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Abstract

The introduction of Virtual Reality technologies into documentary filmmaking in the previous decade has brought about opportunities for emotionally compelling narratives to be constructed surrounding various social issues in hopes to raise more awareness and provoke real change. However, it is important to remember that just like any other media format, immersive 360-degree documentaries are nonetheless produced and consumed within the hegemonic Euro-American human rights spectacle which lays at the core of all contemporary humanitarian communication practices. Thus, through a qualitative analysis of three immersive 360-degree documentaries, this research study aims to provide critical insight into the current modes of immersive documentary making about refugees and/or displacement.

**Key Words**: refugee representations · 360-degree films · eurocentrism · narratology · empathy virtual reality film · collaborative documentary filmmaking · Refugee documentary films

**Type**: Research Paper
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1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the period of the last seven years, the documentary genre has been significantly ‘shaken’ by the introduction of immersive or virtual reality technologies. These new technological affordances have supplied the format with “new opportunities for emotionally compelling narratives and user agency” (Kukkakorpi & Pantti 2018, 2). To be more precise and with specific regard to humanitarian communication practices centred around the depictions of refugees and the global crisis of displacement, filmmakers, producers and artists have asserted that the affordances brought about by the immersive format are able to “amplify empathy for victims of humanitarian crises” by allowing the audiences to see or rather – experience the world from the victims perspectives (Gruenewald & Witteborn 2020, 2).

On the other hand, despite the ‘hype’ which the VR format has received since its conception, it is nonetheless important to remember the fact that the immersive format is subject to its own limits by various cultural, political and ideological factors, just like any other medium. Additionally, the recent years have also witnessed a growing academic debate surrounding the positioning of “VR film as a magical device to create empathy” due to the fragility of empathy itself and its questionable role in humanitarian communication practices in the context the hegemonic Euro-American human rights spectacle which privileges individual emotion at the cost of muting political and historical facts that are vital to the understanding of contemporary social crises and their aftermaths (Gruenewald & Witteborn 2020, 3).

1.2 Purpose of the Study and academic relevance.

Therefore, taking into account the issues outlined in the paragraph above, it is important to highlight that the aim of this research study is not to examine if or how specifically VR documentaries are able to evoke increased empathy levels of its audience which may provoke change compared to non-immersive documentary films about refugees. Even though this has been a very trendy topic in recent academia as illustrated by the works of Kukkakorpi & Pantti (2020), Schutte & Stilinović (2017), Nakamura (2020) and Shin (2018), the researcher has chosen to not follow this approach not only because she thinks that it is very difficult or perhaps even impossible to truly be able to measure human emotion because it is such a subjective
matter, but also because such an approach would entail upholding or prescribing to the ‘neo-liberal shift in humanitarian communication in which individual feeling’ has become the cornerstone motive for intervention in lieu of the actual systemic and political inequalities (Nash 2017, 11). Instead, greatly inspired by the works of Tim Gruenewald and Saskia Witteborn (2020), this research study aims to question the overly utopian assumptions about VR documentaries as well as examine to what extent can their production levels may be considered as inclusive through an analysis of three immersive 360-degree documentaries Lives on Hold in Lebanon (2018), Life In The Time of Refuge (2017) and Dreaming in Za’atari: Stories After Syria (2018).

1.3 Research Questions

In order to address the issues outlined above and meaningfully contribute to the scholarship surrounding the limits and potentials of VR documentaries, this study will be answering the following research questions:

- RQ1: Through what Eurocentric cliches or stereotypes are the Syrian and Palestinian refugees and their experiences are represented (or rather – simulated) in the three immersive documentaries and how does this affect their perceptions?
- RQ2: How do the three documentaries enforce a “script of suffering to hope” to appease global audiences without really getting to the bottom of the fundamental problems that have misplaced millions of people worldwide?
- RQ3: To what extent can the production dimension of the three 360-degree documentary films be considered as collaborative and what might this indicate for the future of immersive documentary filmmaking?
- RQ4: To what extent can these three immersive documentaries be positioned as examples of problematic humanitarian communication practices that center too much on emotion?

Finally, is important to mention that all of these questions will be answered using a qualitative methodological approach which will consist of a mixture of Film Narratology (to address RQ 1, RQ 2 and RQ 4) and Critical Discourse Analysis (to address RQ3). Additionally, the limitations and other issues of this research approach have been discussed in Chapter 3 under the section 3.3 titled ‘Limitations’.
2. Literature Review

In order to provide the necessary contextual, theoretical and critical background information, this chapter has been dedicated to address literature which is crucial for a better understanding of the research study and its argumentative conclusions. This chapter is structured as follows. The first section will be exploring how modern documentary practices have changed and developed in the recent 20 years to provide the necessary background information. The second section will be addressing the limits of conventional documentary films about refugees to illustrate how contemporary humanitarian communication practices are unable to escape the Eurocentric power structures they are produced and consumed in. The third section will be outlining the affordances of immersive documentary films in more detail as well as illustrating the production trends in contemporary immersive documentary filmmaking. The fourth section is dedicated to an overview and a debate surrounding the immersive format’s ability to elicit empathy and the context of the “hegemonic Euro-American human rights spectacle” in which the immersive (as well as non-immersive) documentaries are produced and consumed (Bystrom and Mosse 2020, 89).

2.1 Contemporary documentary filmmaking: recent changes and developments.

When contrasted to earlier stages in the history of documentary film production, it is clear that documentary filmmaking has transformed into a highly profitable and popular industry. To fully understand the extent of this so called ‘explosion’ of documentary production, one can take a look at the European statistics of the past 18 years, which indicate that the total amount of documentary films released in The UK and Ireland has increased from four in 2001 to ninety-nine in 2019, whereas in France the amount of documentaries produced over the past eleven years rose from twenty nine releases in 2010 to a record of sixty five releases in 2020 (Statista). Consequently, with regard to this newfound interest in documentary filmmaking, it is important to acknowledge that documentary films are also no longer being regarded as “a passive experience intended solely for informal learning or entertainment” (Nisbet & Aufderheide 2009, 450). Instead, it would be fair to claim that over the past two decades, documentary films have transformed into effective communication practices which hold an impressive potential to “spark debate, mold public opinion, shape policy, and build activist networks” or, in other terms, impact certain social circumstances or causes through their abilities to construct powerful narratives about various social issues. (Nisbet &
Aufderheide 2009, 450). Put in short, the transformations which documentary filmmaking underwent in the past 10 years have also reshaped the format’s “capacity for political intervention (McLagan 2012, 305)

