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# Virtual Reality and the Syrian Refugee Camps: Humanitarian Communication and the Politics of Empathy

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In recent years, virtual reality (VR) has gained traction in humanitarian communication through its utopian promises of copresence, experiential immediacy, and transcendence. I analyze three communication texts that engage with the Syrian refugee crisis. Two were made using immersive technology, and one is a traditional documentary. The article argues that VR brings new techniques of experiential immediacy to the practice of humanitarian communication, but it also uses meaning-making codes in the simulations of other peoples and spaces. Therefore, VR remains subject to the operations of dominant ideologies. Comparing these artifacts, the article demonstrates that although immersive technologies foreground the primacy of nonmediation, ignoring the structures of representation defangs the political possibilities of humanitarian communication.

*Keywords: humanitarian communication, virtual reality, refugee studies, representation, digital humanitarianism, communication technology*

The civil war in Syria, which began in 2011, has led to the unprecedented forced migration of peoples. In 2016, the United Nations estimated that from a prewar population of 22 million Syrians, more than 6 million were internally displaced, and around 5.5 million became refugees outside the country. Syria's neighboring countries are hosting the vast majority of the refugees. Several other governments, the United Nations, and many organizations have stepped in to render help. The incorporation of new communication technologies to highlight the refugee crisis plays a significant role in these aid efforts. The new technologies operate under the paradigm of "humanitarian communication" aligned with what Chouliaraki (2013) calls the "humanitarian imaginary," referring to a "configuration of practices which use the communicative structure of the theater in order to perform collective imaginations of vulnerable others . . . with a view to cultivating a longer-term disposition to thinking, feeling and acting towards these others" (p. 45). Humanitarian communication parallels the conventions of theatrical performance by distancing the spectator from the spectacle of the sufferers through the objective space of the stage (or any other framing device) while enabling proximity between the two through narrative and visual resources that invite our empathetic judgment toward

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the spectacle (Chouliaraki, 2013). This article explores humanitarian communication's engagement with the new technology of virtual reality (VR) in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. The appropriation of VR into humanitarian contexts is grounded on the hope that it will enable empathetic connections between the immersees and the distant sufferers. Immersive technology runs counter to the centrality of the stage in the theatrical aspect of humanitarian communication. The technology, after all, aspires to deliver a fully immersive experience wherein the spectator will forget her or his own position and participate in the simulated world. It is this contradiction—between theatricality and VR's subsuming of it under claims of technologically aided empathy—that I wish to explore. The article will analyze this friction through representations. I argue that although immersive technologies foreground the primacy of nonmediation, ignoring the structures of representation defangs the political possibilities of humanitarian communication.

The incorporation of VR in humanitarian communication is seen in several documentary films that convey the experiences of refugees. Out of the three I analyze, two (*Clouds Over Sidra* [Arora & Milk, 2015] and *For My Son* [Temple & Ingrasci, 2016]) are made using VR, or immersive technology. The third (*Another Kind of Girl*) is a traditional documentary, and its inclusion will lend a comparative dimension to immersive VR. *Clouds Over Sidra* was the first ever film shot in VR for the United Nations. *For My Son* is notable for its foregrounding of a resistant refugee identity intimately tied in with professional achievement. Both of the VR artifacts have corporate sponsorship from Samsung. The tie-in demonstrates an increasing trend of what Hoijer (2004) calls "humanitarian sponsoring" (p. 514), wherein companies want to be seen as benefactors. This might be evidence of a larger trend of the "instrumentalization of the humanitarian field" that reveals contemporary humanitarianism's "neoliberal logic of micro-economic explanations that ignores the systemic causes of global poverty and turns humanitarianism into a practice of depoliticized managerialism" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 9). This article is premised on the centrality of representations in humanitarian communication. As Dogra (2012) writes, we come to know the world through its representations, which do not simply represent facts but also constitute them:

> We derive our understandings of global poverty from our "stock of knowledge" which includes what we see, hear, know, believe and feel about it. Representations, which include what aid agencies and NGOs tell us, are key ingredients of this knowledge, our awareness of global inequalities and our very conscience. (p. 1)

Representations are crucial in the field of humanitarian communication because aid and action are directly dependent on how spectators perceive the distant others who are subjects of the representations.

It is important to make a distinction between VR and 360-degree video, even though marketers, the media, and the general public use the terms interchangeably. Both technologies employ the same headset to communicate content, but they have crucial differences. As explained in a Vimeo post (Dana, 2017, para. 3), the viewer can move either left to right or top to bottom within an enclosed sphere in 360-degree video. In contrast, VR experience can almost seem limitless. The

viewer has control of the environment beyond direction. Instead of being a spectator, the viewer can move around virtually and interact with the environment, within the limits of the software:

> Think of it like this—with 360 video, you're in the passenger seat of a car. The driver represents the filmmaker, who creates a stunning experience and invites you along for the ride . . . With VR, you are behind the wheel, deciding where you want to go . . . it is not the same kind of experience filmmakers and viewers are seeking, and that's why VR is most often used in video game or simulation systems. (Dana, 2017, para. 4)

Adams (2016) writes that true VR shows simulated environments

> presented via high-powered headgear and, eventually, other bodily accessories like gloves and whatnot . . . The worlds need to be created . . . significant computing power is necessary . . . the most advanced virtual-reality goggles . . . must be tethered to a PC. (para. 5)

The differences bring up the related issue of the use of immersive technologies for traditional storytelling purposes. Bailenson (2018) lays out the stakes: "VR is about exploration, and storytelling is about control" (p. 220). Although VR is great for experience because it is organic, user-driven, and different for everyone, film and prose are ideal for telling stories, where the director or writer constantly guides the viewer's attention. These tensions between the experiential and the narrative are played out in the documentaries. The representations of the Syrian refugees fall primarily within the realm of 360-degree video rather than of VR. Even though the artifacts are yet to acquire the full haptic interactivity of sophisticated VR, they are, nevertheless, a significant leap from earlier single-shot moving images. They can be read as aspirations toward full VR capability, with which the spectators will no longer remain mere viewers and will be able to interact with the simulated world of the refugees.

