

Breaking down the fourth wall

## Why it is significant that Venice Film Festival put VR on the bill

*The oldest film festival in the world embraces a new medium*



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AN article of faith shared by film festivals everywhere is that the best way to watch any film is on the largest possible screen, in an auditorium packed with fellow enthusiasts. Millions of people may prefer to catch the latest blockbuster or art-house drama on a laptop or a phone, but festivals reassure cineastes that the traditional, immersive, common experience can't be beaten.

But times are changing: in the past couple of years, festivals have started to make room for virtual-reality (VR) films. Yet by its very nature, VR can't be enjoyed communally (at least not yet; the technology may be able to recognise multiple

users in the same space in the future). The only way to watch a VR film is to put on a headset—imagine a padded scuba-diving mask and a pair of headphones—which cuts you off from everyone and everything around you. You can't even reach for a bag of popcorn. In some ways, VR films are the opposite of what film festivals stand for.

And yet “Jesus VR”, the world's first feature-length VR film, was on the bill at Venice last year. This year's Cannes included [“Carne y Arena”](https://espresso.economist.com/3e91970f771a2c473ae36b60d1146068)

(<https://espresso.economist.com/3e91970f771a2c473ae36b60d1146068>), an installation created by Alejandro Inarritu, an Oscar-winning director. Other festivals, such as Sundance, Tribeca, Toronto, Geneva and Dubai, have all included small VR showcases. And now Venice has gone even further, becoming the first major film festival to include a competitive programme of VR titles. This marks a seismic shift in the way the medium is perceived by the cinema establishment. Alberto Barbera, the festival's artistic director, declared that “until just a few months ago [VR] was considered little more than the latest technological gimmick”. Since then, it has become significant enough to warrant its own exhibition space.

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To watch—if that's the word; some seem to prefer “experience”—the 22 “Venice VR” films in competition, you have to be shuttled in a ferry across the water from the Lido, where the festival takes place, to the neighbouring Lazzaretto Vecchio, the home of the city's 16th-century plague hospital. This seems slightly unfair. Compared to the actual reality of historic red-brick halls and

flaking frescoes, the virtual kind falls rather short. But the evocative, airy buildings are also a sign of how seriously Venice is taking VR. At other festivals, participants sit in makeshift booths in anonymous rooms, as if they are at a corporate trade fair. Lazzaretto Vecchio, on the other hand, has the hushed, contemplative atmosphere of an art gallery. The beautiful setting lures in journalists who have never tried VR before; your correspondent was among them.

The films run from four to 40 minutes, most of them around the 15-minute mark. They range from “The Argos File”, a frantic science-fiction detective thriller in which the characters themselves are also plugged into virtual-reality devices, to “The Last Goodbye”, which takes you on a sobering tour of the Majdanek

Concentration Camp in Poland while Pinchas Gutter, one of the only surviving inmates, stands at your shoulder and describes how he lost his family there.

“Greenland Melting”, an 11-minute “walk-around” climate-change documentary, was striking and memorable: it lets you lean out of a helicopter as it flies above a glacier, and stand on the tundra as a cliff face of ice recedes to the horizon.

The first-ever winner of the Venice VR competition will be chosen by a jury led by John Landis, the director of “The Blues Brothers” and “Trading Places”, along with Céline Sciamma and Ricky Tognazzi, two leading lights of European cinema. In other words, the entries will be judged not by computer-science boffins, but by renowned film-makers. What counts is the quality of the storytelling, not just the technical pyrotechnics.

Puttering back from Lazzaretto Vecchio to the Lido, it is easy to wonder whether you’ve seen the future. Reviewing “Jesus VR” last year, the *Guardian* asked if VR would be a fad, “like scratch’n’sniff cards at the movies”. But Venice has never devoted a strand to scratch’n’sniff cards, or to 3D films or iMax films for that matter. The festival’s high-profile commitment to VR is a major statement that it is no longer regarded as a tricky twist on a venerable medium, but as a different, compelling medium altogether. Some of modern cinema’s best storytellers (<https://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2017/07/eyes-others>) have already begun to experiment with VR. Now that it has been given a sort of institutional blessing, it might not be long until audiences are putting on headsets for blockbusters and art-house dramas alike.

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