

SANCTUARY

Documentary in Virtual Reality (VR)

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ABSTRACT

Sanctuary is a documentary film in virtual reality (VR). The film uses 360-camera technology to offer a sensory immersive viewing experience. The film attempts to transcend the borders of filmmaking by merging new 360-camera technology and a nonlinear form of storytelling. The film is an observational piece.

360-degree videos are an emerging technology, which offers the viewer a sensory, immersive experience in virtual reality. Influenced by the 360-panoramic mural paintings created in 1860s,¹ the use of the 360-camera breaks away from the syntax of documentary filmmaking and gives the audience an active role in the film-viewing experience. It breaks the traditional semantics of filmmaking and sets new rules of viewing which are personal and unique to each viewer.

Sanctuary documents the Juhasz family, which has been living in a church since November 2014. The film is an eight-minute experience that gives the audience a 360-degree glimpse into the Juhasz family's life and their living conditions. The film is presented as an installation, using Samsung's Gear VR as the exhibition technology.

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To all the women documentary filmmakers and artists using new technology and virtual reality (VR) to push the documentary genre in a new direction.

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1. BACKGROUND

Sanctuary is a 360-camera immersive documentary in virtual reality. It is about the confined and claustrophobic living conditions of a Hungarian family of three — a mother and her two sons — who have been living in a church for the past year and a half (at the time of writing). The film addresses the role of new technology in documentaries and demonstrates how technology is changing narrative storytelling approaches in documentary practice.

Marianna Juhasz and her sons, Patrik and Tamas, received their final deportation order from Immigration Canada in September 2014. The family requested sanctuary from the Walnut Grove Lutheran church in Langley, British Columbia and has been living in the church's converted library since November 2014. The family's living space is 13 feet by 15 feet in size and houses all their personal items, including a mattress and pull-out couch, a small desk, a computer, and a television. The small room also contains personal items like immigration case files, shoes, books, photographs, and even groceries. Marianna shares this small room with her 17- and 13-year old sons.

My first connection to this story came from an article on CBC.ca. I was researching a story about a Hungarian Roma family who was being deported to Hungary. I found the story interesting as it raised issues about Canada's immigration and refugee policies and it mentioned the plight of the Roma communities and their conditions in Hungary. The same article mentioned a Roma family who was seeking sanctuary in a church and how they were hiding somewhere in Toronto. Being a Hindu, the concept of seeking sanctuary

was unique to me. I had never heard of people seeking sanctuary in churches. The term “sanctuary” intrigued me, so I researched its historical and religious significance. I learned more about the Roma family that was seeking sanctuary in an undisclosed church in Toronto. It took me two months to connect with them. When I finally did connect, the family had lived for almost three years in the church and had made up their mind to go back to Hungary. The family denied me access. They were deported in December 2014. Their refusal to participate led me to contact the Juhasz family in Langley.

My first step was to write an email to the Walnut Grove Lutheran Church, which was offering the family sanctuary. As soon as I got access, I connected with the family through Skype for our first face-to-face e-interview. I told the family about the 360-camera and why I was keen to tell their story to the world. I told them the new technology would go beyond what a journalist would do and it would generate more awareness about their struggle with Immigration Canada and their living conditions in the church. The 360-camera would act as an audience itself, witnessing their conditions and helping viewers to empathize with their situation. The oldest son Patrik had heard about the 360-camera technology and told his mother more about it. In the summer of 2015, I met the family twice for a period of 15 days each. During my first trip I carried a small camera and an audio recorder. My intention was to see their living conditions and observe their life inside the church. We spoke at length but I hardly used the camera or the audio recorder. That trip helped me chat freely with the family, meet their friends and make connections. I shared my ideas with the Juhasz family and their friends that visited the church. I wanted everyone to know what my intentions with the project were. This process helped me immensely in planning my second trip and my shooting schedule. That

second trip occurred a month and a half later. The family, their friends, and the church all approved the shooting schedule.

In today's world, stories of refugees and migrants dominate the news, and are important topics in reference to Canada's immigration policy. It was important that my film shed light on something more than what people read online or see on television. The news documents the background of the families and states the facts but they don't offer insight into the actual experiences of refugee families. I am hoping my 360-camera experiential film will evoke emotional reactions and contribute to changing Canada's immigration and refugee policies. With the approval of the Juhasz family, I hope to share the film with policymakers in Ottawa once it's completed.

2. TERMINOLOGY: FROM REFUGEE TO SANCTUARY

The Juhasz family has lived a total of five and half years in Canada, of which the family has lived four years outside the church and a year and a half inside the church. Today, the family lives under the "Undocumented Immigrants" or "Asylum Seekers" category. A report by the City of Toronto titled, "Undocumented Workers in Toronto" states:

The Canada Council for Refugees uses the term "person without status/undocumented." This means a person has not been granted permission to stay in the country, or has overstayed their visa.²

Tom Head, Civil Liberties expert mentions in his article *Illegal Immigrants or Undocumented Immigrants*:

An undocumented immigrant is someone who resides in a country without proper documentation.³

The film focuses on a case of undocumented immigrants who came to Canada seeking asylum in the hope of a better life, but are confronted by strict immigration policies. The film challenges viewers to ask questions about Canada's policy on undocumented immigrants and the government's commitment to families living in sanctuary.

First, it is necessary to look into the history of the legal definition of child abuse and neglect in Hungary. I will also provide information related to the refugee claim made by the Juhasz family in Canada.