## Literature Review

I provide a brief overview of some dominant critiques of humanitarian communication to link the key themes of this critical literature with the discourse on VR. The review will also provide an ethical baseline for representation and will develop an analytical framework for the VR artifacts. Cottle's (2015) mapping of the transformations in humanitarian communication is useful for understanding the role of VR within the field. The media have impacted the humanitarian field in the six analytically distinctive ways of scale, speed, saturation, social relations enfranchisement, surveillance, and seeing. One can argue that all of them apply to new technologies in humanitarian communication, but the category of "seeing" has particular relevance for this article. Cottle (2015) links seeing to the media's capacity for the communication of dramatic visuals, which "provides enhanced opportunities to 'bear witness' to disasters around the world and their human consequences—a prerequisite it seems for empathetically informed humanitarian response" (p. 25).

Tester (2010) defines humanitarianism as "paying moral attention to others who are beyond one's own immediate sphere of existence" (p. vii). He argues for the inextricable link between humanitarianism and culture: Paying attention "requires and involves an imagination about the world, about the relationships between the near and the far, 'us' and 'them.' Culture is the medium through which extended attention is imaginable" (p. vii). Humanitarianism's troubling aspects exist in "a hegemonic form," resting on "myths and, more insidiously, the vestiges of a distinctly imperial mindset, which establishes the West as the only right actor in the world" (p. ix). Tester uses "common-sense humanitarianism" (p. 34) to define the humanitarianism of media audiences who rely on unquestioned myths to make sense of the suffering of others. Hoijer (2004) also argues for the link between humanitarianism and culture. Even though the moral ideals of humanitarianism do not discriminate between victims, global compassion designates some populations as "better" victims than others. The ideal victim worthy of aid and care is a cultural construction.

Other critiques address the representational choices of humanitarian communication, including the fact that images of women and children are far more prevalent than those of men. Manzo (2008) argues that this lopsidedness, wherein images of vulnerability stand in as metaphors for the developing world, perpetuates a paternalistic colonial ideology of innocence, dependence, and protection. To Dogra (2015), the dominance of such images "evokes implicit binaries" (p. 107). The majority world is symbolically projected as "toddlers" still needing the help of the "adult," or developed, nations and lacking leadership, toward whom the developed world can be paternalistic and helpful (p. 107). The answer to the representation of refugees as vulnerable dependents does not lie in the promotion of "positive" and "smiling" images. Although images of smiling children violate injunctions to be real and to provide context, positive images also tend to reinforce the colonial logic through explicit associations with "aid efficacy" and the healing powers of the Global North (Manzo, 2008, p. 640).

Dogra (2012) writes that in the fruitless debate over negative versus positive images, the question of context remains neglected. Instead of openly rejecting negative images, we should question why they work as dehumanizing spectacles. The answer lies in the context, or causes of poverty in the majority world, and its link to the developed world, which is largely missing from humanitarian communication. This stripping away of context has the unfortunate consequence of representing the problems faced by the majority world as discrete and caused by internal rationales, thus erasing the interconnectedness of issues and people.

Chouliaraki (2015) also argues for the importance of context as an enabling factor to imagine a new communicative structure of humanitarianism. Human vulnerability should be addressed through the politics of injustice rather than pity. Through a "solidarity of agonism" (p. 134), Chouliaraki argues that the problem of dehumanization is resolved neither through sharing our common humanity nor through sharing each other's emotions, but through communicating vulnerability as a political question of injustice and engaging with vulnerable others as others with their own voices. The inclusion of the voice of the vulnerable sufferer in humanitarian communication must avoid the pitfalls of both irony and pity. To avoid irony, the vulnerable other should be portrayed as a historical agent—someone who actively strives to manage his or her life, yet who is severely constrained by historical structures of injustice; and to avoid

pity, this other escapes the universalist imageries of powerless destitution or hopeful self-determination characteristic of the traditional discourse of pity.

The representational choices of humanitarian communication are intricately tied in with the crucial problem of refugee visibility. Arendt (1996) described the conditions endemic to refugees—those of nonvisibility, negative visibility, and loss of identity—"as the great social weapon by which one may kill men without any bloodshed" (p. 118). Even when refugees appear in the public domain, they do so only under strictly circumscribed ideological filters that determine the themes of their representation. Wright (2004) notes that visuals of refugees serve as decorative wallpaper while "expert knowledge is usually provided by representatives of aid agencies. The voice of the refugee remains at the end of a chain of 'framings': contextualized by the anchorperson, reporter, non-governmental organization (NGO) representative and (perhaps) translator" (p. 108). Rajaram (2002) argues that media representations render refugees speechless. The media connect refugee identities intimately with the territorial state, and "those without citizenship or bereft of it are speechless . . . requiring an agency or expert to speak for them" (p. 251). To Nyers (2006), the refugee is constituted through a series of "ontological omissions" (p. 3). Qualities present to the citizen are absent to the refugee. Visibility, agency, and rational speech of the citizen-subject are conspicuously absent in conventional representations of refugees that cast them as invisible, speechless, and nonpolitical.

