Light from aside: A screenwriter's perspective *in* virtual reality

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'And I am out with lanterns, looking for myself'
Emily Dickinson

Abstract

Light from aside: A screenwriter's perspective in *virtual reality* investigates the language of spatial storytelling in virtual reality through artistic research. Drawing on screenwriting practice and theory, as well as creative documentary approaches such as room-scale virtual reality design, the conceptualisation and partial production of the experience *Finding Frida* is central to this investigation. In its final form, this single-user, room-scale virtual reality experience will be approximately 20 minutes long; it is intended for general audiences, including those who are unfamiliar with virtual reality. Beyond the reconstruction of a personal narrative – that of forgotten artist Frida Hansen's life and art – the experience seeks to combine linear storytelling devices with spatial 'dreamscapes', giving the spectator access to the protagonist's private memory world, through representational spaces. This essay, as a part of the artistic, doctoral outcome of the project's writer, presents the conceptual and creative groundworks for the work-in-progress storytelling in *Finding Frida*. The essay also seeks to convey insights from a writer's point of view of the hurdles and challenges of transitioning from temporal to spatial storytelling in virtual reality – and the aligning of narrational and stylistic choices in an experiential, technically complex and innovative form.

Content

Introduction

Close your eyes and imagine your body in space
Close your eyes and imagine a space, without your body
Close your eyes and imagine your body as a space
Open your eyes and see the body of the space

During a course that introduced screenwriting students to virtual reality, one of the participants looked perplexed as she unfastened her headset and said something along the lines of: 'I am simply amazed that something like this even exists'. It is not an uncommon reaction to experiencing virtual reality for the first time, and it resembles that of another student, who said: 'When I first put on the headset I was not convinced of its effect, but now that I take it off, it feels as if I have been somewhere else'; or this student's description: 'I cannot explain exactly what it was like, and the experience of it wanes quickly, already like a faint memory'.

Coming to virtual reality as a writer – and more specifically as a writer for film – the phenomenological aspects of the medium continuously intrigue me. The simultaneous awareness of your 'body in space', as emphasised by documentarist and virtual reality pioneer Nonny de la Peña, and the sense of being transported to someplace else are captivating enough to endure the discomfort of a head-mounted display: a headset that strains the forehead and leaves indentation marks on the cheek.

The question of 'How it is that while we are physically sitting in a room at a computer terminal we can also be phenomenologically embodied in virtual representations?' (Murray & Sixsmith, 1999, p. 315) can be explored on a psychological, sensory and bodily level, but it is also an issue that will be addressed by any writer, creator or artist who attempts to create work in virtual reality, though articulated differently: How can I make this story, this experience, sufficiently captivating for the audience to forget that they are sitting at a desk, or standing in a room, tethered by cables to a computer and weighed down by a headset?

Virtual reality director Aaron Bradbury (Bradbury, 2018) describes the 'intimacy between space and story' as transformative in virtual reality and writer Nicholas Burman (2020) suggests that the audience becomes 'not so much astronauts, as psychonauts of representational spaces'. Is it true that 'virtual reality reinforces the Cartesian duality' by being 'a creation of the mind? (Penny, 1993, pp. 17-22). Does this 'creation of the mind'

exclude, or include the bodily experience of the virtual space – with or without a representation of the spectator's physical body?

Returning to Nonny de la Peña's oft-quoted 'I close my eyes and imagine my body in space' (Bradly, 2018, p. 3) – which, from a maker's point of view, can become something of a mantra and a starting point for imagination – as a writer, I approach the space in virtual reality as a storytelling space: a three dimensional canvas that can 'hold' a narrative that extends and responds to the spectator and that can be 'read', perhaps primarily with the mind, but in interaction with the sense of one's body in space. A demonstration of the 'seductive trickery' of what I have come to think of as 'spatial storytelling' is to present a window in the virtual world, and to see the spectator grasp for a windowsill that is not there.

The artistic research[1] that is presented here is an exploration of virtual reality as a storytelling medium and an attempt to localise, or identify, the mechanisms of implicit, mimetic storytelling in relation to it. Virtual reality being perceived, at least currently, as a primarily visual medium, mediated through optical technology (Murray, 1999, p. 316), I have conducted my research in an ongoing and dynamic feedback loop with my practice as a scriptwriter for film. Cautioned (and not without reason) by both professionals and scholars that virtual reality is *not* like film, I have unwaveringly proceeded to look for the similarities and common ground, driven by the understanding that film developed as a medium for complex storytelling by incorporating strengths from theatre, literature and visual art. Although acknowledging virtual reality as an innately different medium, with strong influences from games and other digital media, I look to filmmakers who also bring their sensibilities to virtual reality, including those of great acclaim such as Michelle and Uri Kranot, Randall Okita and Alejandro G. Iñárritu, to name a few.

Central to my investigation has been the conceptualisation of a virtual reality experience with the working title *Finding Frida* and the production of a vertical slice: a proof of concept in the form of a test scene. The short transitional 'act' is structured around a virtual encounter with Norwegian textile artist Frida Hansen (1855–1931) accompanied by 'representational spaces' reflecting her life and art. With this concept and test scene as a case study, alongside the examinations of virtual reality work by others, the research reflects – from a maker's perspective – the interplay between practice and theory, the cross-pollination between

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[1] The Nordic Model, as described in James Elkins 'Six cultures of the PhD' (Elkins, 2013, p. 11).

disciplines in collaborative art and the shift in conceptual thinking that occurs when moving from temporal–visual storytelling in film, to the spatial–visual in virtual reality.

Engaging with a tradition of artistic research – where the research might be best disseminated in the artwork, and conversely, the artwork in the dissemination – I will address the reader as a colleague writer, sporadically adopting an epistolary style to evoke the mode of a conversation. Conditioned by a result-oriented tendency in film making, I will convey to that imagined writer only the building blocks and stepping stones that have been of use in my process of conceptualisation. Not all that I have read has found its place in this text, and not all that I have seen, tasted, touched or heard can be reproduced as 'findings', however impactful. This 'chronicle' of my artistic research is a synthesis of all the influences to which I have exposed myself in the process, both credited and unattributed.

The text is loosely divided into six 'chapters', with the starting point of musings on the artist as a researcher. I then attempt to identify aspects and premises that in my view shape a 'workable' narrative and navigate the issue of perspective in relation to film studies and its implication in virtual reality. I reflect on narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan's discussion of categories in digital narrative, briefly introducing the idea of 'narrative of place'. Interwoven with this approximation of a theoretical framework are the examinations of virtual reality work by others, as seen in light of the theoretical aspects. I proceed to present my own conceptualisation of *Finding Frida*, followed by an account of the collaborative work on the vertical slice. In my final thoughts, I asses the intentions and ideas behind the conceptualisation in relation to the result.

A method that has emerged – or made itself known to me – throughout the research, is that of a writer's flow: the steady stream of associations, emerging insights, perceived connections and gut feelings, accompanied by the persistent urge to structure this stream into a shape that can become a work.

It is my hope and intention that the reconstruction of the various flows – both in thought and practice, creatively and analytically – will provide insights that may inform others in our concurrent pursuits to expand the art of complex storytelling in virtual reality.

The inspiration of Frida Hansen's life

The background story of Frida Hansen's life – the story that stood out to me and that shapes the narrative for the virtual reality experience – begins in 1855, when Frida is born into a well-to-do family in Stavanger. As she grows up, dreaming of becoming an artist, she paints with the famous Norwegian painter Kitty Kielland. Her dream fades when, at the age of 19 she is married to an older business partner of her father.

She lives a comfortable, but unfulfilling life as a socialite and a mother of three, until a grand-scale bankruptcy disrupts everything, leaving her life in ruin – and two of her children die of illness. While her husband tempts his luck abroad, Frida works her way out of her misery, opening a small embroidery shop to get by. Through the simple work with textiles, she rediscovers her artist´s dream.

Going against societal norms and her husband's expectations, Frida establishes herself as an internationally acclaimed textile artist, whose art is to travel the world and gain her financial independence. Four generations later, her great-great-granddaughter takes inspiration from her imaginative and symbolic 'image-weaves'[2] to create a virtual reality experience that conveys Frida's art and her life story.

Frida died in 1931 at Bestumhus – the house that features in the *Finding Frida* experience.

Several of Frida's works are on permanent display at Stavanger Museum and at The National Museum in Oslo, and monographies and catalogues on her work have been published (Thue & Hansen, 1986; Thue et al., 1973) (Leithe & Ueland, 2015).

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[2] 'Billedvev' – a term adapted from traditional weaver Kjerstine Hauglum by Frida Hansen to distinguish the Norwegian tradition and her own work from the French term Gobelin (Thue, Hansen, & Kunstindustrimuseet i, 1973, pp. 26, 27).

'When work is made with threads, it is considered craft; when it is on paper it is considered art.' *Textile and graphic artist Annie Albers (Dijke, 2023)*

'When it is with pixels it is considered a toy'. *Writer-designer-director Christy Dena (Dena, 2023)*

> To consider the artist as a researcher (…) Who finds at times, but is not interested in their findings as such: they continue to search. *Francis Ponge* (Ponge, 2018)

I. *Light from aside*

You keep asking me what it is I am doing. I never know what to answer. Where to begin? I do not know how to reduce or explain. 'It is a process', I keep saying to myself, a process that I am not so much processing, as it seems to be processing me. I wonder if that makes sense?

You know how it is with writing; it is not something you can control. If you make your living from what comes out of the writing process you learn to respect it as the monster it is: its unpredictability, its opacity, its possessive powers and its fickleness. One day it is there, pulling you along, making you forget all the little trivialities of life that – you know by now – will catch up with you sooner or later, and are not so trivial anymore. Another day the monster will be distant and ignoring you as if the two of you had never been companions, traversing foreign forests and distant lands together in the dark.

Perhaps that is why I hesitate when you ask me what it is that I do. I am wary of disturbing the monster, of exposing its mystery, fearing that too much light will make it dissolve and disappear. Can we live without the monster? Can you? Do we even know how and whethet we want to? What do you think? Have you ever tried?

I wish I could talk about the 'whys' of what I am doing. The truth is, I do not know them – and I do not want to. Is this because I resist the possibility of being held accountable? Or is it because I question my credibility when I attempt to formulate an answer? Every attempt rings false. Better then, to go straight to the how: How am I doing what I am doing?

I read. I read closely. And how I read now is different from how I used to read. I used to devour books, hungry for stories and glimpses into lives very different from my own. As individuals, we only get one attempt at life and reading is one way to learn from others' lived experiences. When I was young, I read as if looking into a crystal ball, to see the future, attempting to fathom it before it arrived – anticipating (wishfully deflecting) future trouble armed with literary perspectives.

In Nora Ephron's adaptation of Ernst Lubitsch' (1940) film *The Shop Around the Corner* renamed *You've Got Mail (1998)*, the character of Kathleen Kelly says: 'So much of what I see reminds me of something I read in a book, when shouldn't it be the other way around?' I am not convinced that it should be the other way around. I think my 'read life' is an equally essential part of me – of my experience and understanding of the human condition – as my own slice of lived life.

As Hélène Cixous (1993) says, in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*:

As soon as you open the book as a door, you enter another world, you close the door on this world. (…) We don't always think of this because we no longer read; we used to read when we were children and knew how violent reading can be. (p. 20)

As noted above, the reading I do now is different. It takes more time; it takes will and determination. It is not the kind of reading that will haul me along like those bulky books did during my seemingly endless summer vacations. I am not looking for experiences or events in what I read now: I look for unities, singularities, a de-cluttering of thoughts. I look for the machinery behind the processing – and it is terrifying, as if looking straight into the sun. Terrifying, perhaps because of the fear that with the unravelling comes the end of the pursuit.

As I sit down to assemble these critical reflections, the title of Aslaug Nyrnes' (2006) article, which I read early in my artistic research journey, lingers in my head: Lighting From the Side. Ironically, the PDF I have saved of this paper on my laptop will not fit on my screen, and the only way I can read it is to turn my laptop on its side – reading sideways. As I search online for another version, I find the following reference to Nyrnes in a blogpost by professor and vocal artist Tone Åse (2012):

Adopting a position between classical rhetoric (you know what you say and why you are saying it) and a new rhetoric (you know that you do not know what you are saying and why you are saying it), she points to language as being not only a communicator of findings, but also as being embedded in the entire research process.

I find some comfort in the thought that the confusion I revealed to you in the opening paragraphs seems to have a name: new rhetoric. In her opening paragraph, Nyrnes (2006) writes about Foucault who 'once wrote that it is not always climbing the highest peak that

will give you the most interesting view. On the contrary, light from the side will be the most alive and life giving' (n.p.). How far can I go with this lighting from the side? How patient will you be with me, while I approach everything indirectly, never switching on the top light or flooding the scene as if a crime must be solved, even if I do feel guilty of something?