Before diving deeper into the potentials as well the limitations of documentary film narratives, the increase in the production of documentary films themselves need to be addressed from both production and distribution perspectives in order to identify certain technological trends which have contributed in supplying momentum to the documentary genre during the past two decades. First and foremostly, it is crucial to acknowledge that since the inception of the genre in the beginning of the 20th century, categorizing documentary films has not been as straightforward as with other film genres. Moreover, as a consequence of the “rapid broadening of the media landscape” that took place during the past decades, documentary films have become even more difficult or perhaps even impossible to define (Anischenkova 2019, 810). However, this ‘broadening of the media landscape’ enabled by the arrival of new communication technologies, for instance in the form of online video-sharing and on-demand platforms like Youtube or Netflix, can be directly linked to the broadening of the “documentary culture itself” as now, online distribution possibilities made documentary films (or cinema in general) more physically and financially accessible to people than ever before on a global scale (Hight 2008, 3). Furthermore, due to its ability to create an online environment where “far more direct if not yet fully democratic, forms of participation” were highly encouraged, the same newfound distributive freedom possibilities also shifted the role of the audience from being passive to more engaged members with agency (Hight 2008, 3). Beyond that, it would lastly be fair to claim that such changes additionally facilitated the “flowering of the work of new documentary auteurs” who pioneered a new way for documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute more ‘alternative’ types of documentary films which do not fully adhere to the framework of the six genres of documentary, them being poetic, expository, reflexive, observational, performative, and participatory, as coined by the documentary film theorist Bill Nichols in the early 1990s (Hight 2008, 5).

On the production level, similar technological advances have contributed to the vast development of the documentary narrative structures. For instance, in the past five years, documentary filmmaking world has experienced a distinct shift in the direction of the ‘immersive turn’ “most notably [through] the harnessing of the virtual reality (VR) platform for nonfiction” which consequently has brought about significant attention to these new documentary narratives and their abilities to offer audiences more than just the experience of watching documentary narratives unfold from a fixed perspective of the camera (Rose 2018,
Therefore, the principal value of the ‘immersive turn’ in documentary filmmaking can be mainly summed up with regards to how immersive documentary narratives actually enable the audience to have a more ‘intense’ or emotionally charged viewing experience of which they are more in control of. More detailed information about the affordances of immersive documentary narratives will be provided in the section 2.3 of this chapter.

As Kukkakorpi & Pantti (2020, 4) point out, due to the fascinating potentials of immersive filmmaking techniques abilities to produce more “emotionally compelling narratives” as well as “introduce new opportunities” for user agency, well known humanitarian/intergovernmental organisations, news companies, audiovisual artists as well as photojournalists have begun to produce short length immersive documentaries to raise awareness about certain social issues in ways that have not been done before. One of the earliest and most memorable examples of this trend can be seen in the way how Clouds Over Sidra (2016), the first film produced in VR for United Nations, was strategically screened for the very first time “at the World Economic Forum in Davos […] at a high level donor meeting prior to the Third International Humanitarian Appeal for Syria in Kuwait in March 2015” raising 3.8 billion US dollars for the people affected by the Syrian war (UNVR, n.d.). Therefore, it is clear that these VR documentary films are indeed effective at providing a new perspective, or rather - new experience of raising awareness about important societal issues in ways that have never been done before which some regard as superior to the ‘regular’ non-immersive documentary narrative.

As outlined in the paragraphs above, documentary films have come a long way from being random experiments “in seeing what happened when you pointed a camera at the things around you” since the invention of the format in the 1920s (Winston 2013, 5). Given their increasing popularity as well as potential, it is nonetheless imperative to highlight the ethical fragility of the genre itself and position it as a medium which cannot escape its own inherent subjectivity by nature. According to Bill Nichols (2001, xiii ) “documentary tradition relies heavily on being able to convey to us the impression of authenticity” since documentary films are generally premised on unscripted depictions of interactions or events. However, just like fiction films - documentaries do have audiovisual narratives which are compiled or constructed by human beings. Therefore, in order to take this into consideration when analysing documentary films, it would be wise to approach documentary films, be they immersive or not, as “rhetorical forms” - or in other words “as stories with some kind of argument inside” instead of taking their ‘objectivity’ for granted (Bondejberg 2014, 14). To be more specific, Bondejberg (2014, 14) further justifies this approach by stating the following:
“We expect documentary films to tell us something about reality that has a quality of truth, reality and authenticity. But that said, we do know as spectators, and all theories about documentary genres confirm that documentaries use all kinds of communicative strategies and they appeal not only to reason, but also to feelings and the more sensual dimensions of our reality.”

2.2 The concealed limitations of Western-made documentary films with regards to the representations of “the other”

According to the statistics provided by The United Nations Refugee Agency, there currently are 80 million people that were forcibly displaced worldwide, 43.7 million of them being internally displaced people, 26.3 million holding the title of refugees, and 4.5 million seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2021). Furthermore, approximately 30 – 34 million (38-43%) out of the 79.5 million forcibly displaced people are children under the age of 18 years (UNHCR, 2021). Moreover, with regards to the representations of these vulnerable groups of people whose numbers are rising every year, it is no secret that mainstream media has played a defining role in the “framing [of] public policy and discourse about immigrants and refugees” due to its ability to manipulate the public perception of these vulnerable groups. (Esses, Medianu & Lawson 2013, 520). And lastly, judging by the past media representations of these people, there is no doubt that the majority of Western mainstream media representations of refugees or migrants have been rather negative and two-dimensional, contributing to their image as passive newcomers that pose a threat.

Thus, taking into account how mainstream media actively misrepresents refugees, it becomes more clear why documentary films are of great advantage in balancing the negative stereotypes that have prevailed in Western media. To put in more specific terms, their value can be largely explained thanks to their abilities at “shedding light on important issues ignored by the mainstream media” as well as challenging the normative perceptions of refugees and/or migrants which have been normalized in the Western discourses (Chaudhuri 2014, 2; Anishchenkova 2018, 810). However, it would also be incomplete (or incorrect) to solely praise these types of documentaries based on their popularity and potential, without taking into account the embedded limitations that they nonetheless possess.

As argued by both Austin (2019) and Anishchenkova (2018), the most consequential yet simultaneously most ‘concealed’ limitation of Western refugee documentary films is the fact that they are embedded in a Eurocentric framework of asymmetrical power relations which
sustain the dominance of European or Western discourses which themselves come from the authorship of non-refugees in Western Europe. More importantly, by being embedded or in other words ‘stuck’ in these Eurocentric power structures, the documentaries simultaneously reinforce the same power imbalances through their own narratives in ways which can be considered highly detrimental to the representations of non-western subjects. For instance, this can be illustrated by how numerous Western documentaries about the current Refugee crisis have oversimplified certain aspects about the reality of the situation as well as “actively participated in victimization of their non-western subjects through a neo-colonial gaze” (Anishchenkova, 2018, 813).