Marianna and her two sons Patrik and Tamas landed in Toronto in 2010 from Gyongyos, Hungary, seeking refuge and a safe life in Canada. While they were still living in Hungary, Marianna had noticed that her son, Tamas who was 6 years old then, would cry and refuse to visit his father every second weekend. After much careful investigation, Marianna realized that his father was physically abusing Tamas and also threatened the 6-year-old if he told his mother. Tamas was unable to express his feelings and describe the problem to his mother due to the fear of facing his father, but would either shiver or cry endlessly when asked to visit his father. Marianna approached various counsellors at school and sought help from lawyers. However, a lawyer told her that as per Hungarian law:

The father has a right to the custody of the child or visitation rights until the child is over 16. Once the child is over 16 years of age he can choose not to visit his father but until then as per the law the father has full visitation rights.⁴

According to, “*Country Report on Child Abuse and Neglect in Hungary*” conducted by the Family, Child and Youth Association in Hungary by Maria Herczog (2011):

...The legislation on child protection is primarily included in the Law on the protection of children and the custody administration however; child abuse and neglect are not explicitly defined.⁵

Given the situation mentioned in the report, Marianna is requesting the Canadian government to understand the child neglect situation in Hungary. She is pointing out to the government that being deported to Hungary would mean an unsafe life for Tamas.

So far, Marianna has made two appeals during her four-year stay in Canada. The first one was an application for refugee status. After that failed, she applied on humanitarian grounds. That second appeal to stay in Canada was also rejected, so the family was forced to go into hiding for three weeks. Marianna along with few people from her support group called nearly 50 churches across the Lower Mainland.⁶ It was Walnut Grove Lutheran Church, the 51st church they contacted in Langley, run by Pastor Karl Keller, which agreed to give them permanent sanctuary. During my interview with Pastor Karl he said:

Sanctuary cannot be granted but instead needs to be asked for and Marianna and the boys came to the church and asked me for sanctuary. Being a person of God, I had to grant Marianna and the boys a sanctuary in our church.⁷

Marianna has approached two different lawyers in the five and half years she's been in Canada. Her first lawyer failed to translate her childcare documents from Hungary to English. The Hungarian documents included statements from Tamas' counsellor in Hungary who clearly states the problems faced by Tamas in school. The documents also included statements from the Hungarian police who claimed that Marianna should ignore her child's complaint and let the father see the child until age sixteen. The second lawyer didn't add anything new to her case file. Marianna has now managed to hire another

lawyer who specializes in immigration law and cases of abuse against women. The lawyer is an advocate with the Vancouver Battered Women's Support Service. With the supporting documents and her new legal representative, Marianna hopes that the next appeal will have a more favourable outcome. Today the Juhasz family is deemed as asylum seekers and they do not fall under the convention refugee status.

As stated in a report by Helen Yu where she defines a *Convention Refugee*:

Convention Refugee

Section 96 IRP Act states that a Convention refugee is “a person who, by reason of well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group or political opinion,
(a) is outside each of their countries of nationality and is unable to, by reason of that fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of each of those countries; or
(b) not having a country of nationality, is outside the country of their former habitual residence and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to return to that country.”⁸

Marianna and her two boys do not fall under the description mentioned above. And to add to their situation, the Canadian government doesn't deem Hungary as an unsafe country and hence Marianna's claims as a refugee have been rejected.

A report by the City of Toronto estimated that there were between 20,000 and 500,000 undocumented migrants living across Canada in 2007, with more expected to arrive each year.⁹ A UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) statistics report updated as of June 2015 shows that there are about 149,163 refugees and about 16,711 asylum-seekers residing in Canada.¹⁰

Marianna and her boys are now deemed undocumented immigrants. They do not hold a health card, driver's license, or a SIN card. The only documentation they have is their deportation order. As per the definition stated by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) asylum-seekers are:

An asylum-seeker is someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed.¹¹

To understand my research topic, it is necessary to understand the background of the word *sanctuary*. The English word *sanctuary* is derived from the Latin word *sanctuarium*, meaning a sacred place that is set apart as a refuge from danger or hardship.¹² Writer and human rights activist, Bernie Faber, states that:

Sanctuary is an ancient practice in the Jewish and Christian traditions and it has taken many and different forms throughout history. In ancient Israel there were cities of refuge, in the medieval period where people sought sanctuary in a church to escape the wrath of a feudal lord, during the Nazi period monks and nuns hid Jews within their monasteries, in the United States churches and synagogues offered sanctuary to refugees from Central America in the 80s' and now in Europe today there is a "New Sanctuary Movement" to protect desperate refugees who have made the harrowing voyage across the Mediterranean.¹³

So what is Canada's policy on sanctuary or asylum? In *Sanctuary, Sovereignty, and Sacrifice*, Randy Lippert points out:

Sanctuary is illegal under Canada's Immigration Act and Criminal Code because it involves aiding and abetting as well as conspiracy. Since at least 1976, the Immigration Act has prohibited aiding and abetting migrants subjected to deportation orders and has stipulated fines of up to CDN \$ 5000 and two years imprisonment.¹⁴

A new Harvard Law School study titled *Bordering On Failures* argues that:

...the Multiple Borders Strategy and the Safe Third Country Agreement systematically close Canada's borders to asylum seekers, contravene Canada's refugee protection obligation under domestic and international law, make the Canada-US border more dangerous and disorderly, and undermine Canada's proud history of refugee protection.¹⁵

The report further states that:

Canada is turning its back on a proud history of refugee protection, and renegeing on its fundamental refugee protection obligations under domestic and international law.¹⁶

3. AN INTRODUCTION TO 360-CAMERA

360-cameras images or videos are shot with the use of multiple Go Pro cameras or other similar cameras like the Ricoh Theta, the Sphercam, which are out in the market. These cameras capture a 360-degree view that is visible to the human eye. In many ways, the camera lens plays the role of our eyes. It captures everything that our eyes see horizontally and vertically. It can capture an entire scene in all directions. The image that is captured looks like a globe and we are placed within the image or video, almost becoming a part of the process and location.