Nyrnes states, to my concern, that rhetoric 'is always an important perspective in works of research. Rhetoric qualifies research' (n.p.). I say 'to my concern', because, as you are likely aware, I do not like to state my mind. I do not like to lead or build up an argument that can either qualify or disqualify – be proven true or false. It is the lighting from the side that I seek. The moment when dusk and shadows allow one thing to be two things, the cat both dead and alive, a story both true and untrue, simultaneously, depending on which side the light falls on – or from.

I can hear you saying, 'Get to the point!' and it unnerves me a little, because what if this *is* the point? A point, at least, that I would like to make. A point that drifts, extends and flickers in and out of view. 'To be unaware of the verbal language is to be ruled by it' (n.p.) Nyrnes writes, and paradoxically, being hyperaware of the language – and how it both facilitates and limits what you can say – leaves you just as powerless. Writing is a game of cat and mouse, where the words are cats and the thoughts are mice, dreading the claws that reach for them in the dark, knowing it will be their death.

I would like to insert here a sidenote on language that I wrote during a writing session held by my supervisor, writer and transmedia creator Christy Dena, for the research fellows at the Norwegian Film School.

Recently, when scrolling through Twitter, I came across the suggestion that writing a poem before each chapter of a book or a thesis could be helpful. The idea seemed to resonate among the followers of the account, many of whom were writers, and I asked myself what it was that made the idea seem so appealing. What mechanism behind writing a poem could be extrapolated to writing a book or a thesis?

Perhaps the natural constraints of a poem can help a writer to focus the text, to boil down and to leave out, and to reduce what they are trying to say to its essence. Perhaps a poem can inform a writer – on a deep, intuitive level – of emotional undertones and unassumed perspectives in the material. To operate within the limits of a poem, you must cut to the core of things.

The few attempts I have made at writing (anything resembling) poetry were on

occasions when I felt overwhelmed by life events and turned to writing as a coping mechanism. I found that simply sitting with my difficulties for a while, searching for words or images to capture their nature – finding a rhythm, a cadence of sentences and sometimes even unexpected closure – could give me a sense of having resolved something, even if in fact nothing had changed, except for a slight shift in my mind.

I wonder if writing poetry could help inform my research – or if it is just one more way to deflect and digress. As I have already described, my only attempts at writing poetry were to, very privately, give voice to unclear, unresolved internal issues. One such issue, with which I now deal daily, is the feeling of self-consciousness when I write in a language that is not my own. It makes me hyper aware that every time I type a sentence, I make small mistakes. My texts are littered with tiny figurines of foreignness: a wordplay, a syntax, a manner of writing that reveals my background as a non-native speaker. Some mistakes I am aware of, others are a bit like black swans; I cannot even look for them, as I do not know they exists.

The many ways in which a language can be foreign, and can make *you* foreign, is something I have experienced first-hand. I was only 19 when I moved from Norway to the Netherlands, and I had to learn a new language from scratch. It was a formative experience, as I had always felt competent in my mother tongue and all its facets. Now, for the first time, I often felt *in*competent, even in the simplest of everyday interactions. Once, a shopkeeper from whom I was buying a soda asked if I wanted a straw, and I looked confused and had to ask him to explain to me what a straw *was*. My Dutch *sounded* fluent at the time, but as I had never come across the word 'straw', there was an incongruence between my pronunciation and my vocabulary that made the shopkeeper wonder what was wrong with me.

As my mastery of Dutch grew, it felt as if my Norwegian was stifling and becoming inert for lack of use. It did not develop together with me as I grew into adulthood, and I ended up feeling not entirely fluent in either language – or, as a Norwegian friend put it, not having *spiss-kompetanse* in any language. I find *spiss-kompetanse* difficult to translate. 'Specific competence' may come close, but what the Norwegian term meant to me, when my issue was labelled with it, was that I did not feel like I had ownership over any language – the kind of ownership that makes you entitled to say, 'I'll make an executive decision to say it like that, like it or not'. It was a realisation that made me sad, as it cannot be undone. I can never go back to *not* being bilingual. It has become who I am. I will have to live with the consequences of my choices and make the best of it.

Hence my attempt at a poem:

Thou shall not steal
I know
but I wear this stolen language
like clothes I found
hanging from a line
to dry
that almost fit me
Forgive me
but I have to wear something
so you can see me naked

What the last line of the poem made clear to me – a sentence that landed itself intuitively, simply as a play on words – was that not fully mastering a language makes me feel a bit naked. I cannot hide behind language the way I imagine one can if one feels fully at home in it, and superior in one's mastery of it.

Then again, I realised, perhaps being naked is not so terrible – and what would I need a language for, if not to be unclad, unabashedly myself?

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Perhaps this ambiguous relationship with language is why I work with images. Images are a universal language that does not care where in the screenplay you place your commas. (Writers of screenplays, especially writer-directors, are infamous for their bad spelling.) Of course, cinematographic grammar has its own set of conventions, but we come to this from all parts of the world on more equal terms.[3] My work leading up to this artistic research project has been to put words on paper that describe and conjure images: images that are in a way more honest and concrete than words, at least for me as a writer – a writer who perhaps feels more like a composer of images.

Literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes (2010) writes about film as 'a skin

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[3] How equal these terms really are is a discussion on its own – clearly it is not as straightforward – but at least it is true that an image can be read and understood, if not in all subtleties, then across language barriers.

without puncture or perforation', 'a garrulous ribbon' (p. 45). As a spectator, you receive all the facets of an image all at once. You cannot choose to unsee them – the lighting, the atmosphere or a first impression made by an actor dressed in a certain way: 'even before he signifies, everything is given to me' (p. 46). This lies contrary to text, where elements or facets of a character's wardrobe are assembled in the reader's head, step by step, as the writer chooses to introduce them – or not.

My sense of images is that they are what they are, like musical notations of tones in a melody. Images, although in themselves not unproblematic, are somehow more discrete in their value, as opposed to the continuous nature of words and sentences. Images begin and end within a frame: What you see is what you get, unlike words and their derived meaning. And like musical notes, they resonate when arranged in sequence.

I am simplifying, of course, and as I write these words, I know that they are treacherous. Images can be manipulative, misinterpreted, ambiguous and coquettish – just like words. But still, as a scriptwriter, I sometimes get a feeling of images locking together in clarity: they *clunk*. It is the same feeling I remember having when looking at an example of ancient Roman masonry, in the Croatian town of Split, where long and short bricks are laid in alternating patterns for enhanced strength. Perhaps this feeling of a clunk, or a clang, or a clang, is related to what Nyrnes (2006) refers to as 'sensuous knowledge'?

Nyrnes (2006) says that Foucault is 'not in favour of too many comments on artistic practice', but that 'Deleuze and Foucault pose the question: 'What does this object make us think (or feel)?' In the community of film makers, it is a daring and often frowned upon endeavour to go beyond the work itself and seek or assign meaning with words. A work should not have to be explained; it should speak for itself. In my research proposal for the artistic research programme, I stated – with a boldness that now seems naive – that the 'proof should be in the pudding'. And here I am, tempting you to taste the pudding through the recipe, hoping that there is value both in the recipe itself and the narrative surrounding it.

Nyrnes (2006) goes on to say that 'it is the artist themselves that should develop their rhetorical competence. This is because artists experience the gap between the artistic processes and the verbal language used to describe these same processes' (n.p.). How to handle this gap if the outcome of one's artistic practice is a half-product, as is the case for a scriptwriter? Where does my research end, and someone else's – the director, the producer or in the case of virtual reality, the developer's – research begin? Can a concept, a blueprint, a collection of ideas that have yet to prove themselves in the executive hands of others still be an outcome? Can it be this object that raises questions about thinking and feeling? Is it a

question of rhetoric whether this half-product qualifies as an artistic research result?

If anything, the process of artistic research has made me rethink and re-evaluate the work I have always done with images. To research the transposition of visual stories from one medium to another – from film to virtual reality – it is equally important to investigate the old medium as the new.

II.   Analogy

In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes writes:

The 'analogical' arts (cinema, photography), the 'analogical' methods (academic criticism) are discredited. Why? Because analogy implies an effect of Nature: it constitutes the 'natural' as a source of truth; and what adds to the curse of analogy is the fact that it is irrepressible: no sooner is a form seen than it *must* resemble something: humanity seems doomed to Analogy, i.e., in the long run, to Nature. Whence the effort of painters, of writers, to escape it. (…) Analogy is simple structural correspondence (…) The bull sees red when his lure falls under his nose; the two reds coincide, that of rage and that of the cape: the bull is caught in analogy, i.e., in the imaginary. (pp. 4-7)

In the process of rediscovering what film language meant to me – and how I could or could not apply it when writing for virtual reality – I came across the above passage by Barthes. It was late in the evening, and I was on an airplane that had been grounded for hours due to bad weather. With heavy rain beating against the window next to me, the only highlight I could see were those sentences marked in yellow on my laptop.

They made me wonder if filmmakers are also 'caught in analogy': analogy as a 'special kind of comparison', in the words of author and translator Kate Briggs (Briggs, 2017) in her book *This Little Art*. As Briggs writes, '[analogy] works by pointing to something familiar or readily understood in order to clarify or explain something more complex and less readily understood' (p. 146).

When Barthes pointed me to this 'structural correspondence' quality of film – even if he calls it simple – it made me recognise an underlying mechanism that, as a writer I find useful. I realised that this had been the central theme of a visual writing course that I had developed and taught at the Norwegian Film School.

Analogy, as in a model resembling something from our lives, even if seemingly very different, is what I had been attempting to lure students into creating in images and scenes and on an overarching structure level: film as metaphor – or, more precisely analogy.

It is what makes the provocative directive of script-guru Robert McKee (1997) sensical: 'If the scene is about what the scene is about, you're in deep shit!' (p. 186). It is how stories about people and lives that are very different from our own can still resonate, because of a

resemblance on some level – or a mirroring, or an extrapolation of underlying emotions from one situation to another. I believe this is how we can recognise something in a violent or ridiculous character (in a 'godfather' for example), not because we *are* them, but because we are *like* them in some underlying aspect.

If we follow Briggs' suggestion that our understanding of complex issues is helped by comparing them to something we can grasp or recognise more easily – and assuming that what is more complex is ourselves, and what is easier to grasp is someone else's tale – in the film The Godfather (Coppola, 1972), the analogy lies in family dynamics and dependencies that are pushed to the extreme by violence, making these dependencies tangible and concrete. Even if the tale is larger-than-life, we can still recognise the dynamics. The story of a man torn between family tradition and the demands of modern society is universal.

The insight-giving analogy is the condensed and themed life-tale of a character: 'themed' as in centred in a way that emphasises only certain aspects – a variation of motifs and imagery that builds subtext. This does not mean that the tale must be simplified or obvious – but I believe it can be only *one analogy* at the time. The structure holds up because all the building stones are supporting one central theme – the analogical principle. It is not *about*, what it is about

Related to the analogous is *ironic tension,* and by this I do not mean dramatic irony – a narrative device that lets the audience know more about the plot than the character involved in it – but a tension that arises from the film's premise.[4]

In the once-popular book on screenwriting, *Save the cat* (with the brash – and likely ironic – secondary title of *The last book on screenwriting that you'll ever need)*, Blake Snyder (2005) illustrates ironic tension with examples of good loglines.[5] One logline, from the classic hit film and box-office success *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988) is simply 'A cop comes to L.A. to visit his estranged wife and her office building is taken over by terrorists'; or from *Pretty Woman (Marshall, 1990)*, 'A businessman falls in love with a hooker he hires to be his date for the weekend' (Snyder, 2005).

In both loglines, there is a sense of irony in the way that expectations and actual events are in juxtaposition. The image of someone visiting their estranged wife, only to find the

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[4] A premise is something that the entire story sets out to prove – or show. According to Lajos Egri (1972), in *The art of dramatic writing*, the terms 'premise', 'goal', 'root-idea' or 'theme' are all different names for the same thing. As he writes, 'The premise is the motivating power of everything we do' (p. 24).

[5] A logline is a one-liner that tells us what Snyder (2005) refers to as 'what it is.' It is the story in a hyper-condensed form, boiled down to its essence, with the intention of giving us a clear, yet intriguing idea of 'what it is'.

building taken over by terrorists, has a kind of Freudian twist to it – how much inner resistance does this character possess to this meetup? Even if *Die Hard* is a light-hearted action film, in its logline, there is still this analogous element of its hero overcoming inner and outer obstacles at the same time. There is no need to explain that he is anxious about meeting his estranged wife: the state of the building reflects this.

Ironic tension brings about a psychological suspense in the audience when they realise that the dramatised events will challenge the character's core beliefs; we become excited by the prospect of witnessing their solution, their ''accommodation,[6] or merging of a new life-concept with old ones. Perhaps it is this process of accommodation that we recognise on a deeper level, beyond the actual plot of events: a recognition that reminds us of our own experience with facing seemingly unreconcilable values, paradoxical truths, and how we must expand our minds to hold new beliefs. In the dramatic tension, even if larger than life, we recognise the opportunity for growth – or regression.