As can be seen in this short review, the main challenges plaguing humanitarian communication in the context of refugee representations center around how to address the imbalances linked to the predominance of images of vulnerability, how to address the prevalence of stereotypical images devoid of context, and how to address the invisibility or negative visibility of refugees wherein their voices are either muted or heard only after they pass through ideological frames that perpetuate existing power hierarchies. The use of VR in humanitarian communication—so the argument goes—will address these shortcomings through its immersive experiences. VR experiences will allow spectators to be "present" in the environment of the refugees, thus raising the empathy levels of its users. Further, it will enable spectators to hear and see the refugees directly, without the interference of cultural filters. This discourse plays a central role in humanitarian communication's enthusiastic embrace of the technology. VR's major assertion is that the technology has transcended any of the representational filters that burdened earlier communication technologies. This is reflected in Sadler's (2016) claim that there is no frame in VR: "The shot you're taking is above, below, and around. The frame is removed. You're not just thinking what fits . . . but you are thinking about what's behind and in front of you" (para. 8). Sadler's claim remains silent about the human agency behind the placement of the camera. Who places the camera and where? What dynamics of social power decide that certain subjects and their concerns are worthy of being featured in the camera frame? His words have serious implications that far exceed the technical details. They mean ignoring the political implications of representations by accepting that the images appear "naturally," without the intervention of a human element.

Defined as "a three-dimensional, computer-generated simulation in which one can navigate around, interact with, and be immersed in another environment" (Briggs, 1996, p. 13), VR has been celebrated by industry enthusiasts. In a TED talk, Chris Milk (2015) proclaimed that VR is "the ultimate empathy machine" (3:10). This purported ability to generate empathy is based on the claim that we are

entering the era of "postsymbolic communication" (Lanier & Biocca, 1992, p. 161). Audiences will no longer depend on symbolic representations as the technology makes possible immersive 3-D simulations. VR's claims to develop proximitous relationships is linked to nonmediation and telepresence, which describes the precedence of the environment presented via the medium over the physical environment in which one is actually present (Coelho, Tichon, Hine, Wallis, & Riva, 2006; Steuer, 1995). Nonmediation is the perceptual illusion triggered when a person fails to perceive the existence of a medium in her or his communication environment and responds as if the medium were absent (Beardon, 1992; Laurel, 1991; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Penny, 1994; Ryan, 1999). VR's appeal lies in the assertion that it can bridge the gap between real and mediated experience. This can be seen in Bailenson's (2018) claim that when VR works well, it is seamless, and the virtual world changes just as the physical world does:

> There are no interfaces, no gadgets, no pixels . . . sensation of "being there," . . . *psychological presence* . . . is the fundamental characteristic of VR. When it happens, your motor and perceptual systems interact with the virtual world . . . Presence is the sine qua non of VR. (p. 19, emphasis in original)

The responses of media critics to VR have been guarded. Replying to claims that immersive technology is "postsymbolic," Biocca and Levy (1995) note that

> in the "sensory realm" of virtual reality the problems of communication abstraction do not go away . . . the problem is simply refracted through new codes . . . postsymbolic never means postsemiotic . . . Although more information can be transported . . . it is not certain that the meaning . . . is clearer. (p. 23)

Hillis (1999) pushes back against the tools approach, which assumes that communication technologies are neutral conduits through which meanings, social relations, and agents pass without being affected by the interaction and argues that we should be suspicious of VR's appearance of codeless naturalness and direct iconographic "see-ability." VR operates under the assumption that the machine "thinks" the represented image: "The mental work required to extrapolate sensation seems unnecessary, as a central promise of this technology is sensation itself. The nature of immersion is to make users feel drenched in sensation" (p. 70).

The dominant discourse of VR as a disembodying medium aligns symmetrically with its appropriation into humanitarian communication. Such discourses, according to Murray and Sixsmith (1999), build upon a mind-body split; the rhetoric is "of leaving the body behind at the computer terminal, of projecting a wandering mind into cyberspace. The body, the story goes, remains docked . . . while the mind wanders the pixelled delights of the computer programmer's creation" (p. 318). The Western spectator, with the presence afforded by the technology, can now experience and even empathize with the travails of the distant refugees. In short, VR delivers what I call an affordable empathy that carries no physical and emotional risks (at least, not ones that are not easily perceptible). The point is how far can VR push the spectator from this affordable empathy to a risky empathy wherein the spectator is willing to revisit the self–other relationship and perhaps even entertain the thought of addressing the unequal power dynamics embedded in that liaison.