Unlike video cameras, the production process in 360-cameras is very different. The cameras are portable, light and very small compared to other film or video cameras. The cameras are user-friendly and easy to operate. The camera's ability to shoot in 360-degree makes the production process different. The crew doesn't have the leisure of being behind the camera and directing the subject or directing the frame. Instead in 360-cameras it's the location that becomes the main subject. The action that sets to unfold in front of the camera then becomes your main protagonist. It is important to understand the role of the camera-angle and framing with 360-camera, as it works differently in this process. I will be describing the process in detail in my *Adapting to New Form* chapter.

The form is garnering huge amounts of interest from every field. Its immersive ability is what is making all the difference. The ability to experience, move your gaze and seeing all the small details is changing the relationship between the user and the camera. The form's ability to create a sense of presence is also another reason why its attracting viewers. The form has the unique ability to make you experience the moment rather than

just seeing it. It creates a rich embodied experience, which can never be created with a single camera. Facebook's investment into Oculus Rift and other big names investing into this medium is also driving the market and this form in many ways. A report in Digi-Capital points to how companies are trying to woo viewers attention with technology like Google Glass, Oculus Rift and Holo Lens to name a few. The article forecasts that AR/VR (Augmented Reality/Virtual Reality market could hit \$150B revenue by 2020.¹⁷

This experimental form is difficult to access and could be termed as an expensive hobby. The gadgets are expensive and constantly being updated, making it difficult for the common individual to play catch up. The technology requires training of the mind as well as the audience to understand this form. The form needs to evolve to be accessible to a bigger market and for it to be truly successful within the world of entertainment.

4. GOAL FOR THE PROJECT

Sanctuary is a social observational documentary, filmed inside the Juhasz family's living room and kitchen within the church. The film invites the viewer to become a participant by letting them into the family's private living space while Marianna cleans their small room or when the boys have friends over to play their favourite video game. The observational approach also lets the viewer be virtually present and share a laugh with Marianna and her friends in their kitchen.

The film uses the 360-camera to give the audience an immersive, embodied experience of the small room. It was created to test the storytelling boundaries of the new technology, and create awareness about the Juhasz family's current situation. Audio interviews with 17-year-old Patrik create a narrative arc, as he shares the family's

struggle living in the limited space in the church. The film challenges viewers to think about other families who are seeking sanctuary and living suspended lives in churches across Canada. The immersive technology draws attention to the mundane life of the Juhasz family, and poignantly reminds the viewer about their suspended lives. The goal is to raise the issue of sanctuary in Canada by screening the film to the public, with the hope that the film provokes political action. The film exhibit will include an opportunity for the public to sign a Change.Org petition to help free the Juhasz family.

5. PROCESS: LIMITATIONS OF USING 360-CAMERA

Being a researcher and talent scout, I am constantly searching the Internet for stories that have not been tapped into or not explored in much detail. I feel journalism gives an initial peek into a certain story, but documentary offers much more. Journalism's approach is more balanced and often offers you two sides of a story, but at the same time it doesn't always draw enough attention to the minor details.

VR is being adapted by journalists and changing the form of storytelling. Soon journalism and documentaries could merge in a VR future. A very good example of journalistic story merging with documentary using VR is Chris Milk and Gabo Arora's *Clouds Over Sidra*.¹⁸ Using a 360-camera view, the film follows Sidra, a young girl who shows viewers her life inside a Syrian refugee camp. The film gives the audience an opportunity to see the Syrian refugee camps and explore the space virtually. It leaves a profound effect on the audience as the experience is in the viewing rather than the telling.

360-camera is a new technology. Being in its nascent stage proved a hurdle to my learning process. Not many people had clear answers to the questions that I was posing. I

continued my research and had frequent meetings with my supervisor but it seemed I needed something more concrete and something that was justifiable for the use of 360-camera technology. My supervisor posed two valid questions: “Why do you want to tell a story in 360-camera? Why can’t you tell the same story using a single camera?” These questions were important and helped me in my research process.

In March 2015, I came across an article about Little Bay Island in Newfoundland.¹⁹ The story was about the small island with a population of 72 residents²⁰, which was slowly being depopulated. Everything was changing on that island. The island school only had two students.²¹ This story interested me as I felt it had an important point to make about the diminishing fishing industry and its impact on Newfoundland.

I used several means to connect with the locals of Little Bay Island, but in May 2015 I was denied any access. During this whole process of research and making connections, I realized how important and difficult it was to gain access. I realized even in the world of technology, documentaries are all about people. There is no substitute for a human story. Gaining access needs more patience than imagined. One only learns about this with experience.