To provide a more concrete example of narrative oversimplification and explain how it impedes the representation of non-western subjects, Austin (2019) points out how in the critically acclaimed 2016 Italian documentary film Fire At Sea (Fuocoammare), which was praised for its depiction of life on the Italian island of Lampedusa, the use of selective shots of refugees inside small boats largely contributed to their renditions as a monolithic “anonymous collectivity”. To a large extent, this can essentially be regarded as the continuous use of stereotypical imagery of non-European subjects in contemporary Refugee documentaries. This is crucial to pin point because in a sense, the documentaries are doing the same as news outlets do which can be considered paradoxical because documentaries are more ‘highly regarded’ due to their assumed nuance as well as authenticity. Moreover, not only does the use of such oversimplifications and stereotypes further evokes the idea that “orientalism is alive and well even in documentary format” but also raises the very real issue of how Western documentary filmmakers actually employ the same Eurocentric framing techniques in order to make their films ‘more consumable’ for the European audiences by meeting their expectations through the use of overly stereotypical or normative depictions of ‘the other’ (Anishchenkova 2018, 813).

Even though documentary films are effective at being able to provide an ‘alternative’ platform for refugees to tell (some of) their personal stories, it must also not be forgotten that by doing so they also exploit their subjects and commonly reinforce the mono-dimensional image of “the ‘Arabs’ as a monolithic group”, as well as accentuate “the fundamental differences between us and them” (Anishchenkova 2018, 814-815). This can be considered problematic because instead of bridging the gap between refugees and Europeans, this further promotes the “us versus them” discourse that (un)consciously separates the audience away from the subjects. Moreover, additional ethical limits of using documentary films as spaces where refugees are able to voice their very delicate and emotionally loaded stories have been further problematized. For instance, with regards to the interview format, these ethical limits
have been pointed by Anishchenkova (2018, 816) who raised the following questions that may not even be answerable:

“To what degree does the objective of exposing the atrocities and educating the (primarily western) public justify the means?”

“How ethical is the exposure of the subjects’ physical and psychological traumas, while denying them any agency outside their traumatic experiences?”

Thus, by taking these issues into account, it becomes clear how the narratives of even the most well received documentaries are unable to fully escape asymmetrical power relations in which they are produced and consumed. In addition, such an understanding of the existing problems with non-VR documentaries can also be considered helpful or useful, because it can be positioned as a starting point to elucidate how or if the affordances brought about by the immersive turn may actually provide the much needed agency to the audiences to circumvent the eurocentric narratives by taking control of the gaze. Lastly, to provide more nuance to the issues regarding documentary filmmaking about sensitive topics like the refugee crisis or the refugee experience, Hughes has proposed the idea of collaborative documentary filmmaking as being one of the most effective ways in which the format can be improved at representing ‘the Other’ in more authentic and therefore – less Western-centric ways. According to Hughes, (2019, 160) the main value of employing collaborative filmmaking practices to produce documentary films about vulnerable groups of people lays in the idea that these practices allow for a dialogue between the subjects and filmmakers to take place which would in turn provide the filmmakers an opportunity to “learn to pose the questions they do not originally know how to ask” as well as the necessary conditions in which the subjects of the documentaries could “select the fragments of their reality they deem significant to document” and thus have more agency or control at mediating their own representations.

2.3 Narrative affordances of multifaceted immersive documentary formats.

Over the period of the past ten years, various forms of virtual reality (VR) have received a significant amount of attention from documentary filmmakers, journalists, artists, intergovernmental and/or non-governmental organizations as well as activists who have employed VR technologies to create immersive storytelling through videos or documentaries
about a wide array of social causes. As mentioned previously, this newfound interest in Virtual Reality can be largely linked to its innovative affordances that are able to enhance storytelling due to their potential for facilitating “an immersive media experience” that reproduces a “real or imagined environment” (Owen et al, 2015).

To put in more precise or technological terms, by the means of immersive “sound design and spatial storytelling” VR offers the possibility for the audience to interact with the story environments of the documentaries they are watching through simulation-like processes which in turn transform the audience into being a part of the narrative instead of passive spectators (Alexander n.d.). Based on the idea that VR is able to highly realistic “sense of being in a different location” it has furthermore been postulated that VR is able to “create acceptance across societies and races” and more importantly challenge peoples perceptions of each other due to its groundbreaking immersive nature which allows for the audience to obtain more empathy by the means of a “specialized access to the sights and sounds (and even to the feelings and emotions) associated with the story” (Sackman 2015; Milk 2015; Shin 2018, 66).

Before proceeding to dive deeper into the existing debate surrounding immersive VR technologies it is first crucial to recognize the multifaceted nature of Virtual Reality technologies vis-à-vis documentary filmmaking. Given the fact that almost all immersive forms of Virtual Reality storytelling need similar technological tools such as headphones and a VR headset (also known as a head-mounted display or HMD) to be able to “communicate content” it has become common for the public to use the terms ‘Virtual Reality’ and ‘360-degree videos’ interchangeably with one another (Irom 2018, 4270). However, despite them both entailing immersive narrative structures, it is nonetheless crucial to foreground that Virtual Reality and 360-degree videos are not exactly the same thing. According to Nash (2018, 97) Virtual Reality should not be viewed as “a single technology” but instead be regarded as more of an umbrella term for various “forms of 360-degree video” and other “computer generated environments” which feature immersive narratives. In other words, such an account proposes that 360-degree videos are a part of a larger framework which Virtual Reality technologies make up.

Comparatively, Irom (2018, 4270-4271) offers a more in depth differentiation between the advanced or haptic Virtual Reality experiences and 360-degree videos, describing the latter to be more limited because it enables the viewers ability to move “either left to right or top to bottom within an enclosed sphere in 360-degree” in contrast to the former which “can almost seem limitless” as it makes it possible for the viewer to have “control of the environment beyond direction” within the bounds of the software, which essentially offers a ‘truer’ immersive experience. Ultimately however, it crucial to be mindful of how the VR
documentary is consumed or viewed to be able to ‘separate’ what counts as immersive and what does not due to the fact that while “a 360 video viewed on Facebook or Youtube is simply considered a 360 video” or in other words - non immersive, a 360-degree video viewed using a VR headset does fall into the category of immersive or virtual reality.” (Maio, 2019, Studiobinder).