Through the ironic tension, the setting up of (often enlarged) contrasts, a dynamic occurs that in classic structure will often lead to a form of resolution. It is a basic structure, almost a syntax, that is also recognisable in classical music, where two opposing, alternating themes are often introduced that ultimately come together to form a new and richer harmony: or, in rhetoric, thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Herein also lies the analogous quality of film – understanding something difficult through the example of something simple – the external conflict (easy) becomes an image of the internal (more difficult) conflict.

I believe these mechanisms are present in most dramatic forms of representation, even if in some genres – or flavours – of film, it can be more obvious than in others. Films made for a broad audience might be more straightforward in their chase for a resolution, while art-house films might be more ambiguous, or subtle, in their treatment of the underlying themes.

Working with film and scriptwriting for more than 20 years, I have become just as caught in analogy as Barthes' bull. There are aspects that are analogous; there are totalities that are analogous. There are people who carry the analogy in themselves, in their personality or their life story. There are events, ideas, journeys, animals, mysteries, banalities, misunderstandings and discoveries that become images, that become structures, that become analogies, that become stories.

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[6] The process of accommodation involves altering one's existing schemas, or ideas, as a result of new information or new experiences. (definition by Google).

The mother of one of my children's friends – I will call her Nina – once told me an anecdote from her childhood while we were waiting for our children in the schoolyard. She told me about her own mother who had been the first female surgeon in the country where Nina grew up. Once, when Nina's pet rabbit fell ill, she had asked her surgeon mother to cure it, but her mother suggested that Nina could do so herself. The rabbit would only need a small operation, her mother said, and subsequently – in what I presume was an attempt to empower her nine-year-old daughter, lent her daughter her own set of scalpels.

When telling this story, something defining in the relationship between Nina and her mother became clear to me, and there was a wound that I recognised as the wound of growing up too fast. The story grew in my head and eventually it was developed into the script of a short film *The First Cut* (Schwab, 2009). When the director of the film read the screenplay for the first time, she characterised the actions of the mother figure as 'a gift, and a curse'. The film grew into an analogy for the gift and the curse of growing up.

A similar ironic tension is present in the premise of the film *It's About Time* (Sanders, 2017), which I wrote about an elderly couple with a suicide pact, who were having trouble settling on a date. The real problem was not the issue of dying, but of which spouse got to decide when their life was complete. It became a story, not about death, but about controlling dynamics in a relationship.

This analogous thinking has become such an ingrained part of me that I often express myself in analogies, making my colleague Dalia Alkury jestingly (perhaps sarcastically) name me 'the queen of analogy'.

So, who am I, the uncrowned queen of analogy, without analogy to hide behind?

The reason I spend time with this issue here is because I have found that, when writing for virtual reality, the sense of analogy is less evident. There is a lack of irony and 'structural correspondence' – of this something that resembles something else – in most of the virtual reality storytelling I have seen. It appears to me that the medium is more like a novel in that respect. The literary quality of the narration becomes more important, the ironic tension is either added through the voice-over, or in a 'high concept' in danger of becoming a gimmick.

Is it because, as a screenwriter colleague pointed out to me, the eye of the camera adds a perspective in film – a lens through which we view the material – that is absent, or less clear, in virtual reality? This colleague suggested that 'irony has to do with commentary, or perspective, as something that the camera can do' in film. She told me that she had encountered this when working with audio drama: 'In absence of camera viewpoint and

framing, that decide the story perspective, and give accents and direction, you need other measures, and that brings you to a literary 'telling' perspective as the voice-over' (Poppe, 2023).

Review

In light of this discussion of analogy and ironic tension, it might be useful to look at a few virtual reality experiences, to see if these characteristics, analogy and ironic tension, can be tools for both analysis and writing. Only very rarely have I been able to pinpoint these in the story world itself when viewing experiences in virtual reality. Perhaps it concerns this lack of perspective that the camera offers in film – the 'absence of frame', as Stephanie Riggs coins it in her (2019) book *The End of Storytelling: The Future of Narrative in the Storyplex*.

When the story-world surrounds you and there is no camera to skew your perspective towards a certain interpretation – might the spectators' interaction and experience of the world become an analogy? One example of this is a student project described by architect and virtual reality creator Kim Bauman Larsen. In his presentation, he described a scene wherein the spectator is 'surprised' by sudden, mysterious changes in the virtual environment. The changes occur when the user's attention is deliberately distracted, and as they return to the objects with which they were interacting before the distraction, something has changed: The handle of an old-fashioned telephone is off the hook instead of on; a door that was closed is ajar. It is as if someone is interfering – someone who is invisible. (The maker? An invisible character?) It can make the spectator question themselves and doubt their grip on the virtual world, of what to expect and of the continuity of time and place.

Another example is *Die Fernweh Oper* (Ernst, 2019*)*, in which the user enters a story-world where proportions are 'out of whack': a six meter tall opera singer, planets that drift through walls, a stagehand who plays with a solar system in his hand. Again, we enter a world that takes on an *ironic stance* towards the user, playing with their expectations and making them question their place in the universe and in the order of things.

A somewhat different mechanism, but one that also plays with the spectators' engagement with the story world, is that of *Songbird VR* (Greenwell, 2018). In this experience, the spectator is virtually transported to an Hawaiian island, where they relive an encounter that scientist Dr. Jim Jacobi had with a now extinct bird. The interaction is simple – towards the end, the spectator is given a recording device and is asked to replay a recording the scientist made of the bird's mating call – but the effect is impactful. What the spectator realises is that, when they replay the recording, the rare bird mistakes it for the call of a mate. They realise, as the scientist did, that they have tricked the bird and given it the false hope of not being as entirely alone as it actually is. For a moment, the interaction makes it tangible what it means to be the last of one's kind on earth.

In the two first examples, the environment interacts with the spectator implicitly. It is through environmental and interactive design that the story world communicates or represents. To a degree, it gains an analogous quality, in the sense that it offers a corresponding likeness to the real world: only in reverse. It tells us that the virtual world operates differently from our normal world, and it plays with our expectations. The storytelling, however – the further embroidery or expansion of a narrative – is minimal. There is mostly atmosphere: a hint of an otherworldliness, a sense of suspense and perhaps curiosity.

In the third example, there is a voice-over that contextualises the situation and gives meaning that cannot be derived from the environment only. If this was a film, we could have observed the scientist as a character and felt the impact of his actions through empathy, as an observing outsider. In the virtual reality experience, the sense of irony (as in an unexpected outcome of actions) is transferred to the spectator with the aid of additional information given by the voice-over. The storytelling in this example again seems to operate more like a novel than a film, in the sense that it is the telling, rather than the representation, that is decisive. Language becomes more important than the image, and my inclination towards the image – which stands on its own and communicates implicitly – becomes strained.

It feels as if I am forced into a split between wanting to tell a story – with context, characterisation, analogy and ironic tension – and wanting to tell it implicitly, without explicit narration. As Barthes (1975) writes in 'An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative':

> 'Thus each time the narrator stops "representing" and recounts facts which he knows perfectly well, though they are unknown to the reader, there occurs, through a suspension of the meaningful dimension, a sign of the reading act, for there would not be much sense in the narrator's giving himself information.' (p. 260)

Or consider the distinction that narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan makes in her (2002) essay on narrative in digital media: 'In the mimetic or dramatic conception of narrative, by contrast, there is no need for a verbal act of narration, no need for a storyteller' (p. 584). An ongoing search in my work with virtual reality has been to balance the need for telling and showing, and how to 'represent' in a virtual world when the spectator becomes part of that world. In her essay, Ryan attempts to categorise stories and degrees of narrativity and to

examine their compatibility with digital formats. I find these categories, or modes, helpful when thinking further about the possibilities (and limitations) of telling stories in virtual reality.

III.   Myth & metaphor

In her (2002) essay *Beyond myth and metaphor: Narrative in digital media* Marie-Laure Ryan discusses different kinds of narrative in digital media. She points to narrative as being a question of degree and suggests that not every kind of narrative is equally suited for interactive formats. Ryan states her position towards narrative by pointing to certain features:

As a mental representation, narrative consists of a world (setting), populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (event, plot), through which they undergo change (temporal dimension). (p. 583)

I find this definition helpful, as narrative and storytelling can easily become buzzwords that mean different things to different people. This can lead to confusion, especially between developers with a background in the game industry, and the (screen)writers that are attracted to the world of digital media, where the cry for 'good stories' is regularly heard. 'Story is everything,' is a common phrase that I last heard in a podcast by Kent Bye (2016) – but of what this 'everything' consists of can be hard to agree on.

Ryan (2002) writes that the 'interactive nature of digital worlds is the true foundation of their immersivity,' and she describes it as 'the sense of space that comes from navigating a virtual world'. She says that 'all these features can be traced back to the responsiveness of the system to the actions of the user' (p. 595).

When discussing 'interactive nature', the specifications, a 'sense of space' and the 'responsiveness' of that space useful in regards to virtual reality. It follows that an interactive nature does not necessarily involve deliberate actions, active choices, hand-controllers or other traditional game-mechanics – but a sense that the world you enter is responsive to your presence. This responsiveness of the virtual environment is of course not real, but a constructed illusion and one of which the user is aware. The responsiveness can take on many forms and, like narrativity, can vary in degrees of subtleness, intuitiveness and invasiveness.

Ryan proposes four strategies of interaction, based on two binary pairs. The pairs are

external/internal[7] and exploratory/ontological. Through cross-classification, four modes emerge: external/exploratory, external/ontological, internal/exploratory and internal/ontological.

When the mode is external/exploratory, the user does not see themselves as part of the story and they have no influence on the story other than assembling the different (in the case of hypertext) text units (or lexias). According to Ryan, the hypertext[8] then resembles a puzzle, where the lexias are the pieces, and the text can be regarded as 'a scrambled story that the reader puts back together, one lexia at a time' (p. 597). As with a puzzle, the final image becomes less important than the process of assembling it. Ryan claims that this mode is 'better suited for self-referential fiction than for narrative worlds that hold us under their spells for the sake of what happens in them. It promotes a metafictional stance, at the expense of immersion in the fictional world'(p. 597).

This 'metafictional stance' can also be observed in virtual reality experiences. At times, it can seem as if the concept (high concept) is more important than the story, to the extent that it becomes, as I have mentioned before, gimmicky. If exploration is on the forefront, it seems that focus 'bleeds' away into that activity and there is less left for layered stories – or again, what Ryan describes as 'narrative worlds that hold us under their spells for the sake of what happens in them'.

In the internal/exploratory mode, the user sees themselves as being part of the world, of being present, either through a defined role as an avatar, or through the first-person perspective.[9] Ryan sums the internal/exploratory mode of interactivity up as being suited to certain kinds of plot. She mentions the mystery plot, the parallel plot (a large cast of

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[7] 'In the internal mode, users project themselves as members of the fictional world, either by identifying with an avatar or by apprehending the virtual world from a first-person perspective. In the external mode, users are situated outside the virtual world. They either play the role of a god who controls the fictional world from above or they conceptualize their own activity as navigating a database.'
'In the exploratory mode, users navigate the display, move to new observation points, alter their perspective, or examine new objects in order to learn more about the virtual world. But this activity does not make fictional history, nor does it alter the plot; users have no impact on the destiny of the virtual world. In the ontological mode, by contrast, the decisions of the users send the history of the virtual world on different forking paths.' Ryan attributes these pairs to Espen Aarseth, adapting his typology for user functions in cybertexts towards the 'user's relation to the virtual world. (Ryan, 2002, pp. 595-596)

[8] In this context, I regard hypertext as a stand-in for different kinds of digital, interactive narrative, amongst others virtual reality.

[9] Recent virtual reality experiences seem to have given up on the attempt of assigning the user an avatar. The most common form in virtual reality experiences that are high in storytelling is what Slater refers to as ghost-presence – you have no visible body in the virtual world (Slater, 2017).

characters in different locations) and the spatial narrative (e.g., Alice in Wonderland)[10].

Ryan also describes a kind of plot that she calls the 'narrative of place', and that she sees as 'a combination of parallel plot and spatial narrative'. Ryan refers to the hypertext fiction *Marble Springs* (Larsen, 1993) as 'a text that invites the reader to explore the map of a Colorado ghost town and tells, in short poems, about the lives of its female inhabitants'; Ryan goes on to say that in 'the narrative of place, interest resides not in the overarching plot (…) of the macro level, but in the "little stories" that the user discovers in all the nooks and crannies of the fictional world' (p. 598).

Finally, as examples of the external/ontological and internal/ontological modes, Ryan refers to computer games *(The Last of Us)* and the envisioned (but not actualised) Holodeck universe. In these modes, the user can – to a degree – change the course of the story.

In the conclusion, Ryan predicts that VR experiences will be best suited to the internal/exploratory interactivity mode. The 'narrative of place' is an intriguing example of a kind of internal/exploratory mode story, as it considers the importance of space and place in virtual worlds. 'Narrative of place' – where the story is discovered in 'all the nooks and crannies of the fictional world'– is a description to which I feel quite drawn to and aspire to in my own conceptualisation.

Again, I would like to look at some virtual reality experiences and see how they fit into these categories and – also in the light of analogy and ironic tension _ whether the categorisation can be helpful.