The island landscape was an appealing location for a 360-camera because of the emptiness of the space and the small human population. I felt the island itself could become my single location as well as my character for this film. In VR storytelling, the location forms the backbone of the viewing experience. Pioneer in VR journalism, Nonny de la Peña, creator of *Hunger in Los Angeles*, 2012 argues for this idea in an interview with Fortune magazine:

The challenge of using VR to tell stories is that— rather than tell a linear story — a director must create a spatial narrative that focuses an audience’s attention on a single location or character.²²

VR establishes the viewer’s presence in a certain geographic location and takes on the role of the hero. The action sequences in these locations help move the story forward.

With this idea in mind, I wanted to connect with other filmmakers using a sensory approach to filmmaking outside of VR. I contacted Pacho Valez, the filmmaker of *Manakamana*, and a graduate of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University. Valez shared his ideas about his filmmaking approach and directed me to his interview. The following points stood out for me through the interview:

...I’m watching the subjects’ awareness of their world, and how it shifts to acknowledge the passing landscape, other passengers, and private thoughts, before occasionally, obliquely returning to the camera, which is so clearly staring at them, yet is never explicitly addressed.²³

SEL films give the *space* and *characters* utmost importance. The camera acts as a constant observer, watching each action unfold — or not unfold — depending on the time of the shoot. Valez addresses this in his interview:

... but they capture some of the same shifting consciousness, the sense of watching people think against an unfolding landscape.²⁴

The camera pulls the viewers into the landscape and gives them a sense of being right in front of the action. The lack of dialogue and conventional talking head interviews are two characteristics that make SEL films different. Viewers are immersed in the space, much more than in a conventional observational film. An SEL film, “... allows the subject the time and space to exist, which is exactly what makes it so real.”²⁵ I wanted to bring that simplicity to my film project as well. I wanted to tell a story in its simplest form using a 360-camera, giving importance to the space and the characters.

In May 2015, I came across an article about the Juhasz family who were seeking sanctuary in Langley, B.C.²⁶ This sounded like a scenario with the combination of character and space that I had been looking for, so I hoped to make a new connection. I contacted reporters from the Abbotsford Times who had written articles on the Juhasz family, and I emailed the church office requesting access to the Juhasz family.

The church office and one of the reporters responded to my email within two days. Within a week I had all the necessary information to contact the Juhasz family. Given the situation and the limited time to complete my project, I requested a Skype chat with the Juhasz family. I did intense research on their story and their background. I learned their names, ages and more details about their situation. I wrote out questions before the Skype chat, so I was well prepared to talk to them. The chat lasted for 2 hours. It was exhausting but I ended the conversation with a summary. I told the family that I was keen to shoot using the new technology of 360-camera. I told them how I intended to use this technology to create awareness about their situation and life in sanctuary.

I received an email from Marianna Juhasz within two days expressing their willingness to participate and giving me full access to work with them using the 360-camera. I realized this was the first time in 6 months that someone had agreed to be a part of my project.

In the meantime, I connected with Marie-Esperance Cerda, a Masters student in Media Production at Ryerson University. Maria-Esperance agreed to lend her 360-camera equipment and act as cameraperson for the shoot. We did some test shoots in Toronto. This was my first hands-on experience with the 360-camera. The camera and its technology worked differently. There are certain limitations that come with the camera as

well as the technology and I realized soon enough that I had to accept them.

I made two separate trips to Vancouver. I stayed for one week during my first trip and for ten days in the second trip. My first trip was an icebreaker to meet the family, hear their stories, and see their living conditions. I wanted to understand their struggles in the church, and what it meant to not leave the church premises for nine months. Most importantly, I wanted to build trust. I assured them that even though I was using a new technology, my intention was to tell their story to the world. I explained how the 360-camera worked. During my weeklong stay in July 2015, I spent 7-8 hours each day talking to the family, and making audio recordings. I watched them go about their daily routine in the church. When the family had guests over, I observed quietly. The research trip helped me plan my detailed shooting schedule for my second trip.

The second trip in August 2015 was for principal production. I had a strict shooting schedule to follow, with limited time and no room for errors. I completed all my audio interviews with the family, and then Marie-Esperance Cerda arrived for a four-day 360-camera shoot.

Shooting with 360-camera requires the use of multiple cameras. I used six Go Pro cameras with a small rig, which was mounted on a tripod. The setup is simple but the shooting technique is different. The camera is best used with a remote to ensure that all cameras start at the same time to ensure smooth synching of images during the edit. The camera doesn't let the director choose a single frame or any frame for that matter. The entire location is the frame, and action within that location determines where the viewer will look.

My test shoots helped me realize the importance of eye-level in 360-camera. The test shoot was done with the cameras being placed on a higher angle. The experience of shooting VR from a higher angle made me feel like I was dangling in the air without any body or support. For my final shoot I decided that I wanted to keep the camera at eye-level, so the audience would feel as if they are sitting in the room along with the family and sharing the space with them virtually.

Throughout my experiment with this new technology, I questioned the use of the 360-camera. How does VR change what can be accomplished in a documentary narrative? How immersive or sensory an experience does the 360-camera offer the viewer? Does the new technology transcend the borders of filmmaking? These questions would be answered as I explored the editing and exhibition process. There is no other way to learn more about this technology than to experience it yourself.

I started my edit process in September 2015. This was challenging, as I had to learn *Kolor Auto Pano Giga*, new editing software that stitches the six camera images into one. There were only a few online tutorials, so I had to rely on a trial-and-error method. My editing process was as follows:

1. Upload the footage from the six cameras to the software.
2. Stitch the six images into one.
3. Start the editing process after producing one stitched image.
4. Export the stitched images to Adobe Premiere for editing.
5. Edit the audio separately in the Adobe Premiere timeline.
6. Merge the two and export as an .mp4 file.

