the representational practices of the videos align well with Chouliaraki's notion of a post-humanitarian sensibility (2013), outlined above, whereby contemporary humanitarianism privileges 'a self-oriented form of solidarity' (Orgad and Nikunen, 2015: 17) characterised by 'feel-good altruism' (ibid: 4). By privileging 'Western' spectators, *The Source* and *Girl Icon* therefore risk perpetuating 'improper distance' (Chouliaraki, 2011) and impoverishing viewers' understanding of the 'Other'.

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[9] While it would exceed the scope of this dissertation, it would be interesting to explore the neo-colonial connotations of VR's obsession with 'exploring' the 'global South' through a 360-degree, all-seeing gaze.

Representing the 'Other' along an 'ethics of care': alternatives for Virtual Reality productions

Considering the above, it appears that the use of VR technology in general, and in *The Source* and *Girl Icon* in particular, risks perpetuating problematic narratives which do not create the preconditions necessary for a 'a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding' (Silverstone, 2006: 47) towards the 'Other' to arise. In the next paragraphs, I will consider whether there might be alternative ways to use VR technology in a more subversive way, a way that might open up spaces to foster a more meaningful relationship with distant sufferers based on an ethics of care (Silverstone, 2006) and which might, as mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, 'fundamentally reframe the relation of knowledge, ethics and agency', as Bystrom and Mosse put it (2018: 94). How could VR humanitarian appeals get closer to this objective? In the next paragraphs, I will explore this question drawing also on examples from *The Source* and *Girl Icon.*

Highlighting Virtual Reality's constructedness through self-referentiality and alienation effects

The first way in which VR could manage to generate 'a rupture in the prevailing frames of visibility' (Tyler and Gill, 2013: 89) associated with representing the 'Other' is by estranging viewers from what is depicted on the screen. To engender a critical stance amongst the audience, German playwright Bertold Brecht developed the concept of 'epic theatre' (1967), a theatre which does not aim at entertaining viewers, but at encouraging them to think critically. According to Brecht, the audience could be encouraged to think critically through 'Verfremdungseffekte', namely estrangement techniques which, by presenting familiar contents in an unfamiliar way, would prevent the audience from empathising with the narrative (Zhou, 2015: 135). Orgad (2011:403-5), too, recognises the potential of estrangement, or 'proper distance from ourselves', commenting that estrangement is not only an artistic technique, but also an 'ethical principle' which is 'vital for interacting with others'. An effective estrangement technique could be self-referentiality. Author Donald Richie (1971) defines self-referential film as film

> ‘which is about itself. Unlike the traditional narrative film, which seeks to maintain the illusion that what we are seeing is reality, the self-referential film wants to show that it itself is an illusion. All self-referential cinema becomes, then, a search for reality, or for truth.’

Estrangement could therefore be achieved by showing parts of the film production process such as ‘the camera, the mike, the movieola, the cutting board, even, occasionally, the audience’ (Richie, 1971). It could also be achieved by bringing attention to the editing process VR videos go through, a practice which is observable in two moments of *Girl Icon* where, instead of being plunged in the 360-degree environment, viewers are shown multiple scenes unfolding simultaneously in front of their eyes (01:11-30, 2:57-3:13). Depending on where they tilt their head, viewers are presented with different videos depicting different scenes from Rani’s daily life. This representational technique is unusual for a VR production since, rather than making the most of the potentialities of 360-degree video technology, it simply shows a series of regular videos. Spectators, having grown accustomed with being immersed in Rani’s story, are thus forced to take a step back and realise the ‘unfamiliarity of the familiar’ (Brecht, 1967), which promotes the development of a critical stance towards what is represented. Moreover, depicting Rani’s life in such kaleidoscopic way casts attention on the complexity and multitude of aspects making up her life, thus avoiding, at least to some extent, reducing her to a ‘global South girl’ type. As such, self-referentiality could serve to expose the constructedness of VR productions, thus problematising VR’s claim to ‘framelessness’ and avoiding the furtherance of uncritical attitudes amongst viewers.