A critical reading of VR's relationship with humanitarian communication, therefore, must take into account the broader historical shift in the communicative structure of humanitarianism. A defining feature of this transition, as Chouliaraki (2013) notes, is the retreat of a "theatrical structure of solidarity" and the emergence of a "mirror structure" (p. 22). The retreat signals an attempt to erase the stage or framing device that has remained a central element of theatricality. The mirror structure is primarily occupied with the self; the encounter between the spectator and the spectacle is often reduced to a narcissistic self-reflection that involves people like the spectator. The retreat from theater to mirror is reflected in VR's claim that proximity between the spectator and the vulnerable other can be better developed with the erasure of the theatrical elements of the stage, including the constructed nature of narratives and representations. Chouliaraki (2013) argues that humanitarian communication must recapture the intensity of the theatrical encounter. In short, VR's flippant dismissal of the framing device will not do. In what ways can VR contribute to reclaiming the theatrical structure while minimizing the narcissistic effects of the mirror structure? VR runs the risk of replicating the mirror structure on two counts: One, if the links between VR's representational codes and dominant ideologies are not fully accounted for and the otherness of the refugees are subsumed under an optics of similarity; and two, the sensorial plenitude of immersive VR can very well mislead the spectator into confusing experience with empathy.

Given the above critiques of humanitarian communication and VR's assertion that they can be addressed through a technologically aided intervention aimed at addressing distance with presence and stereotyped representations through the removal of cultural filters and staging devices, the analysis will be guided by the following research questions:

*RQ1: What structures of meaning are employed to make the refugee situation comprehensible to the viewer? In what ways do the texts extend or challenge hegemonic humanitarianism?*

*RQ2: How are the Syrian refugees humanized and given testimonial voices in these representations?*

*RQ3: In what ways do the artifacts address the criticism that the media represent refugees predominantly through an ahistorical and stereotypical lens, contributing to their lack of agency?*

*RQ4: What new representational techniques and elements of experiential immediacy does VR bring to the table? How do these techniques compare with those of traditional documentary?*

## Analysis

### Clouds Over Sidra *and* Another Kind of Girl

I compare two texts that engage with the experiences of a common figure in humanitarian communication, the girl child. The protagonists are Syrian girls living in the Zaatari refugee camp, in Jordan. Both the girls exhibit a strong sense of female agency. The main difference is that *Clouds Over Sidra* is made with immersive technology, whereas *Another Kind of Girl* is filmed using traditional camera equipment and is dependent on conventional narrative tools. The VR documentary makes its institutional links explicit. For instance, we see Sidra for the first time in the film with a rucksack that prominently

displays the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) logo. In the penultimate sequence of the film, Sidra's family gathers for dinner. Its members are seated on a rug inside the family tent. Both the rug and the tent prominently display the UNHCR logo (see Figure 1). This raises the issue of how far such relationships between communicative artifacts and institutional sponsors influence refugee representations.


***Figure 1. Sidra's family over dinner enveloped by UNHCR logos.***

*Clouds Over Sidra* is introduced with a blurb: "Meet Sidra. This charming 12-year-old girl will guide you through her temporary home . . . through her daily life: Eating, sleeping, learning, and playing in the vast desert city of tents." Sidra's voice narrates her family's perilous journey out of Syria: "We walked for days crossing the desert into Jordan" (0:15). The description evokes two biblical motifs, noted by Wright (2002) in his analysis of the media representation of refugees: Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt (refugees are shown as displaced but not necessarily destitute) and the Exodus (refugees are shown as the mass movement of people, suggesting the presence of a pursuer who remains out of the picture). Wright (2002) demonstrated that the media visuals of refugees conform to several patterns in Christian iconography; other categories include the Fall of Man stereotype (refugees are depicted in a state of degradation), and the Madonna and Child trope.

Sidra says that on the way out of Syria, "My kite got stuck in a tree in our yard, I wonder if it is still there, I want it back" (0:20). The repetition of the four personal pronouns—my, our, I, and I—lend a strong sense of assertiveness and ownership. The representation of Sidra as possessing distinct wants

humanizes the refugee figure. Sidra's declaration also refers to an incomplete journey (the kite being stuck) and hints at a future closure of that journey. She is represented as a purposeful character who scoffs at the other kids loitering and avoiding going to school.

Sidra has a big family with three brothers. The female protagonist pushes back against stereotypical gender identities at several points. She makes a tongue-in-cheek comment that her small brother cries a lot more than she did when she was a baby: "I think I was a stronger baby than my brother" (1:06).


***Figure 2. Bakery scene inside the Zaatari camp.***

*Clouds Over Sidra* depicts the gender prejudices within Syrian society that are carried over into the refugee camp. The interior of a bakery is revealed as an all-male space; men and boys are shown making bread (see Figure 2). Boys are shown playing computer games (see Figure 3). Sidra tells us that the machines are off-limits to the girls; the boys "say they are playing games, but I don't know what they are doing, because they won't let girls play on the computers. I don't understand computer games" (3:22). The computers and the world of technology are forbidden to the girls.


***Figure 3. Boys playing computer games.***

The interior of a gym is yet another all-male space. Sidra pokes fun at male vanity: "Many of the men say they exercise because they want to be strong for the journey home . . . but I think they just like how they look in the mirror" (3:50). The immersive film depicts the reality of the refugee camp with all its contradictions and complexities. Even in the gender-stratified space of the camp, Sidra experiences a sense of freedom. She says that in Zaatari, "girls can play football too, that makes us happy" (4:58).