Use Kolor Eyes or IM360 apps to view the edited clip in 360-degree view.

My first presentation was an edited one-minute sample clip for one of the Master classes in October 2015. I presented it to the visiting filmmaker, Katrina Cizek, and received positive feedback from her. This boosted my confidence, which helped me in

my editing process.

6. THEORETICAL POSITIONING OF THE PROJECT

The film *Sanctuary* is an ethnographic film, which explores the restrictions of physical space, and documents the Juhasz family's confined life in the church. The family's inability to leave the church premises for more than a year and half draws the viewers attention to the growing tension between the space and living. The film's main theme is the tight physical space and restrictions of boundaries. The film captures the impact of confined living conditions and the effect of this on the Juhasz family.

It brings me back to the question –why am I using 360-camera to shoot this film? The main purpose of this film is to communicate the sense of space or the lack of it. I want to show the expanse of the church and point to the small living space that the family has access to on a day-to-day basis. I also want to point to the family's inability to step out of the church, which in turn brings the outside world to them. One can see the boys and their friends playing in the prayer hall, or Marianna's colleagues visiting her and sharing a laugh in the kitchen. 360-camera's ability to shoot the space in all directions, gives the viewer the 360-degree view of the small and large space within the church. It helps the viewer map the physical space inside the church and identify small details, which would otherwise be easily missed if I were to use a single-camera. The 360-camera also offers the option of immersing the viewer and show the viewer the story rather than telling it.

The film is influenced by work produced under the banner of sensory ethnography. As Karen Nakamura points out:

Sensory ethnography is an emerging trend within visual anthropology, with practitioners focusing on at least two different aspects: the aesthetic-sensual and the multi-sensory experiential as a means of expression.²⁷

Nakamura draws attention to expository observational films like *Dead Birds* by Robert Gardner by identifying key characteristics of the observational such as:

.... off-camera narration by an unseen narrator (“the voice of God”); lack of reflexivity between the camera and the subject; nonsynchronous sound; and a staged narrative arc.²⁸

Sanctuary uses the expository mode and aesthetic-sensory expression presenting the reality as seen by the filmmaker. It uses voice-over narration by Patrik, however there is no direct introduction of the character within the film except through the voice-over. The film chooses not to give any visual reference to who is Patrik, although he is seen throughout the film. Stylistically, if the film were shot with a single camera, it would have taken cues from direct cinema. Since the film uses the 360-camera, the use of the camera shifts perspective to that of multisensory ethnography. Although, there is no addition of smell or taste, the film physically transports you to a different location adding to your emotional experience.

Sarah Pink defines ethnography as:

Ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers’ own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers’ experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced.²⁹

My film is influenced by the work of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University.³⁰ *Sanctuary* relates to the visual ethnographic approach as a means to explore the bodily praxis and the affective fabric of human existence. It encourages attention to the many dimensions of social experience and subjectivity that may only with difficulty

be rendered with words alone.³¹ So how does one define sensory ethnography? Ernst

Karel, the man behind the sound design of SEL films, defines sensory ethnography as:

Sensory ethnography is based on the understanding that human meaning does not emerge only from language; it engages with the ways in which our sensory experience is pre- or non-linguistic, and part of our bodily being in the world. It takes advantage of the fact that our cognitive awareness – conscious as well as unconscious – consists of multiple strands of signification, woven of shifting fragments of imagery, sensation, and malleable memory. Works of sensory media are capable of echoing or reflecting or embodying these kinds of multiple simultaneous strands of signification. Experiencing them constitutes an intellectual challenge for the viewer, who must actively bring their critical faculties to bear on the experience of the work, in effect to complete the work through their experience of it.³²

That brings us to the question of visual ethnography and how it's different from ethnography. Sarah Pink in her book *Doing Visual Ethnography* suggests:

Visual ethnography is an emerging ethnographic process, which uses photographs, videos, and web-media. Visual ethnography is about understanding how these images and the processes through which these images are created are used to produce ethnographic knowledge.³³

The use of 360-camera and the technology let's me reflect on Georg Simmel's essay on '*Sociology of Senses*' mentioned in Sarah Pink's *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Simmel suggests that the sensory perception of others plays two key roles in human interaction:

First, our 'sensory impression' of another person invokes emotional or physical responses in us. Second, 'sense impression' becomes a 'route of knowledge of the other.'³⁴

Simmel's observation plays a key role in my virtual reality film, as the intention is to create a sensory impression on my viewers.

Bill Nichol's existing definition of observational documentaries argues that, in observational documentaries, "The filmmaker has, in effect, retired to the position of

observer,” by relinquishing control over the action and subjects during filming and editing.³⁵ So, do 360-camera films challenge the existing definition?