Despite the differences that exist within the Virtual Reality technologies which have been outlined in the paragraph above, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that both of the mentioned (sub)formats, haptic Virtual Reality videos as well as the 360-degree videos, contribute to create a highly subjective first-person experience or simulation “of being in a virtual space” (Nash 2018, 98). Therefore, it would be finally important to clarify that the three films Life in the Time of Refuge (2017), Dreaming in Za’atari: Stories after Syria (2018) and Lives On Hold in Lebanon (2018) which will be analysed in the upcoming chapters can be categorized as immersive 360-degree videos that offer a subjective first-person experience of immersivity as they have been viewed using a pair of VR glasses (model: Dive by Durovis Cardboard 6) which made it possible for the researcher to get as close to an immersive experience as possible from the safety of her home during the times of a global pandemic.

2.4 Immersive 360-degree videos as empathy machines & the problem of empathy being at the core of contemporary humanitarian communication practices.

In a 2015 Ted talk, Chris Milk, one of the founding fathers of VR technologies who also played a big part in bringing the immersive format into the field of humanitarian communication, described Virtual Reality [narrative] as the ultimate “empathy machine” which allows people to experience the highest levels of human compassion, empathy and connection when compared to any other media form” (Milk 2015). To be even more precise, it was then in that particular Ted talk when Milk unveiled the first ever made immersive documentary film Clouds Over Sidra (2015) which he co-produced in collaboration with the United Nations and a media company called Verse (as well as the company Samsung), describing the film as “more than a documentary film” because it lets the audience to experience humanity and compassion as it transports people “into a highly affective space” in which they are able to control the gaze themselves and feel like they are inside of the narrative, or in other words – inside of another world (Gruenewald & Witteborn 2020, 2). Consequently, such a definition (or rather – a powerful entrance) provided the immersive format with a lot of momentum since its very inception.
Due to the fact that “humanitarian aid nonprofit organizations have always been interested in engagement” the immersive format was quickly welcomed inside fields of humanitarian communication as well as online news companies (Garcia–Orosa & Perez-Seijo 2020, 1312) To provide more specific examples, this can be illustrated in how the BBC, The New York Times, the Guardian, Vice employed the immersive format to educate the global public about the reality of various humanitarian crises through interactive news stories or short documentary films that were produced in collaboration with the United Nations and other NGOs such as Medecins Sans Frontiers. Put in simple terms, the immersive potentials which the medium carried were largely regarded as revolutionary and were swiftly adopted by social actors for undeniably noble reasons.

On the other hand, it would be erroneous to disregard the criticism which immersive documentaries have received from the academic community in the more recent years which has not only challenged the format’s ability to provide audiences with truly ‘authentic’ experiences, but also questioned the role of empathy in contemporary humanitarian communication on a more general level. For instance, to contend with the Milk’s overly positive or somewhat utopian interpretations of immersive VR, Sam Gregory has compared the immersive format to an “ethical minefield” that can have adverse impact on user’s behaviour as well as psychology and also promote negative, fear-driven responses which can be considered the polar opposite of empathy (Ananthaswamy 2016). Put differently – the format can promote experiences which do not always have to end in compassionate understanding which can help provoke real change but also go the complete opposite direction. Moreover, Nash (2017, 7) has also revealed that because immersive documentary films allow the audiences to focus on their own experiences within the given simulations, they simultaneously facilitate an “improper distance and an ironic mode of moral engagement” as they prevent the spectators to thoroughly recognize the actual distance which exists “between the self and the other”. Furthermore, to illustrate in greater detail the dangers of the improper distance which is facilitated in every immersive documentary, Chouliaraki (2011, 368) has described it as “practices of communication that subordinate the voices of the distant others to those of the West” that simultaneously allow for the “distancing [of] the Western spectators from their own position of privilege” which essentially results in the voices of the subjects to be marginalized in favor of “our own narcissistic communications”. In other words – non-fiction VR films become more about the experience of the individual user within a given simulated environment and not so much about the experience of the subject for whom this
simulated environment does not stop as he or she is there in actuality, 24/7, unlike the audience who experience these immersive worlds for a very short amount of time.

Of course, it would be wrong to deny the fact that empathy is important to the functioning of good or moral societies. However, according to Nash (2017, 11) the most problematic thing about non-fiction virtual reality productions can be boiled down to the harmful “view of VR as a machine for the production of empathy” as it has been advertised since its inception due to the fact that it produces a narrow and troubling understanding of our moral responsibility because it subscribes to and re-enforces the “neoliberal shift in humanitarian communication in which individual feeling becomes the focus for intervention” instead of the “structural inequalities and political exclusions” that lay at the core of all of our global crises (Nash 2017, 11). To accordingly further illustrate the problematic nature (or ideological backdrop) of our contemporary humanitarian communication practices, Bystrom and Mosse (2020, 89) have also described it as being highly subject to the “hegemonic Euro-American ‘human rights spectacle’ in which VR productions “are being used to reinscribe rather than trouble the “mobilization of empathy” which ultimately positions empathy as a “trap when it comes to creating true solidarity with others”.

Lastly, the work of Gruenewald & Witteborn (2020) has also provided a more concrete way of understanding how contemporary VR films evoke empathy. Thus, according to the scholars, contemporary VR films employ what is referred to as a “script of suffering to hope” in their narrative structures in order to cater “to the emotional needs” of the global audiences (Gruenewald & Witteborn 2020, 1). To be more specific, the empirical analysis of the scholars contend that VR films actively employ “cultural symbols to construct a hopeful metanarrative” which in turn motivates the audience to identify with the subjects and thus “makes it difficult for the viewer to reflect critically on the narrative logic and its ideological implications” which further blurs the lines of what matters (or at least what should matter) and what is emotionally appealing (Gruenewald & Witteborn 2020,15).

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Units of Analysis

As established in the introductory chapter, the three immersive documentaries which have been selected as the main units of analyses are Life in the Time of Refuge (2017), Dreaming in Za’atari: Stories after Syria (2018) and Lives On Hold in Lebanon (2018). They have been selected based on the criteria which did not allow for the units of analysis to be
released earlier than 2017 to ensure that they are up to date (as well as less explored by other scholars). Even though 2017 and 2018 can be considered quite a long time ago in the current year of 2021, the circumstances of COVID-19 should not be forgotten because they largely slowed down the production of (and highly limited the access to) new VR films. Furthermore, another crucial criteria was that the units of analysis were all about the Refugee crisis in the Middle East (Syria and Palestine) for the sake of thematic consistency.