Toward the end, we see Sidra alone on her bed, mirroring the first time we see her. The exception is that she is now wiping her tears, saying, "I think being here for a year and a half is long enough" (6:48). The film ends with Sidra saying in a hopeful tone, "I'll not be in Zaatari forever. My teacher says the clouds moving over us also came here from Syria . . . someday the clouds and me are going to turn around and go back home" (6:58). This is the third time we hear a reference to the clouds, thus making the object a carrier of significant metaphoric meaning. The first reference is in the title connecting clouds as a metaphor for gloom with Sidra's status as a refugee child. Resisting this reading, Sidra says she likes cloudy days. She feels protected as if a blanket is covering her. In the third reference, the clouds are an intrinsic part of Sidra's identity and they will head back to Syria someday. The metaphors add to the depiction of Sidra as determined to turn adversities into strengths.

The immersive artifact depicts the Syrian refugees in active roles and engaged in purposeful activities: baking, teaching, working out, playing football, playing computer games. But these scenes function in an ambivalent manner; they resist representations of refugees as purposeless, but they also reinforce gender stratifications. The invocations of the passage of time with its many references to the past, the present, and a hopeful future address what Agier (2011) calls "the absence of sociality" in the camp (p. 49). Agier (2008) argues that humanitarian intervention tends to become ossified at the site of implantation, leading to the loss of a sense of time, history, and movement for the camp dwellers. The documentary manages a fine balance beyond utopia and reality. There is loss but also resourcefulness;

there is freedom in gender roles, but that is tempered with activities divided along gender lines. Such ambivalence is realistic and invites the spectator to help tip the balance in favor of Sidra and all that she stands for.

As a VR narrative, *Clouds Over Sidra* conveys the sense that nothing happens offscreen. With the all-enveloping stereoscopic 360-degree perspective, the impression is that the screen is absent. There is no specific guidance from the director, and the viewer has to orient him- or herself by latching on to perceptible narrative guides such as Sidra's voice-over and her gaze. These two elements act as focal points, helping the viewer piece together the narrative and follow the action. For instance, in the classroom scene, Sidra is seated in the back and her gaze is intently focused on the teacher in front. As we hear Sidra's voice-over about her teacher's habit of calling on students, the viewer must turn his or her head to scan the whole length of the classroom to make sense of the action. I call this an induced movement specific to VR; the technology is able to elicit a physical response from the viewer. The viewer responds by head movement to follow the direction of Sidra's gaze and, hence, the narrative. Within the immersive experience, this establishes copresence and experiential immediacy (if not total identification) as Sidra's gaze and the voice-over work together to make the viewer see what she sees. Of course, Sidra is not present in every scene and setting to effect this experiential immediacy. In some scenes, her voice-over functions alone to render the induced movement and copresence that are distinctive of the immersive experience. The all-male spaces of the gym and the computer room are examples. VR's hope, in the context of humanitarian communication, is that the viewer's movement while wearing the head-mounted display will be replicated in the outside world in the form of charitable giving. The induced movement I noted can be read as an indicator of presence. Coelho et al. (2006) define presence in VR as "an active suppression process of the real world and the construction of a set of action patterns based on the immediate stimulus" (p. 27).

*Another Kind of Girl* is made by Khaldiya, a 17-year-old Syrian girl living in the Zaatari camp, as part of a media workshop to document the everyday lives of the refugees. The workshop was initiated by the Another Kind of Girl Collective (AKGC). On its website, AKGC (2018) declares that it equips "teenage girls living as refugees with the creative and technical means to express their inner worlds and document their everyday lives—how it looks, feels and sounds from the ground, at the heart of their world" (para. 1). The AKGC is driven by a pronounced effort to accord narrative agency to the Syrian girls and to give the refugees a platform to offer testimony. The sense of independent exploration is underlined by the fact that the film does not feature any adults. We hear the voices of adults, but they are not visually represented. Khaldiya is associated with two key images—birds in flight and windows with bars—which are metaphors for freedom, exploration, and societal constraints. These visuals accompany her narration at key moments.

*Another Kind of Girl* has a notable title, which refers to Khaldiya's growth and evolution into a confident young woman: "I was able to overcome all of my shyness. Now I am another kind of girl. A courageous girl" (1:53). We see Khaldiya for the first time in the film as an independent female. She is standing at the doorway of her home looking outside. The image evokes a threshold; she's about to step out and explore. The voice of an adult female asks from the inside: "Khaldiya, why are you standing outside on your own?" (0:22). The question is meant to establish rules, set boundaries, and impose

restrictions. Khaldiya's standing alone is a socially unacceptable practice. In a measured tone, she answers: "I'm looking at the people going and coming" (0:25). This also establishes Khaldiya's identity as a keen observer, which aligns with her role as an amateur filmmaker. The depiction of growth contrasts with Khaldiya's earlier admission of confusion during her initial days at the camp: "There was no sleep. There was no warmth . . . It was a feeling I can't describe . . . I felt I had changed and become a different person" (1:16).

In addition to the theme of growth, "another" in the title also evokes distance from the audience. In the *New York Times* piece accompanying the film, Khaldiya (2016) emphasizes:

> I'm filming from my own personal perspective. I live in the camp, I am within the camp, and I know the camp. An outsider will miss a lot of the deeper meanings because they haven't felt what it's like to live here. (para. 4)

The repetitive "I" not only marks an assertive identity but also counters immersive technology's claims that it can provide empathetic fusion, experiential immediacy, or even identification between the spectator and the subject. Khaldiya's opposition between the camp-dwelling "I" and the "outsider" evokes the limitations of technologically aided empathy claims. The distant others remain distant, which, perhaps, is a more grounded and realistic perspective.