360-camera technology pushes the boundaries of observational documentaries by changing the position of the observer to that of a participant and in exchange gives more control and power to the participant. It democratizes the relationship between the camera and observer, and blurs the boundaries between them. The viewer is no more just a passive observer but has now taken a more responsible and active role in the film process. The technology however, doesn't offer complete control. The user's movement is restricted to only moving their gaze around within the medium; neither can he/she change anything in the world around them or see more than what the director wants them to see. Despite these restrictions, the technology attempts to change the role of the viewer and its viewing experience. This change of role is significant in documentaries as it not only engages the viewers but the content is made user-centric. As argued by William Uricchio in a report which focuses on immersion as a dimension of news and documentary:

I think immersive experiences put a new twist on the old's 'showing-telling' distinction. Showing is far more difficult to contain than telling, seems more impactful in terms of how it is experienced and remembered, and as Confucius tells us, can be re-told in thousand words and thus in countless ways.³⁶

The immersive and participatory elements also make me reflect upon Bill Nichols' definition of participatory documentary and question the role of the participatory mode in my film. Nichols' says:

The filmmaker steps out from behind the cloak of voice-over commentary, steps away from the poetic meditation, steps down from the fly-on-the-wall perch and becomes a social actor (almost) like any other.³⁷

Nichol's definition of participatory mode stresses only on the participatory role of the filmmaker but fails to mention the participatory role of the viewer within the film.

Sanctuary offers the viewer to be a participant within the film, moving their gaze in 360-degree within the field of vision. VR challenges Nichols' definition and urges theorists to redefine the documentary modes within the realm of VR technology.

7. ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Sanctuary experiments with 360-camera and attempts to blend technology with non-linear storytelling, seeking inspiration from other Canadian documentaries like *Polar 360 Sea*,³⁸ created by Thomas Wallner in 2014, and *Nomads Herders*,³⁹ directed by Paul Raphaël and Felix Lajeunesse in 2015. The filmmakers' use of virtual reality as a technique in storytelling was unusual and new. Their attempt to capture the location in its true form and offer viewers a sensory experience mesmerized me. The filmmaking technique in *Nomads Herders* and the unique 360-degree immersive experience left me spellbound. It instantly transported me to Mongolia, the film's location, and gave me a unique experience of being immersed in that landscape with the herding family. I was given an opportunity to act as a virtual guest in the herding family's home. In the process, I became more intimate with the family. The experience changed the way I look at documentary films. I had to wear the Oculus-Rift glasses, which was unique. The glasses shut me out from the rest of the world and I was immersed in a globe-like 360-degree visual. It was like watching the documentary in a home theatre -- the viewing experience was very personal and intimate. I think the 360-camera gave me a more democratic viewing lens, as it let me choose the frame for myself and didn't dictate a certain frame

for me. The camera's democratic approach lets the viewer navigate within the wide field and focus on the elements and interpret the scene. It lets the viewer choose what they wish to see and in lieu offers a more individualistic viewing experience. As a viewer, watching 360-films, I felt liberated and more in control of the viewing experience. I also think the 360-camera offered an authentic form of storytelling as it simultaneously recorded a 360-degree view of the location as well as the herding family at any given time.

So, is 360-camera the next logical step in observational cinema? Just as Bill Nichols suggests, "photographic images do not present concepts, they embody them,"⁴⁰ 360-camera technology lets the viewer become embodied in the space. It is an extension of observational cinema, as it goes beyond the camera's unobtrusive role of watching and now empowers the audience to become a participant in the virtual space. It also fits with Nichols' explanation of observational cinema:

Observational cinema offers the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experiences of others, to gain some senses of the distinct rhythms of the everyday life, to see the colors, shapes, and spatial relationships among people and their possessions, to hear the intonations, inflection, and accents that given a spoken language its "grain" and that distinguish one native speaker from another. If there is something to be gained from an effective form of learning, observational cinema provides a vital forum for such experience.⁴¹

Another major influence on my film was Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss*. Shot in Benares, India, the film uses a single camera to create a sensory experience, giving utmost importance to the location and action. The long takes in the film and the slow pace of the editing lets the viewer become immersed in the experience of being in Benares.

The films made by the filmmakers at Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab inspired me throughout my research process. Films such as *Leviathan*, *Single Stream* and *Sweet Grass*

instructed me with their simple yet profound way of storytelling. I identified with SEL's filmmaking style because it is different from the more conventional approach to documentaries. As Matt Mansfield points out:

It allows students space to create experimental, richly detailed works of non-fiction that capture the experience of *being* in a specific place at a specific time, moving the medium of documentary away from its traditional "talking heads" approach and into something more observational, better suited to documenting reality than presenting facts.⁴²

Leviathan is a convergence of traditional filmmaking and experimental technique and it definitely influenced my work. Directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel (2012), *Leviathan* avoids any conventions of spatial orientation, such as master shots or continuity editing. Likewise, there is no identification of people, place, or activity.⁴³ In my film, I am merging traditional storytelling with the VR technology and although I do use narration within the film, there are no talking head interviews, no specific identification of the people. The edit doesn't follow the conventional continuity edit however; it uses a voiceover narration by Patrik, one of the main subjects in the documentary. Patrik's voiceover leads the viewer and tells them the story or gives them information that they are looking for.

8. ADAPTING TO A NEW FORM

Viewing in virtual reality works differently than in conventional documentaries. The technology allows the viewer to look in a 360-degree arc, giving all the possible information and details within the surroundings at once. It offers the viewer an opportunity to be present in the location and within the situation. Stanford University communication theorist Jonathan Steuer suggests the term "presence" as a way to

describe the human experience of using virtual reality technology, and lays the foundation for the communication of the narrative.⁴⁴ He argues:

Presence can be thought of as the experience of one's physical environment; it refers not to one's surroundings as mediated by both automatic and controlled mental processes (Gibson, 1979).⁴⁵

He further points that:

...when perception is mediated by a communication technology, one is forced to perceive two separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present and the environment presented via the medium.⁴⁶

Sanctuary affirms the role of 360-camera and its immersive storytelling qualities. The ability to be virtually present within the documentary makes the whole experience unique. Although the director and cameraperson can choose to place the camera in a certain position or time, and even decide on the camera eye-level but the technology requires the crew to be absent during the shooting of the actual scene, unless the crew chooses to be seen within the film. The technology breaks the rules of observational documentaries and pushes the filmmaker to give in to the technology and its demands.