3.2 Methodological Tools

In order to execute the two-fold analysis of the three 360-degree immersive documentaries in the following chapter, two qualitative methods will be employed, them being Film Narratology and Critical Discourse Analysis. First of all, due to the fact that documentary films, be they VR or not, are “located between national, transnational and global modes of production, distribution and reception” and also to a large extent depend on “the colonial heritage of Europe’s past, […] present-day socio-political and cultural influences” the method of Critical Discourse Analysis will be employed for the exploration of the production context of these three immersive documentaries (Ponzanesi and Berger 2016, 111). To be more exact, this will be done by a) identifying the actors who were involved in the making of these films and the discourse which they situated these films in b) exploring if the films entailed any degree of collaborative documentary filmmaking practises, as according to Hughes (2019, 160) this “creates an open space for dialogue” that is highly necessary because it allows the documentary filmmakers to “pose the questions they do not originally know how to ask” as well as provides “a place where film subjects [can] select the fragments of their reality they deem significant” for documentary practices. This can be considered even more applicable to immersive documentaries because they provide the audiences with an experience of what it is like to be someone or be next to someone in a more intimate way which in turn requires more responsibility from the producers to ensure this ‘experience’ is as authentic as it can be.

Furthermore, given that immersive documentaries utilize the same narrative techniques such as “choreography, the influence of the camera, framing, the choice of focus and post-production” to manipulate the unfolding of their narratives just like other non-immersive films do, Peter Verstarten’s (2009) conception of film narratology will be used as a method to explore the narrative dimension of the there selected immersive documentary films (Alexander n.d. ). The method is highly relevant because it will provide the necessary tools to uncover the Eurocentric tropes or stereotypes that are present in some of the documentary films as well as
how the script of ‘suffering to hope’ is enforced throughout the immersive documentary narratives and thus show how immersive documentary films about refugees could not fully circumvent the eurocentric narratives which according to Anishchenkova (2018) and Austin (2019) are greatly damaging to the representations of the Refugee experience in documentary films, despite their immersive affordances that promise more agency to the viewers.

To be more precise, the narrative analysis will be conducted with the focus on the following two narratological concepts, them being character analysis as well as setting analysis. Firstly, character analysis will be used to reveal how (or if) the three selected immersive documentaries have represented refugees in rather stereotypical ways – such as passive victims by zooming in how the characters, or rather – subjects in this case, are “positioned with regard to each other” and how their differences and similarities are emphasized (Verstraten 2009, 37). Secondly, given that setting carries “intertextual connotations”, the places in which the three documentaries are set will be explored in detail in order to determine how or if the three documentaries promote the image of Europe or the West as being generally associated with salvation, progress and hope (Verstraten 2009, 63).

3.3 Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of the methodological approach of this research study are the following. First of all, it is important to clarify that both of the methods which were employed to analyze the three selected documentary films are qualitative and therefore yield findings which some scholars have considered as “being merely a collection of personal opinions subject to researcher bias” or in other words – largely interpretative and relativistic (Noble and Smith 2015, 34). Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge their hermeneutical nature as well as recognize the highly subjective nature of this empirical research study. On the other hand, it is equally important to highlight the positive aspects of employing qualitative research methods such as Film Narratology and Critical Discourse Analysis. This can be explained by the fact qualitative research methods are able to yield in-depth findings about certain sensitive social issues, such as the crisis of displacement, by being very inclusive of various context related aspects as well as the fact that they encourage creativity in social research in addition to promoting “innovative explanatory frameworks” which in turn can be deemed necessary for the evolution of various types of social research (Mohajan 2018, 18).

Finally, it also important to acknowledge that the three immersive documentary films which have been selected for this research study do not account for the full representation of
the Refugee experience in the immersive format, as they only account for a specific number of peoples who have been chosen to tell their own personal stories. Therefore, it would incorrect to base the entire representation of the refugee or dislocated peoples experience solely on these three 360-degree documentary films because that would cause a lot of over-generalizations to be made given that these three immersive documentary films simply cannot speak for the whole experience of displacement.

4. Findings

4.1 Production Analysis

4.1.1 Life In The Time of Refuge (2017)

Life in the Time of Refugee (2017) is a VR documentary film that follows the story of Omar, a 9 year old Syrian Refugee boy, suffering from a hormone deficiency, who was relocated to Finland. The film was produced “in partnership with The Humanitarian Cooperative and support from Nokia and The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (Mettle 2017). Similarly to the rest of films that were made in collaboration with the UNHCR, the film was screened at strategic events like the NAB in Shanghai, the Helsinki Conference on Supporting Syrians and the Region as well as at the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva. Despite the fact that there is not much information provided about the film online other than the fact that it was shot in Lebanon and Finland over a period of 3-4 months, it should not be overlooked that the production crew consisted of David Gough, “a filmmaker and journalist with a special expertise in humanitarian issue” as well as Warda Al-Jawahiry who is an “Iraqi-born filmmaker and journalist with over a decade experience working with major news outlets and the UNHCR” but also – a fellow refugee herself (The Humanitarian Cooperative, n.d.). Even though there is no information about her degree of input in the production of the film, (and it should also be highlighted that she actually appears in the film herself, although the film is not about her), it should nevertheless be taken into account that this suggests at least some form of “respectful negotiation and collaboration” did occur in the production of this film, which referring back to Hughes (2019, 163) is considered a positive attribute to refugee documentary filmmaking.

4.1.2 Dreaming in Za’atari: Stories After Syria (2018)
Dreaming In Za’atari (2018) is a VR documentary film that follows the day in the life and dreams of three teenagers, Mahmoud, Tabarak, and Naja, who are located in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. It was produced by World Vision, a global-scale Christian humanitarian organization in collaboration with Contrast VR which is Al Jazeera’s “Emmy-nominated immersive storytelling and media innovation studio (AJ Contrast, 2020). It was narrated by a few high profile people, Game of Thrones actor Liam Cunningham, Helen Clark who is the former New Zealand Prime Minister as well as UN High-Level Commissioner Alaa Murabit (Lee 2018). To be more exact, Dreaming in Za’atari is a part of the Stories After Syria project which consists of seven films that were actually filmed by refugee children themselves at the camp after receiving training on how to operate 360-degree cameras by Contrast VR, while the final product was directed by Zahra Rasool, Contrast VR’s Editorial Lead (Dupire 2018). Thus, with regard to the collaborative production aspect of this film, it would be fair to claim that it was produced on terms that could be regarded as inclusive since this film is a part of a larger project that not only provided the possibility but also the initiative for the children to be in control of what they film.

4.1.3 Lives On Hold In Lebanon (2018)

Last but not least, Lives On Hold In Lebanon (2018) is a documentary VR film which is set in Beirut’s Shatila camp and features three generations of a Palestinian family through their descriptions about their lives in the camp. The film is a part of the Forced From Home series/travelling exhibition made by Doctors Without Borders/ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an international humanitarian medical non-governmental organisation in collaboration with Visualise, a London-based VR & AR agency (Forced From Home 2017). The official website of Visualise states that the project was made in 12 months during which their team “travelled to camps in Greece, Tanzania, Iraq, Lebanon, Mexico and South Sudan to meet MSF field workers and refugees to share their stories” however it is not specified who exactly the members of that team are neither names of the MSF field workers (Visualize n.d.). Thus, it is very unclear how and by who exactly the documentary film were shot and directed which prevents from an in-depth analysis of the film’s production’ aspect. This also can be regarded as a worrisome factor for the transparency of this film and the series it was a part of. On the other hand, it would be of interest to highlight how the film used a simplistic approach for the making of the series based on the following argument:
“All too often in VR films, the director is trying to communicate too many things in a scene. This may be overwhelming for the viewer resulting in the opposite of what you want to achieve from the experience – a sense of ‘presence’, which is to make the viewer feel they are there inside the action.