Dogra (2015) argues that humanitarian agencies rely on "a double logic of 'difference' and 'oneness'" (p. 103) in their attempts to connect the developed world and the developing countries. The global poor are shown as different and distant from the developed world and yet like us by virtue of their humanity. The film employs this "master code" of dualism and oneness (p. 113), although it can be argued that the logic of difference dominates. The oneness theme is seen in Khaldiya's desires to be a normal teenager: "This is what I imagine even though it's impossible . . . Marah and I are in something that looks like college dorms, sharing the same room. And we are being left alone. We're studying there by ourselves, comfortably . . . away from our families" (7:36). Khaldiya's desires are especially poignant, as she left school after eighth grade.

Given that oneness can be a problematic concept because of its tendency to erase specific histories, the differential assertions of Khaldiya's "I" and the various scenes of deprivation acquire significance. In a striking scene, we see one of Khaldiya's siblings struggling to carry a heavy water container across the unpaved road (see Figure 4). We see her siblings playing with improvised toys. Her baby sister is introduced as "a little lady" and shown mimicking the pedaling motion in the absence of a toy bike: "My siblings never liked playing with their hands . . . In the camp, their lives completely changed. Now they play mostly with their hands and with their pretty children's songs" (2:29).


***Figure 4. One of Khaldiya's siblings fetching water.***

Filmmaking offers Khaldiya a way to give testimony and to address the lack of sociality in the camp: "Whenever I'm angry, I go out and start filming. However it comes out doesn't matter. What's important is that I'm filming. Especially when I take the shots from weird angles" (8:25). The activity gives her a sense of control, growth, and identity (see Figure 5).


***Figure 5. Khaldiya figuring out the camera with a friend.***

The protagonist finds purpose too through teaching younger children. The documentary ends with an evocative sequence of the protagonist's hand separating the tarp covering her window, waving at the distant moon, and trying to capture the moon in her palm (see Figure 6).

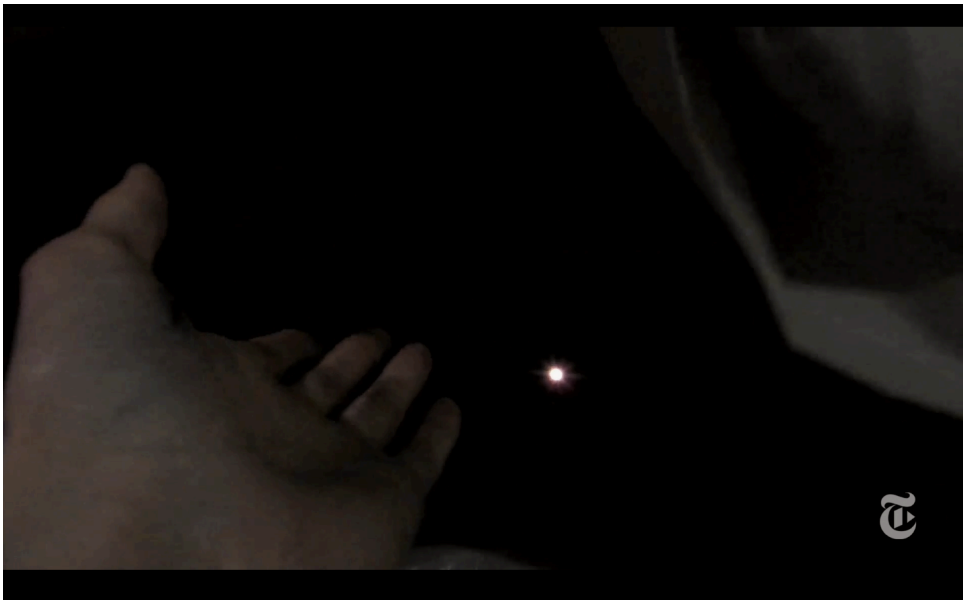

***Figure 6. Khaldiya trying to capture the moon in her palm.***

Here, it is worth recalling Bailenson's (2018) effusive praise for *Clouds Over Sidra*:

> The film was clearly unlocking powerful emotions. But these reactions hadn't been produced by a dramatic score, or clever editing, or close-up shots that lingered on a particularly poignant face . . . These aspects of traditional filmmaking, designed to intensify our emotional engagement, are virtually absent . . . Viewers . . . are *simply* confronted with a series of ordinary moments . . . the immersive video made us briefly feel as if we were there with them. (p. 77, emphasis added)

The attribution of lack of artifice in what is clearly a created work of art is, at best, a naïve reading. This is a common theme in the praise for immersive technology: that the artifacts are somehow more transparent because they disguise the agential determinants behind representations so well. Khaldiya's documentary, in that context, is more honest because it foregrounds its own artificiality and subjective choices. To borrow from cultural theory, the film is quite aware of its own constructedness. In the immersive experience of *Clouds Over Sidra*, it is difficult to locate the agent responsible for the choice of subject, narration, and images. In contrast, Khaldiya's film is a pronounced attempt at asserting authorial agency. Khaldiya (2016) writes:

> I used to be shy, but when I started learning how to film, and also realized that the image of a refugee camp can be distorted by portrayals by outsiders, I knew that I needed to overcome this shyness—to speak not only to the community around me, but to people in the rest of the world. *I* walk through my days with my camera always in my hand, and when *I* encounter a scene *I* think people would be interested in seeing, *I* film it—life as it is. (para. 3, emphasis added)

Similar to VR's immersive artifacts, the camera is always present. But Khaldiya will film only if she thinks people will be interested. For all her assertiveness, we don't see this sense of agential control in Sidra.