A. VISUALS IN 360

The visuals in 360-camera technology demand no intervention from the crew once the six cameras start shooting. With the use of VR technology, the film is frameless. There are no definite shot breakdowns; instead the action unfolding in front of the camera and the participants becomes the center of attention. The immersive technology can force the viewer to watch the content multiple times. . In the first viewing one might experience the space and not notice the action happening behind them or the other minute details in

the space. In the subsequent viewing, they can then choose to look more closely and observe the space or catch the actions unfold.

The technology offers transparency to the viewer and lets the viewer decide the frame or the story they want to see within the film. The 360-camera doesn't offer one static or specific frame; there are no talking heads, no establishing shots of locations or the traditional syntax that is followed in a conventional documentary. Instead it lets the viewer move around in any direction they choose, and lets them decide what they want to view — either the action within the film between two characters or something else in the location. The presence of the camera is referential and blurs the separation between the viewer and the camera, blending them into one entity. The audience becomes the camera and physically takes on the position of the camera. The camera is mostly invisible, except when the viewer chooses to look down at their feet and then notices the camera tripod.

The camera records everything in a 360-degree arc and doesn't miss any action. The director and cameraperson's absence from the room also limits their ability to change the camera frame in the middle of a certain scene — something often seen in *vérité* style documentaries — or shoot a different scene altogether. Instead the film is shot in short episodes and captures all the action happening in a given space. The decision of when to shoot a scene and when to end the shooting process is mostly dependent on the action and the characters involved in the scene. When I placed the cameras in Marianna's room, I disappeared from the location. The cameras were recording every action within the room. There was no direction given to the Juhasz family, except to ignore the presence of the camera. I was unable to see the action unfold until I saw the footage at the end of the day. The long take justifies the use of 360-camera as it lets the audiences look in all possible

directions in the room and move their gaze in any direction they choose. It gives them a sense of being immersed in the space with independent access to the family and allows them to experience the limited living space.

There is a conceptual connection to what 360-camera achieves in Joe Deal's photographs and his documentary approach. James Hugunin describes the experience of viewing Joe Deal's photographs in terms that are perhaps comparable to watching a 360-camera film:

Viewing his prints we do not fix our gaze on any point nor move about the composition in a strictly determined manner. Rather, we take in the complete field of elements, including the boundaries, in a holistic fashion. We avoid focusing our eyes as much as possible. The actual "object" perceived is really our entire visual field.⁴⁷

The optical democracy that James Hugunin points to in Joe Deal's photographs is the composition of the image that leaves it to the viewer to decide their gaze. The point of viewing a 2D photograph is different than 360-camera but the viewer still has the freedom to choose where they want to look or focus their gaze.

Shooting in 360-camera is more like a play rehearsal, the actors perform impromptu and the camera captures the scene. There are no retakes. 360-camera changes vérité-style filmmaking, as there is no concept of shot breakdown within a scene, unless the director chooses to be seen on camera. One can't cut to a close shot of the character or from a close shot to a reaction shot within the scene. The technology also breaks the concept of an establishing shot or a master shot that is otherwise meant to establish a location. The 360-camera doesn't give you one single frame; instead it creates a globe-like structure with the frame all around you. The biggest challenge is directing the viewer's attention in a specific direction and without such direction it is fair to ask if the storytelling metaphor of documentary still applies.

B. AUDIO IN 360

Sound can be used to enhance the overall virtual experience. It could be used, either as a cue to direct the viewers' attention to the action or to enhance the spatial experience. Sound can either point to the expanse of the space or prompt listeners towards an action about to unfold. The sound recorded with the Go Pro cameras doesn't offer the best quality, but it would be distracting to shoot with a boom microphone in the camera frame. Given the limitations of the technology, I chose to record my audio interviews separately and use them as voice-overs in the storytelling format. For the ambient sound, I chose to keep the Go Pro sound to add to the spatial experience. The ambient sound makes the viewer feel more present in scenes where they can see the family perform their daily chores, see the kids play video games, or witness their interactions with the outside world. The ambient sound directs the viewer's attention to actions within the scene. The echo reflects the vastness of the church. In contrast, scenes without people use Patrik's narration to tell the story. This lets the viewer observe the space in more detail.

Sound plays a key role in telling the family's story. The audio interviews give a complete contrast to the visuals. The visuals are non-linear and mundane, while the audio storytelling is linear and emotional. In many ways the audio and video form two layers, which intersect at different points in the film but individually tell two parallel stories.

C. THE NARRATIVE SEQUENCE

The film has seven scenes, which are edited in a specific pattern, adding a certain rhythm to the editing. Four locations are explored: each with and without people in it.