Our approach was to “simplify the viewer experience. This requires the abandonment of many things learnt from traditional filmmaking. By having fewer edits, simple composition of shots, with action taking place in front of the viewer, we wanted to create space for the refugees to tell their stories and enable the viewers to connect on a deeper level” (Visualize n.d.).
4.2 Narrative Analysis

4.2.1 *Life In The Time of Refuge (2017)*

![Image](image1.png)

*Figure 1. Life In The Time of Refuge (2017) – Source: YouTube*

![Image](image2.png)

*Figure 2. Life In The Time of Refuge (2017) – Source: YouTube*

Setting Analysis

*Life In The Time of Refuge* is a 10 minute and 27 second long immersive 360-degree documentary film which follows the story of a 9 year old boy named Omar who suffers from a hormonal malfunction that is hindering him from growing. He and his family have been relocated to Koupio, Finland where he attends school and where he is being treated by doctors. To begin with, the short immersive documentary starts through an analepsis (or a flashback) to the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. It is also coupled with Omar’s voiceover in the English language that has a slow and somewhat melancholic Arab extradiegetic music in the background as well as the sound of bombs and explosions. On a visual level, the setting is represented (or rather – simulated) through the viewer standing in a cemetery, surrounded by unkept graves as he/she
looks further to where the camp, Omar’s former home, is located in the distance (see Figure 1). It would be fair to claim that the slow Arabic music has an effect of setting a sad emotional tone to the beginning of the story and may furthermore be interpreted as an effect which provides the viewers with “an impression of an exotic location” that highly suits the classic Eurocentric/orientalist representation of the Middle-East (Verstraten 2009, 154). Moreover, the specific way in which the setting of Lebanon is introduced and mono-dimensionally represented throughout the whole narrative can be considered as attuned to the trope of a dirty and unlivable location from which the refugees wish to flee from as people are suffering there. This becomes very apparent when contrasted with the imagery through which Finland is introduced (see Figure 2) and multi-dimensionally represented throughout the whole film such as through the varying shots of a green forest, a lake, a school and hospital where Omar is being treated for his hormone deficiency. Furthermore, the idea of Finland being intertextually connotated with hope and progress can also be supported by what Omar explicitly says in the voiceover which continues through the film such as through the phrases like “I like it here in Finland! And dad says we are really lucky to be invited here…” or “Since I went to Finland I’ve grown a bit.” (Life in The Time of Refuge 2017, 0:77). The way in which he (or his dad) describes Finland as a place where they are lucky to be can be considered slightly problematic because it gives the impression of how the refugee subjects are there because they are lucky, and not so much because they are human beings who simply deserve to live under normal living conditions and get the medical support they desperately and also to some extent normalizes the fact that there are so many people who are denied of these human needs everyday and further promotes the idea that one has to be ‘lucky’ or be especially deserving to be allowed to live on European land.

Figure 3. Life In The Time of Refuge (2017) – Source: YouTube
Figure 4. Life In The Time of Refuge (2017) – Source: YouTube

Character Analysis

The way how the characters have been represented in Life In The Of Refuge is also an important element that can provide insight as to how the script of “suffering to hope” is constructed throughout the immersive documentary film. As mentioned in the paragraph above, the documentary starts in the setting of a refugee camp in Lebanon. Before the story shifts to Finland at minute 1:47, we also get to see refugee boys playing in groups surrounded by trash (see Figure 3). Neither of them are named and it is difficult to even understand how many of them there are given the format’s ability to look back (or to the left and the right) and see the story unfolding behind. To some text, it would be fair to claim that such a way of representing the refugee boys (as well as other subjects inside of the tents in the camp) in groups, never alone, robs them of their individuality as people due to the fact that they are positioned through their similarities and not so much through their differences, which is actually not very different from the ways through which mainstream media is known to represent these vulnerable group of peoples (Anischenkova 2018). Another important character is Warda, a fellow Refugee from Iraq. She enters the story when she comes to visit Omar to check on him and Omar’s voiceover introduces her as his refugee “sister” (Life in The Time of Refuge 2017, 2:10). Such an introduction may be interpreted in a few ways: the use of the word sister can be seen as a means to highlight the (assumed) solidarity which exists between contemporary refugees or as another narrative effect which further supports the representation of non-western people in the movie as being very similar, almost like one big family. Of course this may not even be considered problematic as family usually is associated with something positive, however it is worthwhile to highlight due to the fact that documentaries are known to depict refugees as a “limited and
neatly organized diversity” in order to be easily ‘digestible’ for European or western audiences and in turn - promote the idea of Arabs as being a “monolithic group” (Anischenkova 2018, 814). Finally, a key character which is very important to Life In The Time Of Refugee is the doctor who enters the storyline at the end in the scene where Omar is weighed on the scales and it is cheerfully revealed that he has grown a lot more which is great news for his health (See Figure 4). Thus, to a large extent, it would be fair to claim that the scene in which the doctor is introduced can be considered the ‘hope’ part of the script of suffering in this particular immersive documentary film. It has been strategically placed as the end, one minute before the film ends, and carries a positive revelation of hopeful news that indicates Omar’s growth and that the suffering is about to end, in sharp contrast to how the film started – through suffering, literally through a simulation of an actual graveyard.

4.2.2. Dreaming in Za’atri: Stories After Syria (2018)

Figure 5. Dreaming in Za’atari: Stories After Syria (2017) – Source: YouTube

Setting Analysis

Dreaming in Za’atri: Stories After Syria is a very short 5 minute and 8 second long immersive 360-degree documentary film which is set entirely in the Za’atari Refugee camp in Lebanon. It follows the stories of three Refugee teenagers, Najat, Mahmoud and Tabarak, who reside in the camp. Unlike the other two immersive documentaries, Dreaming in Za’atari: Stories After Syria is an immersive 360-degree documentary that features graphic animations appearing at different times throughout the short plot which serve as colourful illustrations or embodiments of the hopes and dreams of the three teenagers. Moreover, it is also the only documentary which entails voice-overs by famous people (Liam Cunningham, Alaa Murabit,
Helen Clark) who essentially assume the role of translating what the teenagers are saying throughout the plot.