**For My Son**

*For My Son* has several distinctive features. In place of the women and children who typically populate humanitarian communication as worthy victims, the protagonist, Firas, is an adult male. The documentary focuses on the professional difficulties faced by the refugees when they transition from camp life to the outside world. The introductory blurb in the website of the company that made the documentary provides an extensive backstory of the protagonist ("For my son" video clip). Firas is a 27-year-old Syrian man who followed his family to Jordan after being shot in the leg. Firas left the refugee camp after 45 days and moved to Amman, where he married his wife. Mohamad, their son, was born in Jordan and has never known Syria. The website also carries text in bold font framing the refugee camp as a negative experience: "His biggest regret was sending his family to the camp." The framing device is a letter Firas writes to his young sonThe extensive context humanizes the refugee protagonist.

*For My Son* opens with the information that most refugees don't live in camps and that more than 80% live in the towns and cities of their host nations. Holding up his son, Firas speaks:

> My little Mohamad, let me tell you a story . . . Before the war, your mother and I lived in Syria. I had graduated with a law degree and we had our entire lives ahead of us . . . we were forced to flee our country. These pictures are all we have left of that. (0:35)

An adult woman is present, but she remains silent. Firas says there is no home for them to go back to and that he was thankful for making it safely to Jordan. He is a restless man who wanted to leave the camp: "But I didn't want to be a burden anymore. I wanted to live in a city, to have choice again" (1:36).

Firas's desire to leave the camp and 'to have choice again' can be understood in the light of Agier's (2008) interventions that offer a framework for interpreting humanitarianism's relationship to the refugee camp. The camp is the opposite of the social and political exchange that unites all human beings. Agier is not arguing against refugee camps per se; they represent the best emergency arrangement making it possible to group people effectively, ensuring protection and a minimal level of care for exiles who arrive hungry, destitute, and often in very poor health. However, there is a lack of sociality in the camp intimately tied in with refugee identity. Agier (2008) writes, "the only status acceptable in the camps, and even decreed, is that of victim":

> The refugees are in a state of waiting . . . have no right to work the land . . . nor to take any kind of employment, since life is "given" them by the humanitarian principle . . . a contradiction between minimal biological life . . . and the social and political existence of individuals: the refugees are certainly alive, but they no longer "exist." (p. 49)

Agier (2011) urges us to think of the refugee camp as a contradiction: "Humanitarian intervention borders on policing. There is no care without control" (p. 4). Firas is eager to find a way out of this absent sociality by reclaiming his professional identity.

Firas's restlessness is underlined by the visual of a busy city street in Amman. He wants to join the workforce as a normal adult. Firas is also an empathetic man aware of the difficulties faced by his host country: "Jordanians already struggled to find jobs before we came, and there aren't a lot of resources . . . I wish I could make my own opportunities and give back to Jordan for hosting us" (2:30). Firas tells us that that he has been unable to work as a lawyer. As a refugee, he lacks a permit; he works illegally as a barber to make ends meet.

We see Firas and his son in Amman's famous Roman theatre built in the second century (see Figure 7). Firas speaks:

> My little Mohamad, while the civil war is now part of our history, it will never be our whole story. Your mother and I will teach you about the great culture of the Middle East. Mathematics were born here. Written language was invented here. It was here that it was first coded into law that a man is innocent until proven guilty . . . Sometimes the world forgets. You should be proud to be Syrian, no matter what people say. (3:23)

The setting of the ancient ruins reiterates Firas's pride in the history of the Middle East. The full impact of VR's immersive experience comes to life in this scene. Firas's words evoke past glory and future hope. He also emphasizes that all things are subject to change and that the family might build on their present troubles to emerge to a brighter future. The stereoscopic 360-degree perspective places the viewer squarely in the middle of the majestic immensity of the ancient amphitheater and its steep steps, which seat 6,000 people. The expansive perspective and the voice-over blend together to deliver a memorable segment that emphasizes the incomplete arc of history; there was a past, there is a present, and there will be a hopeful future.


***Figure 7. Firas and son at Amman's second-century Roman theater.***

The ending of the documentary reiterates the importance of professional identity for the refugees. Firas is shown hugging a thick law textbook. He is dressed professionally in slacks and tucked-in blue shirt:

> I am an educated man with a law degree. My mission was to protect the innocent and none of that has changed. There are so many of us who can make the world a better place, if we are just given the chance (4:05).

The segment repeats the induced-movement technique noted in *Clouds Over Sidra*. After Firas speaks, the lights dim, and we hear another voice. The viewer must turn his or her head if he or she wants to match that voice to the human figure. As the viewer moves, a spotlight focuses on each figure. It is important to note there is no panning of the camera; it is the viewer who has to turn from the previously static, passive position. The other people in the room remain unnamed; they are identified only by their professional qualifications (see Figure 8).