Addressing the risk of improper distance

Secondly, as discussed above, VR productions should aim at achieving ‘proper distance’ (Silverstone, 2006:47), as this would promote the creation of a sense of the ‘Other’ ‘sufficient for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility’ to arise. As regards the risk of bringing viewers too close to the suffering ‘Other’, the concept of estrangement explored above remains relevant. In fact, estrangement has the effect of distancing viewers from what is represented, thus avoiding the risk of proximity. In addition to self-referentiality, estrangement can also be achieved by introducing moments of pause and reflection, as *Girl Icon* manages to do in certain scenes. For example, at three different moments during the video, Rani stops her narration to instead address viewers directly. As the screen turns completely black, she asks viewers to think about their own lives: 'think about what are the good and bad things in your lives. Tell me about your neighbours, school and your personal life' (1.01-05). In the third interruption, Rani also asks viewers to 'think about what [they] want [their] future to look like' (04:01-04). On top of creating a moment of reflection, these interruptions openly encourage a comparison between Rani's difficult situation and the viewer's own privileged existence. Such comparison has the potential to make viewers understand the 'Other' not merely along the lines of their common humanity – a discourse which has been criticised for 'fail[ing] to recognise the radical plurality of world histories and cultures and ultimately exlud[ing] those who do not fit the cultural norms of the West' (Chouliaraki and Orgad, 2011:343). Instead, by casting attention on the different positions of power occupied by viewers in the 'West' on the one hand, and suffering subjects in the 'global South' on the other, the video invites viewers to 'acknowledge, accept and respect difference' (Orgad 2012: 312). Finally, to avoid the risk of excessive proximity, VR productions could also avoid depicting intimate details of the sufferers' lives, as they might create forms of non-reciprocal bonding between 'Western' viewers and 'global South' subjects (Orgad, 2012: 917). Amidst recent critiques accusing VR of being a new form of 'poverty tourism' (Alsever, 2015) or 'poverty porn' (Jabour, 2017), it is crucial for VR productions to avoid fixating on showing intimate spaces. At the same time, the risk of excessive distance can be addressed by avoiding to adopt a post-humanitarian, narcissistic style (Chouliaraki 2013) which privileges the experience of 'Western' viewers over the humanitarian aim of denouncing instances of suffering. As mentioned above, such risk is inherent in VR's very construction, encouraging viewers as it does to turn away and explore the surroundings, instead of devoting their undivided attention to the sufferers' accounts. Nevertheless, the extent to which VR is used as a 'cool, fun and self-centred activity', in Orgad's and Nikunen's terms (2015: 17), rather than as a means to foster solidarity, will depend on each production. Instead of merely focusing on the sensory dimension of the VR experience, humanitarian appeals should make use of the potentialities of immersion to foreground messages of suffering along the lines of care and solidarity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, analysing the humanitarian 360-video campaigns *The Source* and *Girl Icon* has provided fruitful insights into the implications of the use of Virtual Reality technology on the representation of the suffering 'Other' in humanitarian communications. Starting with a description of the changing humanitarian field and its increased reliance on the use of Virtual Reality technology, this dissertation has then considered the potential risks associated with using VR for the purposes of humanitarian communications. In particular, two problematic aspects of contemporary discourse around VR were highlighted: Firstly, the medium's claim to 'framelessness', which runs the risk of fostering an uncritical attitude in viewers, and secondly, the risk of 'improper distance' (Silverstone, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2011), which VR humanitarian appeals run when they bring viewers either too close or too distant from the suffering 'Other'. Both characteristics are potentially problematic because, whether by producing an uncritical attitude in viewers, as in the case of VR's supposed 'framelessness', or by failing to 'preserve the other through difference as well as through shared identity' (Silverstone, 2006: 47), as with the case of improper distance, they end up concealing the 'structures of injustice which underlie humanitarian calls to action' (Chouliaraki, 2011: 374). Using audio-visual and semiotic analysis, this dissertation has then focused on charity: water's *The Source* and the Milaan Foundation's and Oculus' *Girl Icon* to explore the implications of the use of VR on the representation of distant sufferers. After focusing on the choices of mediation which characterise both appeals, such as the choice of protagonist and the positioning of the omnidirectional camera, I considered the risk of 'improper distance'. I determined that both videos risk either placing viewers too close to the suffering 'Other' through 'mediated intimacy' (Orgad and Seu, 2014) and along an 'ethos of capture' (Sanyal, 2017: 8), or too distant by prioritising 'Western' enjoyment of the potentialities of VR technology, thus aligning themselves with a 'post-humanitarian' (Chouliaraki, 2013), ironic solidarity. Finally, I explored ways in which VR could, if differently conceptualised, open up a subversive space as regards the representation of the 'Other' in humanitarian communications. In conclusion, analysing the use of VR in humanitarian communications, and in *The Source* and *Girl Icon* in particular, has cast doubt on VR's supposed ability to foster a relationship of solidarity and care with the suffering 'Other' in the 'global South'. By exploring the risks associated with representing the ‘Other’ through VR, it emerged that this medium, unless differently conceptualised, might not be the long-sought-after solution to changing humanitarianism for the better, as contemporary discourse so vehemently constructs it.