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[10] 'The spatial narrative, whose main theme is travel and exploration. This could be an electronic version of Alice in Wonderland, where Alice would not really do anything but rather stumble into the lives of the other characters and observe them for a while.'(Ryan, 2002, p. 598) 'a rather flat character whose involvement in the plot is not affective but a matter of exploring a world (…) This kind of involvement is much closer to playing a computer game than to living a Victorian novel or a Shakespearean drama.'(Ryan, 2002, p. 594)

Review

Notes on Blindness (Colinart, 2016) is a virtual reality experience made as an accompanying – and complementary – piece to a feature length documentary by the same name. It is a work to which I keep returning as seminal, in the way it merges form and story to create something unique in the medium. It is as if, in this piece, the subject matter and the execution have aligned perfectly. This apparent symbiosis is also what makes it difficult to generalise how it works – on a conceptual level – to other experiences.

In short, it is a kind of 'simulation' of how perception can change when becoming blind. As a spectator, you are alone in a dark, claustrophobic world that only lights up where there is sound. This illustrates the shift in perception from sight to sound that often occurs when a person goes blind. The process is made tangible to people who can see – not by leaving the user completely in the dark – but by mimicking a form of echolocation. As we hear the sound of children playing, the wind in a tree or a bicycle passing, we can see slightly abstract shapes appear in the dark (negative) space around us. As trembling contours of blue light, they are our only means of orientation. At the same time, we hear the voice of the main character, John M. Hull, describe how the world is only alive in places where activity can be heard[11]. 'Where there is no activity, there is no sound, and then that part of the world dies' (Colinart, 2016).

As a virtual reality experience, *Notes on Blindness* fits Ryan's internal/exploratory mode, as the spectator is present in the world and perceives it through the first-person perspective – even if the degree to which one can freely explore is limited. There are at least two different versions of the experience – one has more direct interactivity built in – but the main exploratory action is that of contemplating Hull's perspective of how the world changes when he goes blind. Is it possible to distil ironic tension from the premise of this experience? Is the deprivation of visual input an ironic element that engages us in the story?

Perhaps this deprivation creates an internal conflict between our ability to perceive and the environment – a conflict that again sharpens our sense of urgency and the need for resolution. When I saw the experience for the first time, I remember being moved by a scene towards the end, when we see the shimmering shape of a choir singing in a church. As Hull describes how he has come to terms with his blindness – and how his condition has made him

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[11] This is the real voice of writer and theologian John M. Hull (1935–2015) who documented his own process of going blind with an audio recorded diary. In 1990, the diary was published as a book entitled *Touching the rock*.

feel more connected to his environment and especially to his children – a sense of catharsis comes as the world slightly lightens up. It is still dark, and the visual input remains abstract, but the environment now has a warmth and a softness to it, and it feels less disorientating.

Even if the design of the experience relies heavily on the spoken narration, the voice-over does not feel as expository as in other experiences. In *Notes on Blindness,* the voice-over blends in with the world and becomes a part of the environmental storytelling: in part because of the subtle, but important detail of hearing a click from the tape recorder before Hull's voice is heard – a sound that reminds us that these are original recordings. Perhaps this creates a feeling of urgency and of something happening here and now.

In another virtual reality experience, *Vestige* (Bradbury, 2018), something similar happens. Just before the voice-over begins, we hear the sound of a telephone dialling in, implying that the voice-over is really a telephone call – and thus internal to the world. Again, this gives us a feeling of something happening-as-we-speak, and that we are a participating character.

It seems to me that when the voice-over is 'camouflaged' as actual sound – present inside the environment and not external as an all-knowing entity – it helps the user to enter the internal mode of interactivity that Ryan describes. It makes the difference between being there – or not – and of presence.[12] When someone is speaking to you directly, even if there is no eye contact or visible acknowledgement of you as a spectator, you are included in the story on a conceptual level.[13]

In *Book of Distance* (Okita, 2020b), the makers take a step further and let the author of the experience, Randall Okita,[14] be a character that speaks directly to you. He appears as an animated figure who paces restlessly back and forth, followed by a spotlight as he speaks, as

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[12] Computer scientist Mel Slater is known for his grounded theory research on presence and immersion and the introduction of the notion of 'being there' as a response to the 'place illusion' – the feeling of actually being in the place of the virtual environment (Slater, 2009). He emphasises a differentiation between presence (form) and involvement (content); (Slater, 2003), and connects the term presence to sensory or perceptual conditions in the virtual environment. This distinction makes his definitions, although intuitively attractive, less applicable when conceptualizing content, as they seem to refer to mechanisms comparable to the level of framerate in film – a very basic condition that can interfere with one's engagement but independent of the conceptual qualities.
[13] I will leave out the discussion of the terms 'diegetic' and 'non-diegetic', as a voice-over is usually seen as diegetic in film, while a music score is not. Intuitively, I believe that diegetic sound and music are essential in virtual reality, as they enhance the spatial storytelling. Where in the virtual space a voice-over should be 'placed' has been an issue of discussion and experimentation in the development of our vertical slice. Further on in the text, I will discuss Chion's notion of 'acousmêtre' in relation to characters.
[14] *Book of Distance* recounts Okita's personal family history. It won several awards, including a Canadian Screen Award for Best Immersive Experience

if on stage. He draws lines on the floor to indicate spaces; he provides props and pulls set decorations into view – staging his story as if in real-time – exploring the past by re-enacting it.

In some respects, Okita uses the virtual space as if it was a black box theatre stage; in others his design is cinematic[15]. In the experience, the spectator travels back in time to Japan, where they witness Okita's grandfather take leave of his old life and sail off as an immigrant to Canada. The short, vignette-like scenes work together as a montage to create background and context before the core of the story is unpacked – which is Okita's own exploration of his family's Second World War trauma. As Japanese nationals in Canada, his grandparents and their children (Okita's father) were detained in camps during the war, and their family farm, built from scratch in the Canadian wilderness, was appropriated.

In an impactful scene, the spectator is present in the living room as the military police come to take the family away. The role you are implicitly assigned is that of a witness, and your inability to intervene might give rise to an internal conflict. In another scene, Okita struggles to imagine what it must have been like for his grandfather to be separated from his wife and children and placed in a detention camp for men. We see how Randall attempts to 'see through the mist' of the past, looking at his grandfather in the all-male camp, pacing back and forth behind the barbed wire fence – mirroring Okita's own restlessness. It is a scene in which the setting in virtual reality is perhaps the most effective, as the distance between Randall and the past is visualised and felt in space.

Another example of spatial storytelling is a scene towards the end. In one slice[16] of the dark world we see Okita; in another we see his aged father at his kitchen table; and in a third slice we see the farm with the young family before the war – three different generational stages, three different slices of historic time, arranged spatially to create *one* moment.

In a book about perception and consciousness, *Seeing Red,* psychology professor Nicholas Humphrey describes human consciousness as a time ship, where the bow is the future, the stern is the past, and the present is somewhere midship; every moment we experience is coloured by our beliefs about the future and our knowledge about the past. In every *now,* we are like this ship plunging forwards through the waves of time (Humphrey,

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[15] Mimetically represented scenes, vignettes, that are projected in the virtual environment – as fragments of film on a screen

[16] A slice – as if you could divide the 360 degrees of the virtual environment into slices of 20, 30 or 45 degrees (like pizza slices), and different scenes representing different times or places can appear simultaneously in different parts of the sphere

2012). In virtual reality, this experience of life can be made tangible in space, as demonstrated in Okita's spatial design.

Although I am not convinced that *Book of Distance* could not have been told as a conventional documentary film, perhaps with equal emotional impact, it is also an elegant virtual reality piece. With its emphasis on connections through time, it has won international acclaim.

In an annotated walkthrough of the experience, director Okita highlights the participatory aspect as an important element of the design. He says:

> It can be easy for history to feel abstract. In this project we embraced the idea that engaging with our histories can be an act of imagination, that it can be participatory, alive, and physical. (…) Through identifying our attempts to fill in the gaps of knowledge and putting our process of creation on display, we are inviting the audience to join us, to become our partners in telling the story. (…) I also make myself visible, as an author of this work, but also as a participant in the learning, someone trying to make sense of this history and how it lives in me today. I think this approach allows the audience to connect to the meaning behind the actions they are taking, and the situations being represented. (Okita, 2020a)

The participatory aspect makes sense if you listen to Okita's explanation. It seems to align with Ryan's internal/exploratory mode expressed from a creator's point of view. Okita connects the participatory aspect to the engagement of the spectator. By making them partners in the creative exploration, he hypothesises a stronger connection with that which lies beyond – a subtext perhaps – to themes of belonging and alienation. Okita also places himself in this perspective, of how he relates to his Japanese–Canadian ancestry in comparison to his father and his grandparents.

In the experience, there are also more evident interactive elements modelled on game mechanics: like taking a photograph, packing a suitcase and planting strawberries. Okita (2020a) comments:

> The actions of taking pictures, opening letters, planting seeds and feeding the family, has the opportunity to resonate as an act of memorialisation, an attempt to understand,

or for it to become closer to a historical moment. In this way, the audience becomes part of the telling of the story and part of the performance that assigns meaning to what happened then, and in some ways to what happens next. (n.p.)

Again, it seems to me as if Okita wants to include the spectator and ground them in the story world by allowing them to act upon it. The design makes the spectator aware of the 'responsiveness' of the virtual environment in a very direct and practical way. It is as if Okita is inviting us to play a game and to listen to a story at the same time – an approach that could result in a failure to achieve either.[17] However, in *Book of Distance* the interactive parts are arranged into interludes – the spectator gets to take a break from the flow of the story and solely concentrate on the given tasks. As Okita states (Okita, 2020a):

> We minimized cognitive load in terms of user's visual focus and physical position in space; we never wanted them to question whether they were where they needed to be, where they needed to go next or whether something was happening where they weren't looking. Considerable design time was spent on choreography, lighting, placement of action, sound cues, and the pattern and connection of each interaction.

Still, I find myself questioning how effective these activities are in the storytelling and if the experience could be equally engaging without them. There is a risk that game-like tasks will feel obligatory and, instead of making me engage with the story, make me more aware of the construction behind it. Perhaps the actions did impact me on a level of which I am not fully aware – having planted and harvested the field and helped build the fences of the farm, I might feel more deeply what is at stake – but as I can never undo these things and experience the story without them, I can never know for sure.[18]

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[17] Research conducted at the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam indicates that being interactive, handling controllers and performing tasks can distract the user/spectator from paying attention to the narration/story (Hartmann, 2022). Ryan writes about narrativity in action games, and of play-scenes, 'lengthy film clips (…) to enrich the plot: (The fact that it is necessary to temporarily remove control from the user to establish the narrative frame is a further indication that interactivity is not a feature that facilitates the construction of narrative meaning.)' (Ryan, 2002, p. 602)

[18] The idea of testing this with an audience by making two versions – one with, and one without the interactive interludes – is tempting, but in practice, high-end virtual reality experiences with a strong storytelling potential will be so expensive and time-consuming to make that resources will seldom be spent on this. There is also the question of how to extrapolate potential findings, as every story on this level has its own 'organic' and highly specific nature. I do remember trying two different version of *Notes own Blindness*: one non-interactive 360-degree version and a later version where interactivity through eye tracking was incorporated (updated according to growing technical possibilities). I cannot remember being more engaged in the version with interactivity than in the one without.

If we look at *Book of Distance* in the light of the premises I have outlined thus far, it seems natural to categorise the experience in the internal/exploratory mode. The user experiences the story in the first-person perspective and is in the exploratory mode. Their actions will not impact the outcome of the story, which unfolds linearly.

Does *Book of Distance* have a self-referential quality? Is it a kind of metafiction? Perhaps, in the sense that the director keeps us aware of the fictive composition by taking us along in his own attempt to recreate the past; he performs his own exploration of family-history, with the user as a collaborator with restricted participatory engagement.

Does the *Book of Distance's* narrative world of 'hold us under its spell' for the sake of what happens in it? I would say it does, at times, when the meta-level of the narrative moves temporarily to the background and the representational scenes become more elaborate. The design of these scenes develops from fairly static vignettes in the beginning – we see tableaus created to give a watercolour effect, depicting the director's grandfather's departure from Japan and his waving goodbye to his sweetheart on the pier – to more dynamically shaped scenes in the second half of the experience. In these scenes, the spectator is also placed more at the centre of the action and aligned with the characters, as in the scene where the police enter to arrest the young family. This last scene also happens to be the one that I remember as the most emotionally impactful, demonstrating to me the power of 'mimetic or dramatic conception of narrative' where 'there is no need for a verbal act of narration, no need for a storyteller' (Ryan, 2002, p. 584). After the arrest, Okita steps into the scene again and comments on how difficult he finds it to envision the part of the story that is about the incarceration of the family. From emotional closeness, and feelings 'from the inside'(p. 592), we are again at a distance, and contemplate, or become conscious of the reconstructive nature of the narrative.