To begin with, the opening scene of the immersive documentary features shots of muddy streets of the camp and introduces Najat whose voice-over commences the documentary through the following sentence “If I could be anywhere, I would be In Paris” (*Dreaming in Za’atri: Stories After Syria* 2017, 00:07). The introductory scene also entails pink illustrations of cars and an Eiffel tower appearing around the viewer in all different directions (see Figure 5). These “excessive stylistic elements” that are from the very start incorporated into the 360-degree mise-en-scène can be interpreted as representations of Europe (or Paris, France in this case) as an “extravagant spectacle that is presented separately from the actual plot” (Verstraten 2009, 191). Thus, it would be fair to contend that the colorful artificiality of the illustrations also contributes to the emphasis of the ‘dullness’ of the camp and in turn highlights the pre-eminent difference between these two worlds. Moreover, the sharp contrasts of the setting and the representation of Europe through the illustration may also be linked to western media practices that often are at fault for the “othering” of refugees or migrants by the means of emphasizing difference (Jha & Wani 2017, 55). Thus, despite the fact that the illustrations do brighten up the entire mise-en-scène of the documentary and provide the film with a bit more of a positive or hopeful tone, it is still nonetheless important to acknowledge how they separate the two worlds further away from one another.

Figure 6. *Dreaming in Za'atri: Stories After Syria* (2017) – Source: YouTube
Character Analysis

On the one hand, taking into account that the immersive documentary represents each of the three teenagers by zooming into their own individual dreams that are different from one another, it would be fair to claim that the immersive documentary provides the depictions of the teenagers with some degrees of individuality. On the other hand, the particular ways in which the aspirations of the teenagers are evoked can be considered slightly problematic because they a) above all, highlight the predicament of the situations that the teenagers are in – not just being stuck in a camp, but also - in their lives and in addition b) promote the Eurocentric vision of the West as the place where progress can occur. Therefore, to pin point how the dreams of the characters are represented through predicament, one can refer the fact that almost every single sentence which describes the dreams of the teenagers starts with the phrases “If I could” or “I wish” (see Figures 5 and 6) which also consequently highlights the position the teenagers as being stuck or “as passive actors” who do not have much agency to do anything about their positions except dream and wish (Joris et al, 2018, 61). Lastly, to illustrate the latter problematic aspect which enforces the stereotypical image of West as being associated with progress, it would be necessary to recognize how two out of the three teenagers associate their dreams as unfolding in the west – Tabarak wants to go to Canada to become a famous journalist while Najat wishes to go on exciting adventures in America as she has seen in the movies that she watches when the camp turns on the electricity.

Lastly, it would also be important to recognize that the trope of suffering to hope is evoked differently or even – to a lesser extent than in the previous immersive documentary Life in The Time of Refuge because there is no chronological or linear order of suffering turning
into hope in this particular documentary due to the fact that the documentary is largely about the aspirations of the teenagers. On the other hand, given that the documentary starts with the sentence “If I could go anywhere, I would be in Paris” and ends with “I hope that safety, peace and tranquility prevail over my homeland” it could nonetheless be postulated that suffering at the beginning is emphasized through the lack of agency that the teenagers have as they are not even able to leave the camp while the ‘hope’ part of the script is literally expressed through the use of the word hope itself before the credits roll in addition to the illustrations of the dreams of all the teenagers (see Figure 7).

4.2.3 Lives on Hold in Lebanon (2018)

Setting Analysis

*Lives on hold in Lebanon* is an 8 minute and 18 second long immersive 360-degree documentary film which is set in the Shatila Refugee Camp in Lebanon, which was originally opened in 1949 to host Palestinian refugees. It features three generations of a Palestinian family who has lived in the camp since its establishment who share with the audience what it is like to live in the camp as well as how it changed over the years, especially since the arrival of the Syrian refugees after the Syrian war. Furthermore, unlike the previous two immersive documentaries, it does not have any excessive stylistic elements nor does it feature any extra-diegetic music which provides a great dimension of realism to it, as it feels like the audience is taking a walk with the subjects who are showing them around the camp and describing it through their memories as the narrative progresses.
To begin with, the documentary starts with a detailed introduction to the camp (see Figure 8) which contextualizes the setting and provides necessary background information for the audience to understand where they are exactly. This is introduced through a scene in which
the viewer and the subject, Ali Othman, a Palestinian Refugee who was born in this camp, are standing on a busy street surrounded by the inhabitants of the camp. Referring back to the narratological understanding of settings as sometimes pertaining intertextual meanings, there are no hidden meanings or “intended allusions” attached to the setting in which the documentary is set due to its simplistic representation and also – due to the fact that it is never compared to any other location and is seen as a thing of its own, simply a place where people live under bad conditions (Verstraten 2009, 163). Moreover, unlike the previous two immersive documentaries, the camp depicted is through many different scenes which do highlight the poor conditions in which the inhabitants live, for instance through the shots of trash on the street (see Figure 9) however, the documentary also provides a more holistic or three-dimension visual overview of the camp by showing the viewers many different locations of the camp – such as the psychiatric hospital where people are being treated for their war-traumas (see Figure 10), a vendor crossing a street (see Figure 11) as well as plenty of scenes in which regular people are walking around or standing by their homes. Therefore, due to this more ‘balanced’ representation of spaces in the camp which are not purely selective shots of trash or people jammed in tents, the image of the camp is given a more human tone, which in turn also challenges the stereotypical Eurocentric visual representations of Refugee camps or settlements that predominantly focus on “negative aspects linked to refugee-ness” (Lenette 2019, 1813).

Character Analysis

Moreover, the ways in which the subjects are represented in Lives On Hold In Lebanon can be considered to some extent more three dimensional which also challenges the stereotypical depictions of refugees as “passive and powerless, overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding them” as well as their image as a monolithic entity (Bleiker et al., 2014, 194). This can be illustrated by the two following scenes in which the Palestinian subjects share their experiences about their lives in the overcrowded camp. For instance, to illustrate the poor living conditions which have been worsened by the newcomer Syrian refugees in the more recent years, Ali Othman describes the poor living conditions in detail however at the same time he also identifies the ways in which the refugees themselves have contributed to the improvement of the camp, for instance by “stringing up the risky [electrical] wiring” but also touches upon on further ways how specifically the conditions of the camp can be improved, for example by bringing safe drinking water to the homes of the people in the camp as well as improved plumbing to prevent the diseases from spreading (Lives On Hold In Lebanon 2018, 2:38-3:18). Thus, it can be postulated that this particular scene provides the representations of
the refugees who live in the camp with more agency as well as “resilience, livelihood, and community” as it entails the descriptions of how refugees have contributed to the building of the camp, but also - further ways for improvement (Lenette 2019, 1813). Furthermore, another scene which can be used as an example to illustrate how the stereotypical image of refugees have been challenged by realistic portrayals of them as people is the scene in which Mona Ahmand, a fellow Palestinian Refugee, states that the newcomer Syrian refugees “have adapted to the Palestinian community” in the camp but also does not leave out the fact that their arrival has affected the Palestinian community (Lives On Hold in Lebanon 2018, 3:50-3:53). Even though Mona does not explain how exactly the Palestinian community has been affected by the Syrian presence, the inclusion of this scene in the immersive documentary nonetheless contributes to a more nuanced representation of the refugee lives in the camp as it highlights the differences of the refugees from different background but also – emphasizes how these two groups of peoples are able to co-exist in the overcrowded camp because they are humans beings despite all labels that have been put on them.