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APPENDIX

Camera angles

The Source (3:48):

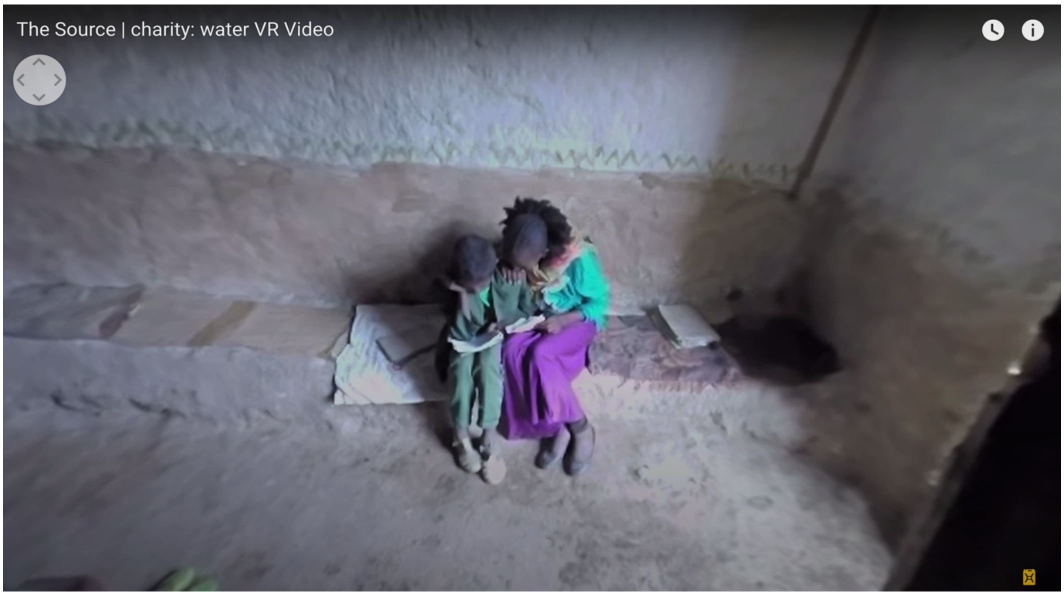
The Source | charity: water VR Video

Figure 1: The 360-degree camera films protagonist Selam from above, signifying victimhood and submissiveness and thus facilitating the viewer's identification as 'Western' saviour.

Girl Icon (3:42):