The people or activity scenes appear first in the order of the edit; followed by a scene of the same location without any people. For example, the second scene shows the kids playing in the church hall, which echoes with laughter, and play. The following scene is set in the same location, only that it doesn't have the same laughter or chaos. Instead it is quiet and echoes Patrik's voice telling us the story. His narration has a linear form and gives concrete shape to the documentary. As I was watching the non-linear edited clips, I felt the urge to provide something more solid for the audiences to hold on to and move ahead with, rather than looking into a virtual space without any specific direction. I thought the audio interviews and the ambient sound would add the needed direction to the overall pace of the film.

The scenes were meticulously chosen to give the viewer a sense of the family's space and their life within the church. The three main sequences follow a path, as if someone is walking within the church premises; first, the viewer sees the church prayer hall, then the family's room and then the kitchen. The sequence is purposeful and it recreates a path of discovery within the church's physical space. It creates a realist portrait of the church for viewers who may or may not visit the church in person.

The film has text at the beginning and end of the film. The beginning text contextualizes the overall meaning of the term sanctuary and gives research data related to other families seeking sanctuary in Canada. This helps the viewers understand and look at the bigger picture of sanctuary in Canada. The text at the end of the film summarizes the current status of the family. The text was an important addition to the film. Being a short piece, the film doesn't give the viewer any background information or

details about why the family is seeking sanctuary. Instead the film throws the viewer directly into the church.

D.INSTALLATION

I chose to present my film as an installation. Given the nature of the technology, presenting the film using Gear VR is the most appropriate method of screening. The film's technology is not yet adapted for theater space. Instead it requires minimal space and a small smart phone as its exhibiting gear. I will be using three revolving bar stools and three Samsung VR Gear headsets provided by Ryerson University.

The technology offers an intimate viewing experience, which is very different than viewing a film in a theatre. Theatre screening is more public, virtual reality is more personal. Each person experiences a new story within the documentary and has a unique takeaway.

The installation is in the Rally Gallery kitchen space. I chose this domestic space as it reflects Marianna's kitchen and puts the viewer in a space similar to the real kitchen. I want the viewers to notice the kitchen in the film and when the film ends and they remove the headset, to draw a connection to the kitchen that they are in. Perhaps this will lead the viewer to wonder what it would be like to live in a space this small. The installation also requires an interaction between the viewer and the viewing experience. The viewers will have to be trained on using the gear headsets and also be reminded of viewing the film in 360-degree. The revolving bar stools will help them acclimatize to the new viewing experience.

The total duration of the film is eight minutes.

9.CONCLUSION

Observational documentaries have always intrigued me for their ability to tell us stories with minimal direction or so it seems. The observational approach of long takes provides viewers with time and through time new stories may emerge.

I believe 360-camera is the dawn of a new era in the world of ethnographic documentaries. The stories and the forms of storytelling are changing and becoming more immersive and sensory in the experiences that they offer.

I realized the value of virtual reality during the filming of *Sanctuary*. I couldn't have achieved the intimate and virtual viewing experience with other traditional cameras.

This was my first foray into the world of observational documentary. In many ways, *Sanctuary* was an experiment with a new technology and a new form of storytelling. My learning arc was very interesting from the conceptual level to the final film exhibit of the film. I was asking myself so many traditional questions and yet I was using a new technology. As a trained traditional filmmaker, I had to break away from the basic shot breakdown format. There were no master or close shots in VR. I chose to be a fly-on-the-wall, but VR didn't let me be in the scene while the scene was being shot. There was a constant conflict between the traditional and VR technology at the production as well as the editing level. The traditional editing form pushed me to look for a conventional story but eventually I gave in to the technology and let the non-linear edit in VR take over the storytelling. VR pushed me in many ways to look beyond the existing modes of

filmmaking. Bill Nichols' theory on documentaries needs more attention in relation to VR.

Nichols' existing theories for documentaries give agency to the filmmaker but they do not take into consideration the role of the viewer. During the filming, I was required to leave the scene thereby reducing the subjective input of the filmmaker in the observation process. This process took the observational cinema to a new level. It made the viewer a different type of an observer. The viewer was now a participant in the act of observation and this changed the experience of viewing an observational film. The existing theories need rethinking in the light of sensory ethnography and VR.

The film as an installation was interesting to witness. It garnered close to 115 audiences over a week's time and was well attended by all age groups. The use of VR technology to tell a story was well accepted. The viewer's reacted to the film with spatial empathy. They felt confined and claustrophobic using the Gear VR and this was an emotional translation of how the subjects themselves feel about their situation. The viewers could see the interiors of the church and the narration by a 17-year old in the film made them feel more present in the situation and understand the family's condition with more compassion. The Gear VR did make some audiences nauseous and claustrophobic and in many instances during the screening, they felt the urge to hold on to some physical object such as the table to establish their physical presence. The installation required training the audiences on the use of VR technology. Those who were accustomed to using technology easily adapted to VR gear. In most cases it took few minutes for the audiences to realize that they could move their gaze 360-degree within the film and this changed the way they experienced the film.

Alternatively, the film could have used a church basement or hall as its exhibit location. This would have enhanced the viewing experience and added a purpose to the use of location since the film is based in a church.

The installation acted as a platform where the audiences could not only view the film but also could sign a Change.org petition for the Juhasz family and support them. The petition's information could've been shared with the audiences through a handout at the end of the film, to make this a more meaningful experience.

The learning process during the film and its installation has enriched me as a filmmaker. In addition, it has contributed to my use of VR technology as a medium with which to tell a story and to help viewers to empathize with the Juhasz family and their plea to be accepted in Canada.

Word Count: 9,471

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