Does this metafictional element bring ironic tension to the story? Perhaps, if the spectator is made to feel ambiguous towards the historical truths of the events. Throughout the experience, Okita's 'performance that assigns meaning to what happened then' is commented on by the dry, down-to-earth voice of Okita's father. Like in *Vestige*, fragments of conversations Okita had with his father (on the telephone) become part of the narration. As an audience, we are led to align with Okita's perspective – his doubts and concerns about reconstructing the past – and his attempts at validating (or rebutting) this process in his conversations with his father.

Perhaps there is even a hint of an analogy there – as in the universality of generational

trauma, or of shifting alliances that can turn an insider into an outsider overnight. One could argue, however, that the strength of the story in *Book of Distance* lies primarily in its subject matter. The events that show how vulnerable individuals can become pawns in political conflict might form a gripping narrative in almost any perspective, but Okita's treatment of them does seem to rise above the level of *fabula* – as discussed in film theorist David Bordwell's (2012) *Poetics of Cinema*. His discussion of narration offers helpful, analytical tools for the process of conceptualisation in regard to perspective, alongside that of philosopher of art, Murray Smith (1994).

IV.   Narration and perspective

When Bordwell (2012) writes that one approach to film analysis would be to look for a filmic equivalent to the first-person perspective of a novel, but with the realisation that a 'filmic point of view might be quite different from literary point of view' and that there is not necessarily a 'cinematic equivalent of a verbal narrator' (p. 3), a similar question arises in regards to virtual reality – what is the equivalent of the perspective-giving camera in virtual reality?

Bordwell describes narration, not in the sense of a verbal narrator, but as 'the moment-by-moment flow of information' (p. 6) in film: how it is told, with which pace, pulse and perspective. Narration is what gives us access to the story as it unfolds: 'a narrative is like a building, which we can't grasp all at once but must experience in time (…) from static spaces to dynamic ones, enclosed spaces to open ones, peripheral areas to central ones' (p. 12).

He states that when 'grasping any narrative, we weigh the dimensions comparatively' and rather than viewing 'narrative as a message to be decoded'(p. 9) he proposes a model in which a representation is first processed perceptually, and then elaborated on by the spectator, in accordance with their existing schemas. This explanation aligns with my understanding of the analogous aspect – of corresponding likeness. Narration, Bordwell (2012) says, when tying it all together, is 'the process by which the film prompts the viewer to construct the ongoing fabula on the basis of syuzhet organization and stylistic patterning' (p. 14).

I find Bordwell's distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* – the raw story material and the way it is assembled – helpful when attempting to unravel the many factors that are involved in conceptualising for film and virtual reality.[19] When I suggest that much of the strength of *Book of Distance* lies in the subject matter, what I mean is that the story – *fabula* – is already rich in dramatic material. Okita's *syuzhet* (participatory, personal exploration and visualisation of the past) adds to that richness, but is not decisive for our grasping of it. The story could have been told without Okita bringing his perspective into the design – without making himself visible – but our conception of the story would be slightly different. There would be a slight shift in what it becomes a story *of*.

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[19] Bordwell chooses to use the terms *fabula* and *syuzhet* in following of the Russian formalists, as opposed to the school of French structuralism's use of *histoire* and *discours*, stating that the term *discours* bundles two aspects that Bordwell wants to separate – style and *syuzhet*. Bordwell argues that it allows for more discrimination on a theoretical level and that there are examples of films where '*syuzhet* patterning and stylistic patterning are out of sync.'(Bordwell, 2012, p. 14)

Bordwell also emphasises that narration must include what he calls 'the patterning of the film's surface texture, its audio-visual style' (p. 14). Stylistic choices are narrational choices as they shape how we receive the story.

Interacting with style, *syuzhet* in cinematic narration can 'juggle the order of *fabula* events', 'manipulate *fabula* duration', 'present simultaneous fabula events successively' or as in the case of *Book of Distance*, 'successive events simultaneously'(p. 15).

Another important effect of narration is the degree to which it gives the spectator access to the internal world of characters – as Bordwell writes, 'pulling us into character's mind via memories, dreams, or imaginings' (p. 15). Cinematic language has evolved to do this mimetically, without the help of a storyteller. A challenge for me, when writing for virtual reality, is how to provide this access without using cinematographic tools, such as editing and framing. What happens to our perspective taking when the spectator becomes part of what Bordwell calls the story world? How does identification with a character work when a spectator is on the inside of the story world? Does distance enhance empathy in film?[20] How does this relate to what Ryan calls 'emotions "from the inside"'?[21]

Another film theorist's perspective that I have found helpful in this aspect is Murray Smith and his ideas about the *structure of sympathy*. In his (1994) 'Altered states', Smith proposes that the term 'identification' be broken into three levels of imaginative engagement: recognition, alignment and allegiance. Recognition is how characters are *constructed* by the spectator, depending on the given features and how the spectator can relate to them. Alignment concerns the visual and aural information that is provided by the narration and that places us in stronger or weaker proximity to characters. Allegiance arises from our evaluation of the values that the characters embody.

The level of recognition is important to keep in mind when writing for virtual reality, where photorealistic characters are not a given. In addition, the possibilities for eye contact between spectator and characters are limited, as well as close ups that reflect the characters' emotions and responses. As a result, what Smith refers to as 'affective mimicry' might not

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[20] In an RSA Animate video, psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist explains how empathy requires distance. He says that to empathise, 'there is a sort of necessary distance from the world. If you are right up against it, you just bite'. (McGilchrist, 2011) The human capability for empathy requires a 'standing back, in time and space from the immediacy of experience' – an ability that McGilchrist calls 'profoundly creative' and which arises from the brain's frontal lobe. Perhaps, in virtual reality, our feeling of having agency, and of wanting to use it, might interfere with being empathetic, while the distance to story provided by film and literature optimises for it? Is it, in the light of this, virtual reality that should be called an empathy machine?

[21] In reference to philosopher Kendall Walton (Ryan, 2002, p. 592)

occur as easily as in film.

Smith writes that recognition 'requires the referential notion of the *mimetic hypothesis*; that is, the appeal we must make in engaging with a text to aspects of real-world experience' (p. 40). He goes on to say that assumptions about the human agent, of what they look like and how they act, are part of this process of construction through recognition. It follows that if a story has its starting point in a (photo) realistic world, at least basic recognition is quickly established. As Smith says: 'Certainly, in most films, it is rapid and phenomenologically "automatic"'(p. 40), whereas in virtual reality – where the story world is often populated with abstract representations – this can be trickier to achieve. Both as a writer and a spectator, I might have to work harder to establish the level of recognition that a two-dimensional, photo-realistic film world can give me in an instant. Not only will the representation of characters need establishment, but also the characteristics of the space, of architecture and the laws of physics in the virtual world. Can you walk through walls, can you fly or teleport, and can you see through characters? In some cases, this 'construction by recognition' of the virtual world and its beings might be the experienced-based story in itself.

It follows from Smith's argumentation, that recognition is important as a precondition for engagement – a way to make the spectator care about the story world. In *Book of Distance*, Okita's character was made recognisable, not through his facial expression (which was practically absent, as was the possibility of making eye contact[22]), but through expressive body language. The animation is stylistically simple, almost generic, but Okita's way of moving, of pacing back and forth and of gesturing with his hands and arms, indicate the use of motion capture. It makes his performance more alive and personalised. This also holds true for the family-members when they are arrested by the police. They are tangibly *real* in their body language and how they express fear through movement. The mise-en-scène, or choreography, has an element of repetition; the family members move almost as if in a loop, deflecting away from the police. This could be an artistic choice, to emphasise their emotion, or it could be due to limited resources. I know from our own work with the vertical slice that implementing moving characters is costly. The result to me is functional – it represents what

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[22] There are technical restrictions around eye-contact with characters in virtual reality, as it is dependent on how the spectator moves in the virtual space, at least in room-scale experiences. Artificial intelligence (AI) applications are making the option of eye contact increasingly possible – and we experimented with this in our vertical slice. However, having the character follow you with her gaze (in our case it was either on or off) felt unnatural, so we chose to direct her gaze in pace with the emotional arch of what she was telling us. In Book of Distance, Okita's eyes were blurred out by his reflective glasses, so eye contact was suggested only by the direction in which he looked.

it must represent – although I have noticed that some users are put off by the animation style, which at times feels rudimentary.

An important element in the recognition layer, aside from Okita's characterisation, is of course his spoken texts that give us direct access to his thoughts and feelings. He tells us what we cannot see, and his narration gives context to the 'silent', mimetic scenes. It helps us to infer what is going on in the characters' inner world. In *Book of Distance*, the alignment is strongly with Okita; we spend the most time and receive the most visual and aural information about him. The allegiance is also with him and his family, and the antagonistic force comes from the side of the police and the power mechanisms that force the family into confinement. We stay with this point of view, and there is never a question or ambiguity as to who is morally right. The story seems to take the stance (rightly so in my view) that the motives behind the policy were on an impersonal, political level. We take the innocence of the family at face-value. Towards the end, we see black-and-white photographs from the family album, and we see a family that is committed to their farm and to building a life for themselves. They are seemingly unaware, or at least unengaged, in the politics of war. The clear colouring of the story, and the choice to focus on the characters' relation to the past, not on questioning it, results in a clear structure of sympathy.

A question to which I keep returning to is how one could work with more ambiguous themes – or more ambiguous characters – within this conceptual frame. Is it possible that the brushstroke with which virtual reality comes to life is still too crude, in the sense that you need a clear, tidy story without too many complicating or conflicting layers?[23]

The question I am attempting to formulate relates to the depicting, or representing, of the inner world of characters – their 'internality'. I believe narrational access to motivations and inner conflicts in characters can open for more layered, complex and finetuned storytelling. It is a question with which I have been struggling with in my own virtual reality conceptualisation, as what interests me in the *fabula* are inward, ambiguous feelings connected to guilt and creativity. I will go into more detail about this in my project 'biography', but first I would like to return to Smith and Ryan and the aspect of internality.

In his essay, Smith (1994) differentiates between central and acentral imagination,

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[23] I am not saying this as a critique of *Book of Distance* – I find it a sympathetic, well-defined piece – but I ask this as a general question towards virtual reality, its form and storytelling tools with which I have struggled myself, in my own concept.

defining the first as a form of affective mimicry: an involuntary reaction to the 'affective states of others through facial and bodily cues, rapidly and with little or no knowledge of context' (p. 47). The second, acentral imagination, is described as deliberate cognitive engagement. To be engaged in this way, Smith writes, 'the perceiver must first understand the narrative situation, including the interests, traits and states of the character' (p. 42). Through his examination of Hitchcock's, *The Man Who Knew Too Much,* Smith shows how acentral and central imagination can take turns creating engagement, but he seems to imply that affective mimicry can only occur once the spectator is primed towards understanding through acentral imagination. Recognition, alignment and allegiance, the structure of sympathy – all of these create opportunities for affective mimicry to occur.

In 'Beyond Myth and Metaphor', Ryan (2002) raises the question of 'emotions from the inside'(p. 593), and the degree to which interactive, digital media allows for such feelings to occur. She questions whether 'VR-based interactive drama can match both the entertainment and the educational value of literary narrative' (p. 591). Ryan states, that if 'we derive aesthetic pleasure from the tragic fates of literary characters such as Anna Karenina, Hamlet, or Madame Bovary,' it is because we, as an audience, or a reader, enter a mental state of 'compromise between identification with the character and distanced observation' (p. 592). Perhaps this compromise, which can be seen as corresponding with Smith's central and acentral imagination, is harder in virtual reality due to the lack of both distance (the spectator is inside the story world) and affective mimicry (the facial and bodily cues of characters can be harder to read).

Early on in her essay, when stating her position on the nature of narrative, Ryan writes that '[n]arrativity is independent of tellability' (p. 583). This phrase lingers in my mind as I grapple with these different factors that all seem to work so well together when creating complex, psychological or sociological stories for film, but seem to lose some of their clout in virtual reality. The kind of spatialised narrative that I intuit in virtual reality seems to be inherently less tellable, as the conventional mimetic ways of giving access to the characters' internality are less effective. A way to work around this, and to still create layered, psychologically ambiguous stories in virtual reality, is to let the space reflect the internality: to create, borrowing from Henri Lefebvre (1991) , 'representational spaces, embodying complex symbolisms' (p. 33). Inherently, the story becomes more abstract – and less tellable.

In an essay discussing Daniel Ernst's (2019) *Die Fernweh Oper*, writer Nicholas Burman (2020) suggests that, through virtual reality, spectators can become, 'not so much astronauts but *psycho*nauts'. In virtual reality, he writes, 'we are able to become psychonauts of representational spaces (…) to explore the impact of spatial relationships in terms of narrative and subjective experiences'.

Perhaps in virtual reality, in place of the affective mimicry that engages us in film, we can place the spectator in a 'realm that exceed what is experienced in the everyday', by making the representational space a psychological space – internal landscapes, dreamscapes or mindscapes – where you derive intimate cues about the story and its characters through the environment. 'Could it be', Burman writes, 'that the space itself is the primary narrator of our experiences?'