***Figure 8. Visual showing a refugee woman identifying herself.***

We first see a woman calling herself a teacher; next to her, a boy identifies himself as a student. A man calls himself a builder, and, finally, a woman says she's a nurse. The induced movement, in forcing the viewer to physically turn around the room and recognize each human figure, creates a political space of human recognition and reciprocity that can be renewed with each repeated viewing. This process of making the viewer recognize the refugees' professional identities through induced movement is a configuration of personal identity both for the refugees and the spectator. In Varela-Manograsso's (2017) words:

> The configuration requires reciprocity between acting and being recognized as an agent . . . living a life of passivity leads subjects to abandon the disclosure of who they are. But the indifference of spectators to actors renders actors invisible and eventually excludes them from the political space of appearance. (para. 7)

Additionally, the scene demonstrates what Bailenson (2018) has noted as a balancing of exploration with storytelling. To achieve that balance, VR filmmakers employ a variety of techniques, including using "sound, movement, and lighting cues to bring the gaze of the viewer toward the action the director wants them to see" (p. 221). Using these cues, the immersive experience focuses the gaze of the viewer toward the professional identities of the refugees.

*For My Son* counters representations that play up the utopian agency of refugees by highlighting the obstacles in gaining professional recognition. Firas is a resistant figure intimately tied in with the strong sense of history he possesses. His professional life as a lawyer precedes his identity as a refugee. He is careful to contextualize his life as before the war, the present, and the possible future. Firas resists both the discourses of victimization and humanitarian charity identified by Bauman (2002) that leads to the representation of refugees as dehumanized and derivative characters. Bauman relates the refugee to

the discourses of victimization (refugee identity is narrated in terms of war) and of humanitarianism (refugee identity remains tied in with assistance offered by international agencies). In both, refugees enter the discourse as objects; they remain the sediments of other people's actions and derive their identities from other people's actions. Firas's character is a realistic, human refugee. He is a figure proximate to us because his desires mirror our own. And yet, Firas is distant from us because he has experienced the abject tragedy of his homeland.

## Discussion

The three texts offer a complex and varied picture of Syrian refugees. The protagonists range from strong characters who resist the lack of sociality in the camps and stereotypical interpretations of the refugee figure to characters who question gender divisions and to characters who foreground the artificiality of their craft. Considering these narratives together gives us a more comprehensive picture of the Syrian refugee experience.

As an aspect of humanitarian communication practice, the documentaries continue to employ familiar tropes. These include the biblical concepts identified by Wright (2002) and pliable tropes such as that of the vulnerable child. The experiences afforded by cutting-edge immersive technology very much remain grounded as cultural products. They absorb, perpetuate, respond to, and sometimes resist the cultural and ideological forces that shape humanitarian communication. In their use of immersive VR, the artifacts demonstrate advances over traditional technologies such as the expansive stereoscopic perspective and induced movement required of the viewers. The artifacts also reveal the blind spots of technological advances. The progressive and the agential are not always tied in to technological advancements. At the very least, applications of technology in humanitarian contexts driven by utopian rhetoric need to consider the ways in which representations and the technologies themselves remain social products. This article is an attempt to fill the gap in this area of research.

I argued that, notwithstanding VR's rhetoric of transcendence, we should question the technology's promise to usher in a new level of immersive engagement. The study claims that the representational strategies of VR are subject to the constraints of ideology and power hierarchies that permeate other representational tools. It is dangerous to succumb to the myth of transcendence, for it is in such rhetoric of immanence and political innocence that we are bound, ethically, to locate the workings of society's power structures. To fully bring to fruition immersive technology's possibilities in humanitarian contexts, those who use it must recognize humanitarian communication's theatrical structure. The distance between the spectator and the vulnerable refugees can be bridged only by addressing the existence of framing devices. Proximities cannot be built without that initial acknowledgment. Otherwise, communication and representational strategies involving refuges will remain trapped within the minefields of hegemonic humanitarianism.

VR's utopian possibilities have been linked with the evolving consciousness of humankind. Commentators believe that virtual culture will play a significant role in humankind's "conscious evolution" (Bivins & Newton, 2003, p. 23). The technology can play a positive role if it takes into account two things: that VR makes an ethical effort to represent the encounter with other worlds and other peoples, and that

VR remain transparent about its links with larger cultural, ideological, and economic forces. The developers of immersive technology need to engage with critical communication theories that posit that the technology, like any other representational tool, utilizes structures of meaning-making codes in its simulations of distant peoples and spaces. As Horsfield (2003) argues, the parameters of the programmed pseudoreality bear significant traces of ideology: "There is ideology enacted in what problems and issues are included, ideology in how those problems are identified and set up, and ideology in the options that one is given for dealing with the issues" (p. 164).

This study does not venture into examining whether VR raises the empathy levels of its users. Psychologically oriented and quantitative studies will be more apt for exploring that topic. Future research might explore the consequences of adopting fully haptic and immersive experiences in humanitarian communication. How do the advances in haptic technology alter the concept of offering testimony by the refugees? In what ways does a fully immersive experience restore contexts to representations and refugee testimonies? Examining the VR artifacts with the methodology of critical media analysis helps us uncover the representational tools used in the depiction of the Syrian refugees and the discursive frames through which the refugee emerges. The media ethicists' continuous exploration of how society and its power structures work through the codes of representation will contribute to a democratizing fracture.

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