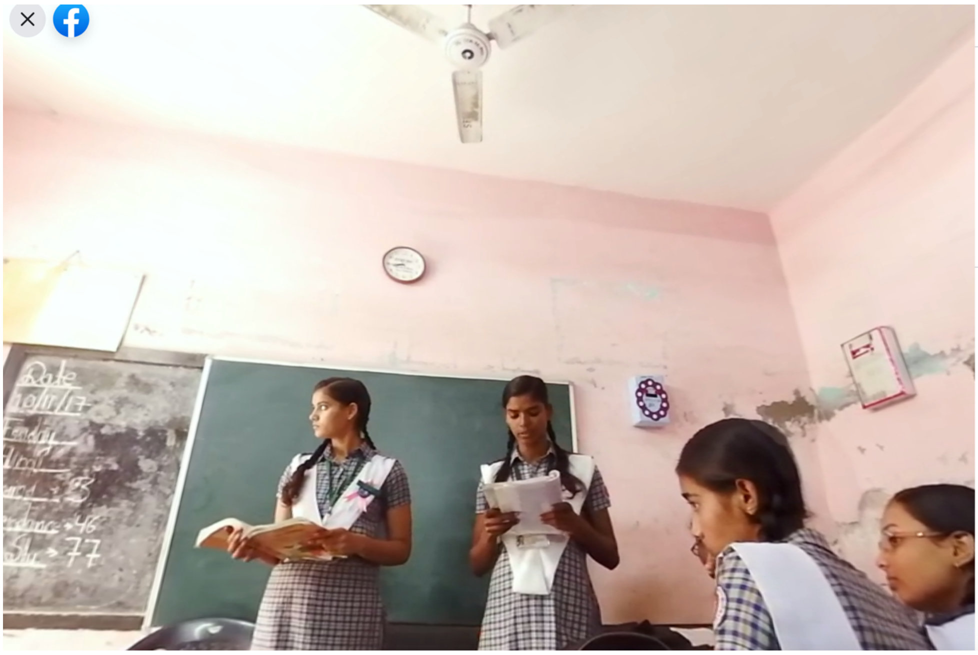

Figure 2: The 360-degree camera films Rani from below, suggesting a position of authority and empowerment over the other girls depicted, as well as over the viewer.

Humanitarian branding in *The Source* and *Girl Icon*

The Source (05:03):

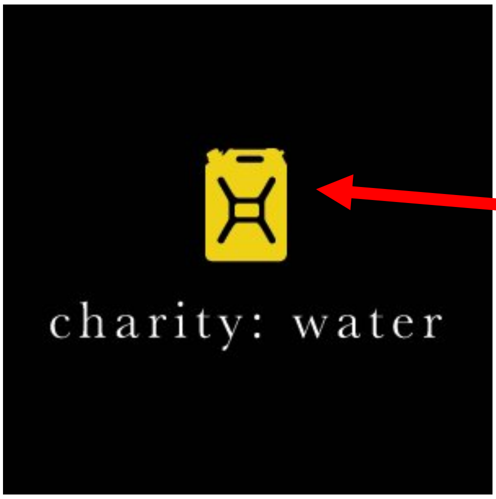
charity: water

Figure 3: The charity: water logo.

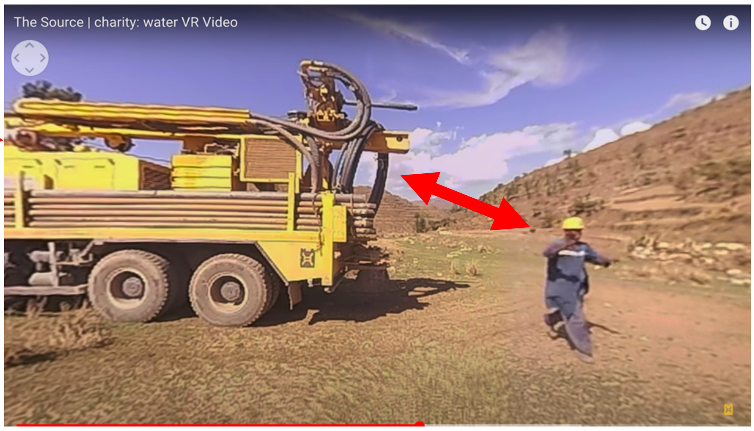
The Source | charity: water VR Video

Figure 4: Use of colour yellow in *The Source:* yellow truck and yellow helmet signify the charity: water brand.

Girl Icon (0:13 and 5:34):

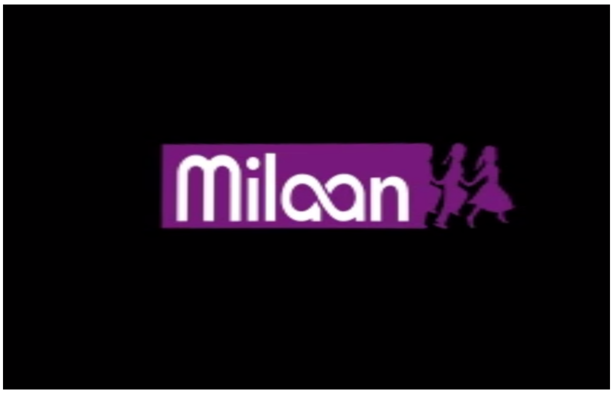

Figure 6: The Milaan Foundation logo.