'If we opened people up, we'd find landscapes.' *Agnes Varda (2008)*

V.   *Conceptualisation of Finding Frida*

A moment of insight early on in my research was sparked while looking at an illustration – *The tribute Money,* by Tommaso Masaccio – in an article about the spatialised screenplay. Media scholars Miriam Ross and Alex Munt (2018) offered the renaissance fresco as an example of 'ways in which the spatiality of the image can be advanced' (p. 195).

In the fresco, we see a linear story depicted spatially: in the middle, we see the figure of Jesus, who is requested by a tax collector to pay tribute money; to the left, we see St Peter who, as instructed by Jesus, pulls a coin from the mouth of a fish; and to the right, we see St Peter paying the 'tribute' and closing the deal.

Ross and Munt write: 'The work proved innovative in its representation of both space and time: since it presents a narrative in three independent scenes featuring the same characters' (p. 195) . Ross and Munt go on to suggest that the challenge when writing for virtual reality is 'to think about how narrative can occur across space' (p. 196).

This suggestion opened the process of conceptualisation for me in two ways: the first was by setting off a trail of associations (from the Renaissance fresco to the tapestry of Bayeux) that eventually led me to the works of Norwegian Art Nouveau artist, Frida Hansen. Her work with *billedvev* – a term that directly translated means 'image-weave' – is also a form of spatial storytelling. Her woven tapestries, some of them almost three by four meters, are a mix of environmental storytelling, spatial composition and symbolic depiction. Frida Hansen was my great-great-grandmother, and an historical figure that already held my interest, both personally and professionally.

The second way the article prompted my thinking, was the challenge I saw in moving from temporal to spatial storytelling. It felt exciting to unfold the temporal, linear film form to allow for what hides in 'all the nooks and crannies of the fictional world' (Ryan, 2002, p. 598) to come out. To create 'representational spaces, embodying complex symbolisms' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) seemed like an attractive goal to which to aspire.

I had the idea that I could weave Frida Hansen's life story and her art together, to let elements from her work blend together with psychological motifs, and to 'place' this story

into what I think of as a 'narrative architecture'.[24] The virtual space would reflect her internality as well as outline her story.

In the article 'Of Other Spaces', Foucault (1986) writes that 'the space of our dreams, and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic: there is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark, rough, encumbered space' (p. 23). This is in reference to Bachelard, who, that according to Foucault, is concerned with 'internal space' – the 'sites of our intimate lives'. As Bachelard (2014) writes in *Poetics of space*:

> In the theatre of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant rôles (…) In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for. (pp. 17-18)

In the conceptualisation of *Finding Frida*, I have attempted to do just that – to create alveoli that can hold compressed time in virtual space. Like Bachelard's topoanalyst, I have been asking myself: 'Was the room a large one? Was the garret cluttered up? Was the nook warm? How was it lighted?' (pp. 15-16) The starting point for the exploration of textile artist Frida Hansen's story as a virtual reality experience was this spatial aspect that I recognised in her art. Like her, I was attempting to spatialise my narrative – as Hansen did in many of her tapestries.

In early drafts, I had collected a handful of segments that I felt finely sketched out her biography – or at least, the aspects that I wanted to highlight. I felt the need for dramatic compression, to boil the scenic material down to the bare minimum, as I knew the building of the virtual environments would be expensive. There was also the question of length, and what amount of time one could expect an audience to spend in the virtual world.[25]

Based on an interview that Frida Hansen gave in 1926, five years before her death, I extracted a string of key-moments that I felt would provide the narrative access needed to understand her character arc:

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[24] 'Narrative architecture', a term popularised by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2004), seems to hold the concept of a virtual reality story better than 'narrative structure', that I find applies well to film. Perhaps architecture allows for the three-dimensional aspect to be more naturally incorporated in the conceptualisation.

[25] When I started my research, 10 to 15 minutes was considered a good length for a virtual experience, both for attention span and for comfort. Now, it is not uncustomary to see experiences that are half an hour and even up to 40 and 50 minutes (even if above 50' is rare). The headsets are still heavy and the quality of the image, although constantly improving, can still induce motion sickness or irritation in the eyes.

1. Frida as a child, borrowing her father's set of watercolour and hiding under his work desk to paint. (ca. 1860)

2. Frida as an adolescence being tutored by Norwegian painter Kitty Kielland. (ca. 1870)

3. Frida marrying at 19 with her father's business associate, Willem, 13 years her senior (1874)

4. Frida, as a young mother of three in a beautiful garden, experiencing feelings of emptiness and an unidentified longing despite the happy setting (ca. 1880)

5. Frida's world falling apart as they lose everything, including their home, in one of the most shattering bankruptcies in Norwegian history [26] (1883)

6. Two of Frida's three children dying of illness (ca. 1885)

7. Frida struggling to find meaning and to trust life, until the work she takes on to make ends meet – embroidery and mending of clothes – brings her to weaving and textile art (ca. 1887)

8. Frida deciding, against all odds, to pursue her childhood dream of becoming an artist, and she experiences an explosion of creativity as she finds her medium in 'image-weave' (ca. 1892)

Similar to the design in *Book of Distance*, I imagined these key moments as vignettes that light up in a dark world, like floating islands of memories. I felt that there was the potential to create emotional landscapes corresponding with her art, but I was still looking for a way to contextualise and connect the fragments.

With the idea of 'narrative of place' still lingering in my mind, I thought back to my childhood memories of Frida Hansen's home in Oslo from when I was a child. Frida died in 1931, but her grandchildren, my great-aunts, still lived in her house when I grew up. Every year, they invited the extended family for a Christmas party, and I have a vivid memory of getting lost in the dark hallways at the back of the house while looking for the bathroom. I imagined what it would have been like if I had met Frida then, her spectre, and what she would have said to me.

Somewhere between everything I had read and heard about my great-great-grandmother,

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[26] Family lore has it that Willem lost a fortune equalling three Norwegian state budgets at the time. (Or perhaps it was two? As with fish, in lore the size tends to increase exponentially each time the story is told.) Author and contemporary of Frida Alexander Kielland is said to have fictionalised the events around the crash in his 1884 book *Fortuna*.

I remembered that towards the end of her life, despite all her accomplishments, she was haunted by doubts and regrets. She rarely talked about the dark times after the bankruptcy, or the children she lost, and I believe she struggled with the idea that she had been forgotten as an artist, and perhaps felt that her work had never received the acknowledgement it may have deserved in the first place.[27]

After her death, an obituary in the paper, written by fellow textile artist Sunni Mundal in 1931, contained the following passage (translation mine):

> In every artist's life, where economic circumstances play a decisive role, there will always be a crisis, in which one must ask oneself if one really does well onto one's closest by choosing the artist's way – if one has the right to pay so much regard to oneself.[28] (Mundal, 1931)

I felt that there was a hint of ironic tension lurking in those sentences in the form of an unresolved inner conflict: an undefined feeling of guilt that I could use as a driving element in the narrative – the elderly, forgotten artist who wonders whether it has all been worth it, and through the encounter with a youthful relative from the future, sees her own story in a new light. The ghost is restless (as they are in stories) because she needs help to resolve these feelings of guilt, this regret about everything she could not be, that has become predominate over what she was.

Departing from this premise, even if I did not know at the offset what the resolution would be, I wrote a first draft: It was about a little girl who sneaks out of a Christmas party, gets lost in the dark corridors of an old house and stumbles upon her great-great-grandmother's atelier where, in its shadowy corners, her ghost still lingers. The girl is not afraid but curious about the elderly, introverted woman, and as they get to know each other, Frida tells the little girl snippets from her life. Vignettes of memories, mixed in with visual motifs from Frida's art, play out as dreamlike tableaus in the darkness outside the atelier window. As Frida revisits her life with her great-great-granddaughter, the spectre becomes

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[27] Frida had often found herself operating in the shadow of her contemporary colleague Gerhard Munthe. He worked with traditional, Norwegian motifs that pleased the nationalistic sentiments at the time, while Frida was accused of being 'Japonistic' and foreign in her innovative style. It was ironic that Munthe often needed Frida to execute his design, as he never mastered the skill of weaving. Frida felt she had to work her way around his designs, which were not easily adaptable to the weaving medium.

[28] 'I enhver kunstners liv, hvor de økonomiske forhold spiller avgjørende inn, vil der alltid bli en krise, hvor man må spørge sig selv, om man nu virkelig har rett overfor sine nærmeste å velge kunstnerveien – om man har rett til å ta så meget hensyn til sig selv.' (Mundal, 1931)

more open, and little by little, more at peace.

While writing the first draft, as I approached the ending – and still had not figured out what it was that had made the Frida character more at ease – I was envisioning the little girl leaving Frida's atelier and returning through the hallway. To my surprise, I saw her turn a corner and disappear out of sight for a moment. When she reappeared, she had transformed; she had become a grown woman who made herself known as the creator of the experience (me). The woman told me that her great-great-grandmother's story had become important to her when she had embarked on the bumpy road of an artistic career herself. Ever since she met Frida's ghost as a child, she had wanted to thank her. And now, by making this experience, she has.

It was as if the script itself came up with this layer that had a metafictional aspect to it: the story biting itself in the tail and allowing the telling of the story to *become* the story. There was something there that I was excited to see play out – and to see if an audience would connect to or perhaps see in it an analogical quality in. Like the poem mentioned in the beginning, this last movement informed me what the story was about. It was not so much about Frida Hansen as it was about the imprint she had made as a role model. And, as this aspect dawned on me[29], I felt that I was not in McKee's reputed 'deep shit' because the story was not *about*, what it was about.[30]

Frida Hansen made a life-affirming choice in becoming an artist after that same life had treated her badly. By doing so, she created a new beginning for herself and her family, even if her husband initially opposed it. In addition, she employed young women in her weaving atelier, and gave them an education and the means to financially support themselves without a man – a lesson Frida had learned the hard way.[31] A quote by writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou comes to mind that I feel is relevant here: 'Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women'.

By writing the script, I had moved from the perspective of the little girl I once was, unaware of Frida's struggle and what it comprised, to my perspective now, as I acknowledge what her story has meant to me on a personal level. It made me reflect on what it means to have – or to be – a role model. By inviting an audience in to share this experience, I would

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[29] See Fred Moten's evocative passage on aspect-dawning in reference to Wittgenstein in Moten's *(*2003*) In the Break.*

[30] It is always hard to pin down and explain this 'what it is about'. My resistance towards it comes from my belief that stories, with their complex structures, layers and aspects rise above what can be said, to what perhaps can be only felt, or intuited. Again, I have to approach this with lighting from the side.

[31] Women's rights to work and to be financially independent from a man (father, brother or husband) were quite limited around 1900; for example, a woman could not open her own bank account.

make the story available to others. And perhaps even on a metaphysical level, ignoring the thermodynamic arrow of time, it could retroactively help Frida as well.[32]

With this overarching meta-layer as a scaffolding, I could focus on the spatial storytelling and the 'audience experience'[33], or as articulated by documentarist and virtual reality pioneer Nonny de la Peña: 'I close my eyes and think about my body in the space' (Bradly, 2018).

I wanted to use the house as a starting point, to let the spectator enter the house and discover the traces of Frida's life that are still present. The initial idea was that the house should be a fragmented and dreamlike environment in the beginning, and then gradually become more concrete, elaborate and light as Frida's snippets of life come together in a new way. The state of the house would correspond with the defragmentation of her character.

A 'redirected walking' approach[34] seemed well suited to this concept, even if I was unsure whether it was an affordable and technically viable option. The idea that the spectator (guided by the little girl) could walk through the hallways of the house, observing family portraits, artwork and artifacts that had belonged to Frida, was enticing. The house should resemble a ghost house, with a staircase leading nowhere, walls that you could walk through and doors opening up into the dark night. At the centre of the house, in its heart, would be Frida's atelier, where she lingers: an abstract, not-of-this-earth figure who gradually becomes more personified.

In the initial draft, Frida's tapestries were portals through which the spectator could transition to the memory worlds. The Frida character in the atelier would provide the context, based on the interview from 1926. The spectator could move back and forth between her dark atelier and the colourful memory worlds where the key-moments – turning points in Frida's life – would be translated into a mood, a spatial representation or 'movement'.

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[32] On a critical note, another aspect of which I have become increasingly aware is that even if Frida had little freedom or autonomy as a woman, her initial position in life – her class and privileged upbringing – may have made her more equipped to take the chance she did. Using her craft to become, not only an artist, but also a successful entrepreneur, may in part have been facilitated by her social standing and network. I sometimes wonder what became of the wives of the many workers who lost their jobs and livelihoods because of the bankruptcy. Was there a happy end to those stories too?

[33] I feel hesitant towards the term 'audience experience' as it connotes theme parks and large-scale events, even if it does originate from the performative arts. The term cues a top-down approach in my thinking, while I prefer to close my eyes and 'be there'. It is, however, a term one cannot escape in virtual reality design.