Figure 12. Lives on Hold in Lebanon (2018) – Source: YouTube

Ultimately, when contrasted with the other two immersive documentaries, it would be fair to claim that the script of “suffering to hope” is less obviously present in Lives On Hold In Lebanon due to the films realistic and balanced portrayals of its subjects and setting. However it would be partial to fully disregard its presence due to the fact that this documentary does explicitly end on the note of “hope” after the descriptions of suffering by various subjects of the immersive documentary. Similarly to Dreaming in Za’atri: Stories After Syria, the last few sentences of Lives on Hold in Lebanon feature the word hope multiple times:
“Everyday we have a feeling we will return to Palestine ad we never loose hope. If we can’t go, our children will. We will never loose hope in returning to our homeland” (Lives on Hold in Lebanon 2018, 7:16-7:25).

On the other it would also be fair to note that the quote above was not accompanied by any extradietetic music which may have contributed to providing emotion where it may not be necessary. Instead, this monologue is coupled with the shots of children standing on the streets (see Figure 12) which to some extent – can be interpreted as symbolic embodiments of hope and future that is linked to the returning to their conflict ridden homes after the wars end instead of forwarding the stereotype of the West as the end goal of all refugee people.
5. Conclusion

5.1 Main conclusion

(Answer to RQ3)

As revealed through the findings of the production analyses of this empirical research study, it would be fair to claim that two films out of the three Life In The Time of Refuge and Dreaming In Za’atari: Stories After Syria showed clear signs of collaborative documentary filmmaking practices which can be considered as a step in the right direction towards the more inclusive documentary production practices which are valuable for their ability to create a necessary dialogue between the filmmakers and subjects. This is largely applicable to the immersive documentary Dreaming In Za’atari: Stories After Syria because it actually allowed and more importantly encouraged the subjects, the three teenagers, to actually film their lives as exemplified by the fact that the teenagers received training how to operate the cameras before they could film snippets from their lives. This can also to some extent be applied to the film Life In The Time of Refuge as it was revealed that Warda Al-Jawahiry, a former Refugee herself who is now a journalist and a filmmaker, was on the team of production who were responsible for the making of the immersive documentary. Unfortunately, no detailed information about the inclusion of the refugee perspective in the making of the third immersive documentary Lives On Hold In Lebanon could be found which makes it very difficult to judge any signs of collaborative documentary practises with regard to that particular film. Perhaps the absence of information for that particular movie might be due to the fact that it has the least views on the platform where is circulated which is on the YouTube channel of Doctors Without Borders (USA account). Nonetheless, it would be fair to claim that 2/3 films having at least some degree of collaborative production practises suggest a that immersive documentary filmmaking might be a step, no matter how big or small, towards more inclusive forms of production that allows for the subjects have a bigger say in mediating their own representations or in the case of immersive documentary filmmaking – simulations.

(Answer to RQ1 and RQ 2 and RQ4)

On the other hand, the narrative analysis of the three immersive documentary films revealed that two out of the three films, again, Life In The Time of Refuge and Dreaming In Za’atari entailed quite a large number of stereotypical representations of their non-western
subjects as well as locations, such as through sharp comparisons between the two worlds, representation of the subjects in ways that contribute to their images as passive victims. Therefore, this suggests that immersive films were unable to fully escape or circumvent the eurocentric narrative structures despite the fact that this immersive medium allowed the audiences to take control of the gaze. Thus, the main issue that needs to be raised here is – what is the point of taking control of the gaze or being ‘immersed’ in a narrative which reproduces not in frames or shots but in simulations the same type of problematic images of vulnerable groups of people? This suggests that our current Eurocentric modes of production need to be put under more scrutiny so that steps can be taken in the correct direction.

Moreover, it was also revealed that all of the documentaries did employ to what Gruenewald and Witteborn (2020, 8) refer to as “script of suffering to hope” which is found in all humanitarian immersive documentary films as it enables to provoke emotion and appeal to the global audiences at the unfortunate cost of ignoring the reality of political and institutional inequalities which lay at the heart of most modern conflicts. On the other hand, each documentary evoked the script in their own different ways that were not identical to one another however some similar symbolic details did overlay in all of the films (such as the use of children in the final shots of the film to represent the future and the hope associated with the future) as well as the blunt repetition of the word ‘hope’. Therefore, taking this into account, it would be fair to view the films as somewhat problematic humanitarian communication practices that center too much on emotion and therefore positions the three analyzed immersive 360-degree documentaries as false illusions of presence and less as steps towards more genuine representations of the refugee experience, despite the fact that they showed signs of collaborative filmmaking which can be considered highly paradoxical.

5.2 Considerations

Finally, with regards to the exploration of the VR format and its role in contemporary humanitarian communication, it would be important to consider the following aspects. First of all, as revealed by the findings, VR technology in itself is not an easy thing to manage, therefore, differently to other kind of documentaries, the director cannot simply give the camera to the subjects to record their experiences as in other kind of productions with regular cameras, as it requires more skill that needs to be taught. Second of all, as illustrated by the analysis of the three immersive documentaries, the identification of the gaze and the point of view can indeed work, and there are positive aspects about it because it does bring the audience at least
one step closer (literally – through a simulation of a physically being in the environments) however – the risk of *spectacularisation* of the whole artifact should be taken very seriously by both filmmakers as well as the spectators in order to treat the format as educational and not as a form of emotional entertainment. Thirdly, it is important to take into account that there is a mise-en-scène that constitutes a whole film genre as it starts to set its own rules, automatisms and manners of perception. Therefore – even though VR films are a rather new format which will undoubtedly grow and develop in years to come, there already appears to be some kind of continuity or ‘rules’ which govern VR films about Refuges – such as the trope of “suffering to hope” as well as the use of children as main subjects who tell their stories.
6. Reference List

6.1 Primary Sources


6.2 Secondary Sources


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6.3 Online Sources