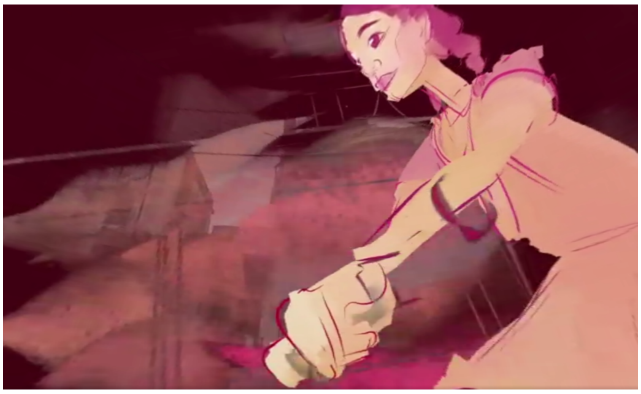

Figure 5: The colour pink is used to represent Rani, echoing both the concept of 'girl power' and the Milaan Foundation brand.

Improper distance: the risk of proximity

Girl Icon: 'Mediated intimacy' (02:01 and 02:39):

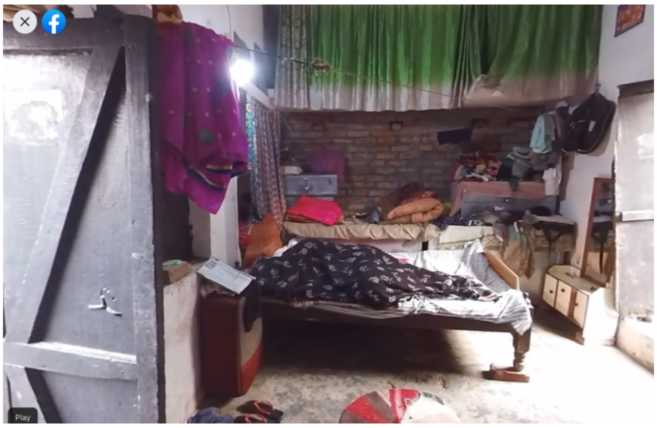

Figure 8: The camera films intimate, domestic spaces, showing us Rani's living room and bedroom.

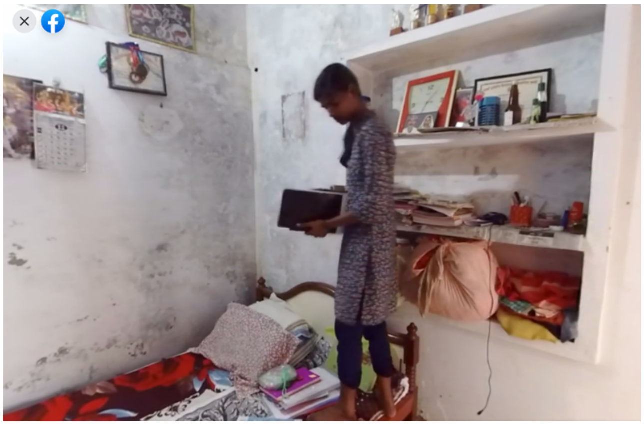

Figure 7: Camera once again positioned below Rani as she stands on her bed, suggesting empowerment and 'girl power'.

The Source: 'Ethos of capture' and 'licensed withdrawal' (01:42 and 03:16):

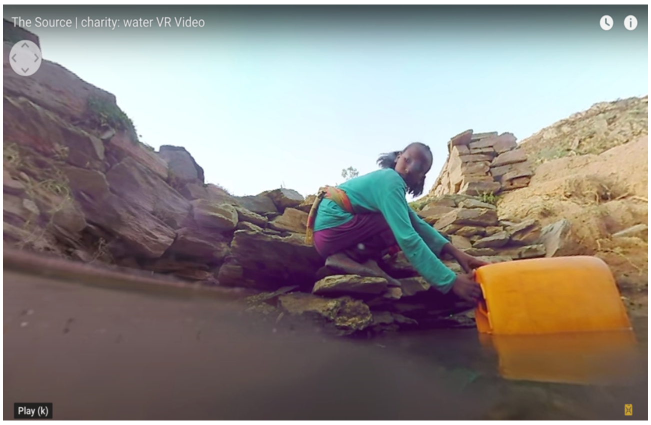
The Source | charity: water VR Video
Play (k)

Figure 9: The camera films Selam during her daily life from an intimate degree of proximity, while Selam does not gaze back.