[34] Re-directed walking is a 'trick' in room scale virtual reality that creates the illusion of walking longer distances than physically possible in a limited space. It can give you the feeling of walking forever, but is not easily executed.

To illustrate what I mean by movement and memory world, which may suffer from a lack of Ryan's tellability, I will describe a transitional sequence from the experience; it is the sequence we ended up building for the vertical slice. The sequence was prompted by two kinds of source material from Frida Hansen's life. The first was a descriptive passage (my translation) from the 1926 interview that reflects Frida's feelings about the watershed moment of the bankruptcy (translation mine):

> One morning, after a sleepless night, when the evening before I had heard that even Hillevåg would have to be sold – I went into the winter garden. A lovely, snow-white camellia had just opened. I broke off the bloom, went inside and took down the bible from the bookcase, tore off the petals without mercy for the lovely flower, and put them between the pages of the book. I pressed the bible hard and put it back in place. Now I had buried my whole passion for flowers – yes – and perhaps the whole of my earlier life. (Rogstad, 1926)[35]

And:

> They say: disaster never comes alone. And so it was. In the course of two years, I lost my little boy and my oldest little girl. My husband went off, first to America, then to London. My surviving child and I went to live with Mother. Those days were heavy indeed.[36] (Rogstad, 1926)

The symbolic act of pressing a flower to say goodbye to her old life made a clear and poetic scene that in the first draft – and in our first block-out/prototype – was developed towards an 'emotionally charged'[37] interaction. We would have the spectator stand opposite Frida's ghost as she shows them the bible with the dried flower. If they touched the flower, it

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[35] 'Men så kom krachet. De store, gamle handelshuser skalv i sine grunnvoller og ramlet overende, det ene efter det andre. En morgen efter en søvnløs natt, da jeg om aftenen hadde fått vite at også Hillevåg måtte selges - gikk jeg inn i vinterhaven. En deilig, Snehvit kamelia var nettop utsprunget. Jeg brakk den av, gikk inn og tok bibelen ned fra bokhyllen, plukket bladene uten barmhjertighet av den deilige blomst og la dem inn i boken. Så trykket jeg bibelen fast sammen og stakk den inn på plass. Det var en begravelse. Nu hadde jeg begravet hele min blomsterpasjon, ja kanskje hele mitt forrige liv.' (Rogstad, 1926, p. 30)

[36] 'Et gammelt ord sier: En ulykke kommer ikke alene. Så også her. I løpet av to år mistet jeg min lille gutt og min eldste lille pike. Min mann reiste først til Amerika, siden til London. Jeg og mitt eneste barn bodde hos mor. Det var tunge dager'. (Rogstad, 1926, p. 30)

[37] With 'emotionally charged' interaction, I mean a translation, or subversion of an emotion into an action, in parallel to film, where actions are tokens of the character's motivations, an interaction can mimic, or even evoke, an emotion in the audience that is part of the story; see mobile game *Florence* as an example (Interactive, 2018).

would crumble and disintegrates. The fragmentation would expand to the world around them until it fell apart. The spectator would then be cast into a dark, desolate and windblown landscape.

The intention was to induce a visceral feeling of what it is like to lose your footing in life – similar to the effect in *Vestige (Bradbury, 2018)* where an exploding world represents the the impact of grief, or in *Minimum Mass* (Syed, 2020), where a similar fragmentation effect shows how grief pervades a relationship. While building the vertical slice, we eventually chose to make this element less explicit and more in line with the low-level interactivity in the rest of the scenes. The decision was in part pragmatic – we did not want a disproportionate amount of our resources to be used on one effect – and in part because it did not have the impact we envisioned, at least not in the early prototype stage.

The second element that prompted the sequence was one of Frida Hansen's central works – Semper Vadentes (1905) – which she described as: a 'restless wandering out towards the sea of eternity, that glitters in the distance' (Thue et al., 1973, p. 104).[38] The motif depicts four women walking stridently against the background of a windblown landscape that resembles Jæren[39]. The stone fences typical of the region crisscross the outstretched land and create a dynamic, restless effect. The women carry objects that can be interpreted as symbolising life-values, and it is suggested that they are derived from themes in Hansen's own life. Art historian Anniken Thue writes in her (1973) book on Frida Hansen that the figures placed in the lower plane of the composition carry money and jewellery, representing vanity and money. The figures in the higher plane carry light and flowers, representing love and creativity (p. 104).

The way I imagined these two elements coming together – the quote and the tapestry – was by placing the spectator in the room with Frida's ghost as she speaks to them about the difficult time in her life. In the original draft, the user would then touch the flower and through the fragmentation effect they would be transitioned to the colourless, windblown environment, alluding to the background of the tapestry. This landscape became a representational space of being lost and hopeless – and again an allusion to the 'eternal walking' from the title of Hansen's tapestry, *Semper Vadentes (1905)*.

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[38] Translation mine.
[39] A flat, lowland area on the west coast of Norway.

I had envisioned this last part in two alternative versions; in one version, the spectator would be an observer, seeing the figure of young Frida walking with a lamp through the deserted landscape; in another they would *become* young Frida and walk through the landscape with the lamp themselves in a first-person perspective. As described in the script:

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10      EXT. WINDBLOWN LANDSCAPE. DUSK

        We are in a depressingly grey and weatherbeaten landscape.

        The wind howls around us and the crows caw. At our feet a
        burning storm-lamp casts flickering light into the darkness
        around us.

        We can pick it up and look around. Low stone fences are
        visible, crossing the landscape in the distance.

        Close by, we can see two, small graves under a tree. We can
        walk closer and light up the gravestones to read the names on
        them. They are Frida's children, aged five and two, a girl
        and a boy.

        The wind howls around us and we can barely see anything in
        the duskiness.

        In the far distance we can discern a faint light and as we
        walk towards it, it is as if the thready fabric of the world
        grows denser. It tightens, and we find ourselves in front of
        a tapestry-wall that blends into the landscape/environment.

        It is huge and we can only see parts of it. It is black-and-
        white, and we can recognise a similarly, windblown landscape
        in the background and in front are tall figures of mythically
        clothed women walking stridently against the wind.

        It resembles the tapestry Semper Vadentes. (Always walking,
        never resting...)

        One of the women depicted in the tapestry is holding a lamp,
        like we are.

        We look at ourselves reflected in the tapestry. The woven
        figure in the tapestry comes to life for a moment as she
        turns and looks back at us.

        Around us, the world becomes a bit lighter, and faintly
        colour seems to return to the grey landscape.
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The turning point in the sequence is when Frida's own art comes to her rescue, in the form of the larger-than-life, strong female figures that appear out of nowhere, as if from Frida's own subconscious. With the rediscovery of her creativity – her childhood dream – her vitality and belief in life returns. In the virtual landscape, the colour gradually returns and the mood lifts.

The way I have come to think of these modulations of tone and feeling in the virtual environment is that they affect like music, more so than mimetic storytelling. It is visual,

spatialised music that you cannot hear, but can see and experience and be enfolded by.[40] It is perhaps these 'movements' or shifts in the scenes, however abstract, that I have become most excited about during this exploration of virtual reality. Perhaps it is here that I see a potential for a new form of storytelling in virtual reality, but where the visual language is still in development – hence the need for explanations and contextualisation.

In the vertical slice (the test scene that we [41] have produced) we arrived at a window as the portal, or connecting element, between the past and the present, in place of a tapestry. The memory world became a tableau that we as spectators can observe from the window in Frida's abstracted atelier, but we are unable to enter it. This choice was pragmatically motivated, as it limited the scope of the exterior world to what we could see from the window.

The idea, and the technique, to give the virtual world a 'woven texture – in the form of a shader that adds a layer of thin, shivering threads to the environments – was contributed by the creative technologist and helped strengthen the weave-allusion to Semper Vadentes.

The structure of the experience grew from the two settings, alternating between the dream scenes outside the window, and the 'telling' scenes where Frida's ghost sits in her dark atelier. Spread out in the dark room around her are a selection of personal artefacts, some of which can be animated in a discrete way according to where the spectator looks:[42]

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To the left, a window appears in the dark. We can hear
summerly garden sounds. An exquisite, thin curtain, one of
Frida's 'transparents', hangs on one side of the window.

A small, ornamentally woven bird rests on the thin, vertical
warp threads in the delicate curtain.

Faint sun-rays from the window cast a warm shimmer on the
floor.

As we look at the bird, it begins to move slightly. It sways
back and forth, its tail in the air, then it flaps its wings
and takes off through the window.
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[40] A review in a Norwegian newspaper in 1906 describes Semper Vadentes as 'a symphony, – its floating colours are like music'.

[41] A team of producer, director, developer, creative technologist (and more).

[42] This has not yet been implemented in the vertical slice. We wanted the rocking horse to move, and the camellia to grow if we looked at it, but even if we experimented with it, we run out of time and budget to integrate the effects.

Our intention with the quiet scenes in Frida's abstract atelier was to create an intimate encounter between the spectator and the Frida character. We wanted to give the audience time to tune in to what she has to say, and to pay attention to the handful of objects in the room and how they relate to her story. The use of negative space – toning down the scenes in light and colour, to create focus and shape – is intentional.

Aaron Bradbury, the creator of *Vestige* – one of the virtual reality experiences that we have looked to for inspiration, has stated: 'When I'm asked what's so special about VR, I always talk about intimacy. It is the intimacy between space and story that has the power to transform (Bradbury, 2018).' This feeling of intimacy is something I appreciate in virtual reality and that I have felt both in *Vestige* and in *Die Fernweh Oper (Ernst, 2019)*. The virtual space, where you can imagine yourself alone once you have the headset on, can accommodate a kind of fictional encounter that occasionally feels like something you have experienced, or dreamed.

It was important to us to create a visual style that was both authentic and highly stylised – to make it apparent that this takes place in a world that is not like our own. The authenticity is approached by using Frida's own texts and the original architecture and objects from her house. The stylisation is achieved, on a conceptual level, through creating scenes that are not logical or self-explanatory, but dream-like and secretive.

Smith's (1994) notion of recognition as a condition for sympathy became important both conceptually (How do we introduce Frida's ghost? What is our relation to her as a spectator?) and stylistically (How do we create a three-dimensional, animated character that bears some resemblance to her, but not uncannily so?).

Even if, in our creation of the vertical slice, we have strayed from (and possibly left behind) the frame narrative of the little girl getting lost, I still feel the need for a narrative device: an easing into the heart of the story – the encounter with Frida – through a contrast, or connection with how it is now, and how it was then.

In the latest revisions of the script, we have played with the idea of using three-dimensional scans of the house and the garden as it is today, surrounded by contemporary buildings and infrastructure, as a starting point for the experience. The viability of this is of course dependent on technical and financial possibilities; that is the case with every production of film and visual media production, and virtual reality is no exception. As I wrote earlier (following Bordwell), stylistic choices are narrational choices, as they shape how we receive the story, and we are still weighing our options in this regard.

The conceptualisation of the story about Frida has emerged through ongoing conversation with the texts Frida Hansen left behind. Here, the interview from 1926 was central, alongside letters and texts that have been kept both privately and in public collections – and the synthesis that Anniken Thue made of her life story and her art in her (1973) book: *Frida Hansen: en europeer i norsk tekstilkunst omkring 1900*. In addition, through the collaborations with a director, a producer, a creative technologist/artist and a developer, the script has been infused with the ideas and images of others. The trail I carved by writing the first draft has been treaded by others and widened in sincere and wonderful attempts to build a world from words.

Who came up with the idea of the tapestry that wraps itself around Frida's shoulders? Who thought of the window? And at what point did the gravestones turn into empty swings? At some stage, the director and I had pitched the project publicly so often, that we imagined seeing elements from our treatment and concept art in the projects of others. This is not meant as an allegation, but as an example of how an ongoing creative process feeds, and feeds on the artistic community with which it interacts.

In the 1926 interview, Frida describes her discovery of weaving as her art with the following passage (translation mine):

'I started with an interest I couldn't quite explain (…) It went through me like a fire. Yes, that is what I wanted to do! I wanted to take up the old Norwegian weaving, renew it, and make it accessible both for decoration and as a field of work for many. And so began my life's work that has filled my mind, my artistic urge, and my life. I have enjoyed this work, as I do to this day.'[43]

In the most recent draft of the script, we have let her words be followed by this concluding sequence:

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[43] 'Jeg tok fatt med en interesse jeg ikke riktig kunde forklare mig. (...) Det gikk som en ild gjennom mig. Ja, det vilde jeg nu gjøre! Den gamle, norske vevning vilde jeg opta, fornye og gjøre tilgjengelig såvel til pryd som til arbeidsfelt for mange. – Og så begynte mitt livsverk som har fyllt mitt sinn, min kunsttrang og mitt liv. Jeg har hatt glede ved dette arbeidet, som jeg har det den dag idag' (Rogstad, 1926).

INT/EXT. DARK ATELIER/WINDOW. DAY/NIGHT

Outside the window, we can see Frida's art and motifs come to
life and inhabit the world. Colour, ornaments, flowers and
mythical creatures blend into the landscape.