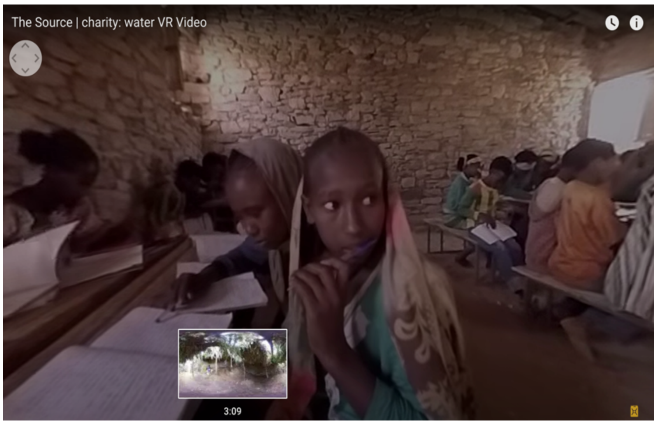
The Source | charity: water VR Video
3:09

Figure 10: In this scene, too, the gaze is not mutual, as Selam does not gaze back at viewers.

Improper distance: the risk of excessive distance

The Source (6:22):

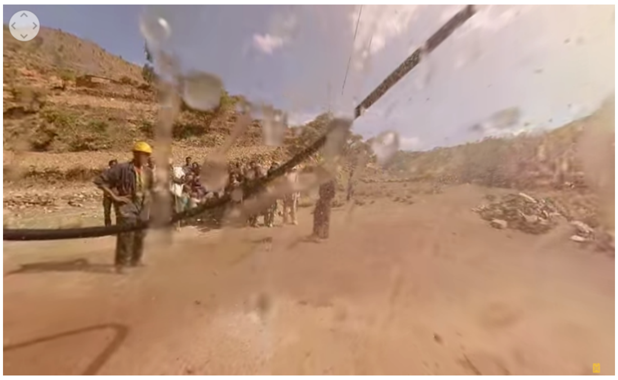

Figure 11: As the drilling machine finds water, a jet of water surrounds the viewer, obfuscating their view. Emphasis on 'Western' spectator rather than on suffering 'Other'.

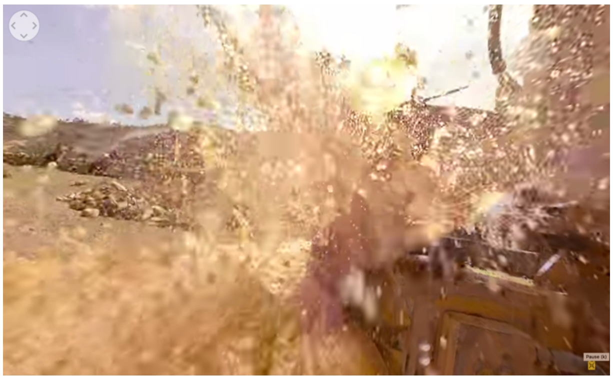

Figure 12

Girl Icon (7:56):

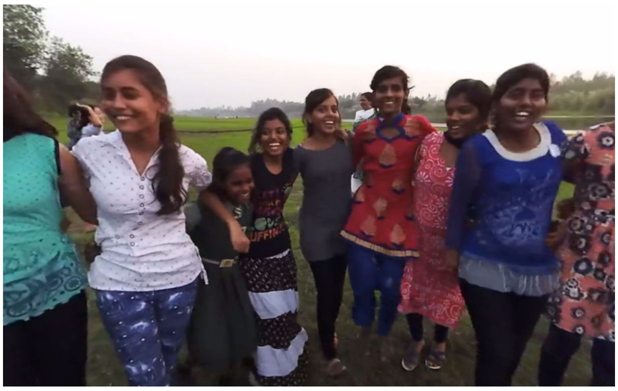

Figure 13: Viewers are placed in the middle of a moving circle of girls. Emphasis on 'Western' spectator rather than on suffering 'Other'.

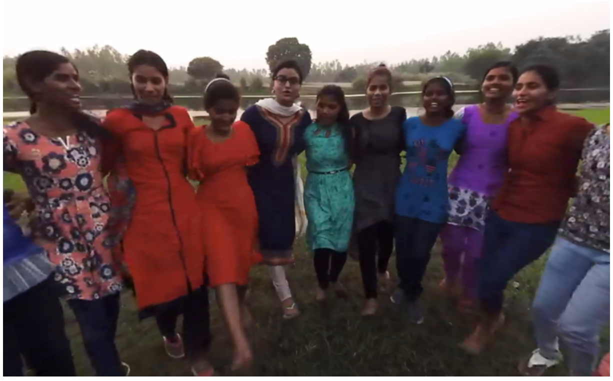

Figure 14

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