Around us, the walls become translucent, then they disappear
and we find ourselves outside in the magical world of Frida's
art. We can see birds flying and flowers opening. Motifs flow
in and out of shape.

It is as if we are inside Frida's mind as she is engulfed by
creative, life saving ideas.

Than, slowly, the light and the colours grow dim, and we are
surrounded by darkness again.

EXT. FRIDA'S HOUSE. NIGHT

In the darkness behind us a building gradually appears. It is
the white villa that we saw in the beginning, Frida's house
Bestumhus. It is still made up of thin, shivering threadlike
lines.

High on the night sky, we see stars appear and a vague,
shimmering light. The motive from Frida's loom, that we have
discerned faintly in the background in her atelier, appears:
The Milkyway - ethereal, light-clad women dance over the sky
as they pull along a veil of all the stars of the milky way.

They are luminous and sensual in their movements. They
radiate strength and playfulness; they are goddesses, but
entirely on their own terms.

Then we may notice that Frida is standing next to us. She is
at her most clear and manifest as a character now. Her body
language has changed. She stand more straight up and she
seems lighter. She looks up at the dancing women.

The image of the women in the sky seems to contract and
become a fabric. It falls softly from the sky and wraps
itself around Frida's shoulders as if to keep her warm.

Frida tightens it in her neck and looks content.

'Text comes from texere, after all: to weave'. *Author Jane Alison* (Alison, 2019)

Style test shader in Unity

VI.   Pacing and placing, letters from collaborative synthesis

October 2022

In case you were wondering, I am in Oslo now. As I descend towards Oslo Airport, my eyes scan the October landscape beneath us: the scattered lakes in-between mountaintops, the moss greens, yellows and iron-red-turning-browns of the forest. It makes me want to take a photograph, but I know the top view will only be a blur on my telephone (there it finally is, the top view) – you would have to be here to see it.

As part of the preproduction of the *Finding Frida* vertical slice, we are having a three-day workshop with the producer, the creative technologist (flown in from The Hague), the director and me (who is not quite sure what I am anymore). Together, we are aiming to distil a viable approach out of the many ideas, images and techniques.

We gather in an old factory-building from the early 1900s, where the production company is based. I reflect on how, when Frida moved to Oslo in 1892 to become a textile artist, this building was not old, but modern, and according to the Norwegian Digital Museum, it was used as a fire station. There are many similar industrial buildings in this area: factories powered by the cascading water of the river – the Akerselva. Nowadays, this is an industrial park with creative businesses relying on modern technology: heavy servers, cables and computer screens that light up the century-old, iron-rimmed windowpanes.

The goal for these three days, as the director puts it, is to get into the same brain: the brain of the project, which is where all the images, ideas, emotions, motifs, sub-motifs, dreams and aspirations are stored. For every new project, this is a magical, mystical and somehow transcendent process. We all create mental images of what it is we want to see materialised in the project, but how to get there, and how to make sure we are working towards the same end result?

As the producer says, while proposals, negotiations and disclaimers are flying back and forth over the table, 'We have to make sure we know what we are going to get in the end'. I think a great deal about these words, and although I understand where they come from – producers carry the final responsibility for the delivery – I still know that any real knowledge of this will be an illusion. It can even be a death trap for a project, as everyone becomes paralysed by expectations. There is never enough time, money or energy to ensure full delivery on all requirements. And, as I said to the creative technologist during heated rounds

of negotiations about who is responsible for what: 'There are no guaranties in a creative project; it is always a leap of faith'.

The place where the three of us (the creative leads, as I would like to think of us) meet is that we all hope to create something beyond our own expectations. There is something out there – or in there, in this common brain – that needs to be created before it can be nailed down. We cannot know what to expect, because if we did, there would be no incentive to make it. I believe that, as a team, we are all a bit like that. We see it only faintly, and some parts more clearly than others, but the process of making, of materialising and, in the case of virtual reality, of coding is transformative. We must dare ourselves to have the faith, even the audacity, that it will all come together in the process.

It can be difficult to trust each other like that. We are creative individuals who have never before worked together. Two of us have never made anything in virtual reality, and the creative technologist has not worked with narrative the way we do. All we have right now is the sum of ideas that are, if not captured, at least approximated – in the script, the concept art, the storyboard sketches and all the reference material. It is vulnerable to trust each other; we all need to make those leaps of faith. We are like alchemists setting out to make gold. I can say this now from a place of humility because we have not yet come far enough yet to know whether we can make it shine. We each have experienced the excitement that arises when you go beyond your own expectations with a project, and that comes close to gold. Now we are sitting here opposite each other, in the old fire station close to the river, trying to muster the trust that we know is needed.

We move to a small studio next to the meeting room that the producer has dedicated to virtual reality. Surrounded by a 180-degrees, curved screen, a powerful PC, sensors, and HTC Vive and Oculus headsets, the three of us stand, bent over the sheets of paper that the director has spread out on the floor: printouts from the script, spheres with cut-out photographs, concept art, colours, impressions. The papers form a horseshoe: This is the experience we want to make; this is the story arc. I point and I explain; I draw lines in the air from one sheet of paper to another. I tuck one sheet behind another, combining two scenes in one – saving 75,000 NOK with a flick of my hand.

The atmosphere in the room is strained. Above the head of the producer, there is a thought bubble full of struggling dollars signs. Above the head of the creative technologist, only question marks. I am desperately awaiting the appearance of a light bulb as I speak. Around the slight, but strong figure of the director, light and colour flickers; if only she could wave her wand, it would all come together. She is a photographer and a documentary maker;

she is used to doing – to outlining compositions and sequences hands-on, with an uninterrupted connection from brain to fingers. One can imagine some frustration arising from the fact that we must now rely on someone else – someone with the knowhow to manifest our ideas in virtual reality.

As I continue my attempt to explain the inexplicable, I finally see if not a light bulb, at least a faint candle lighting up in the thought bubble of the creative technologist. He even smiles and points to one of the spheres towards the end of the paper block-out: 'This is where most of the budget will go', he grins enthusiastically. And we laugh a kind of relieved, hopeful laugh.

A day later, none of us are laughing anymore. There does not seem to be enough money to go around, and as a result, no one feels in a good position to chase the vision we all glimpsed for a moment, huddled over the story beats on the floor, peering into our collective brain. What I realise is that we have skipped at least one round of development funding. We have skipped the part where the director, producer and writer get to be paid to think, to conceptualise, to travel and pitch – to pave the way for the project in the minds of sponsors, funders and gatekeepers. This is hard work. It takes time and energy that never seems to pay off: or at least, sometimes the time gap between investment and payoff is so wide that it is hard to connect the two. And sometimes, you will have had to go and do other things in the meantime, to pay the bills.

In an emerging format like virtual reality, we cannot rely on abstract thinking in the same way that we do in film. Unlike virtual reality, film language is so ingrained in all of us that it is easier to visualise a scene and its potential; we can imagine which actor could play the lead and what the setting could be, prompted by only a few keywords. In virtual reality, where the story relies heavily on digital worldbuilding, this imagining is more diffuse. It helps if visualisation, blocking out and game testing happen in parallel to the concept development.

When film was an emerging medium, pioneering director Charlie Chaplin helped develop film language by adopting a method of trial and error, daring to do things that were unpredictable and not always hitting the mark the first time. He shot and reshot scenes, editing as he went along, feeling his way through the process, and experimenting with what only he could see with his inner eye. By doing so, he pushed limits and advanced film as an independent artform, but of course it came with a price tag unthinkable today (Ondaatje & Murch, 2002).

In the case of virtual reality, to similarly push the limits and advance the visual language,

one would have to pay the price of having developers/artists, directors, scriptwriters and producers all involved in the development phase. The way funding is organised does not take this into account. It is still based on the filmmaking process, of development by a small team, and an expansion of that team in the production phase when higher budgets are available.

To work around this issue, we have built scenes that will be part of the final experience, even if the project is still in development. It is the only way to explore the stylistic and narrative aspects of the project while ensuring everyone involved is compensated, even if the margins are tight. I worry, for example, that the director's and producer's investment to kickstart the project is undervalued.

An added difficulty with virtual reality is finding the artists/creative technologists who can do the job in the first place. Taking on a role somewhat comparable to that of a cinematographer in film, an artist working in a game engine like Unity or Unreal can create the aesthetics needed to carry the story – stylistic choices being (as I have oft stressed) narrational choices.

Virtual reality artists with a sense of story, aesthetics, technical knowhow and the ability to execute are hard to come by. And they know they are rare, either selling their services at a high price to commercial studios, or living and starving by their own artistic projects –equally out of reach. With our creative technologist, we feel we have found someone who can bridge all the gaps and encompass the whole, but can we pay him enough, motivate him enough? I do not know. And it keeps me awake at night.

Money feels like an elephant in the room that always takes up too much space. We drag this elephant along, wherever we go. As Oscar Wilde pointed out: 'When bankers get together for dinner they discuss art, when artists get together for dinner they discuss money'. (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 1 part 2)

On the third and final day of the workshop, we visit Frida's house: just the three of us – the creative technologist, director and me. It feels like a school outing. The stark contrasts between the island of green on which the house is situated, and the urbanisation of the surrounding area is striking when you see it with a stranger's eyes. Today, I see it through the creative technologist's eyes, who is here for the first time and has only seen photographs and selected angles of the house and garden without the background. Taking in the view together makes me realise how much has changed just in my lifetime. It makes me melancholic, realising that one can never go back to how things were. I imagine Frida would turn in her

grave if she could revisit the view from her garden today.

I remember how, when we were little, my best friend and I used to visit a deserted house further up the road: a fairy-tale kind of deserted house with an overgrown garden and partly collapsed roof and floors. We could look straight into the living room through a crumbled facade, and for some reason the floor was littered with old letters. My friend and I used to sit in the middle of the mess and read the handwritten letters from another time. If only I could come across something like that now, a treasure of personal history.

I think about what it looked like here, in 1904, when Frida Hansen climbed this hill overlooking a narrow branch of the Oslo fjord, with tall pines all around a rocky, inhospitable plot of land where she envisioned a garden. Frida would build one of the first houses in this area – then considered the countryside, half an hour by train to the city centre, on rails that had been laid only 30 years earlier. I think the hill reminded her of the property they had lost in Stavanger. From the house at Hillevåg, she could also look out on the fjord.

It is telling that Frida hired the first practising, female architect in Norway to design the house. Together, Frida and architect Lilla Hansen (no relation) used considerable energy to uphold their design under pressure from contractors and builders – men who thought they knew better. The letters the two Hansens exchanged reflect this with humorous grit. I imagine that they needed each other's support to see the process through, and to create the house that they had seen with their inner eye; a house that even now, when you enter it more than a hundred years later, is a testament to their personalities.

I can recall receiving a comment on an early draft of the script, from a reader who wondered why there would be a fireplace in the hallway, so close to the entrance? Was that not a peculiar place to build a fireplace? Perhaps, but I had never thought about it. Reflecting back on my earliest memories of the house, I remember coming in from the cold during Christmas and being greeted by the blazing fireplace. My father's cousin would be sitting next to it, serving mulled wine *(gløgg)* from saucepans that were kept warm on the fireplace tiles.

When the creative technologist entered the house for the first time, he commented on the fireplace, as well. As we discussed it, I began to think that it was an intentional choice – and one that told a story. The hallway, with the fireplace and a broad staircase, is a prominent feature in the architecture, both in size and design. It is very inviting, in the way it accommodates the sunlight, shining all the way through from the terrace in front.

I can imagine Frida sitting here, with the French doors open, bathing in the light. And I can imagine that she wanted people who came to visit to be welcomed into a warm hallway

with a sparkling fireplace. The drawback, as I remember from our Christmas gatherings, was that the living room was ice cold. My great-aunt used to say that when she felt warm in the front, her back would be freezing, and vice versa.

During our visit, the director, creative technologist and I came to the conclusion that the house was designed according to aesthetic rather than practical principles. It reflects the preferences of its inhabitants – perhaps Frida's most of all. Many of the trees, flowering plants and bushes in the garden were planted by her. At the edge of the garden, there are the remains of a half-built, stone fence. The story goes that Frida had an argument with a hired landscaper when, halfway through the construction, he wanted to cut down a beautiful lilac tree to fit his plan. When Frida refused, the landscaper resigned and the whole project was put on hold. The foundations of the wall – and the lilac tree – still stand as a monument to Frida's strong will.

We can laugh about this and think of her as 'difficult', but perhaps it was the only way for her to have any agency? A (2020) book by journalist Helen Lewis called *Difficult Women* – about the history of feminism – has the tagline, 'Well-behaved women don't make history: difficult women do'. So, did Frida Hansen secure her place in art history by being difficult? Was the quality of her art inconsequential? If she had prioritised being well behaved above her art and the lilac tree, would she have been able to achieve as much as she did? Perhaps being perceived as difficult is not unique to women, but it may only be a problem for women, as it is less socially acceptable for them to be so.

One of my favourite anecdotes about Frida concerns the time her husband interfered in a dispute with Husfliden by writing letters to her defence without her knowing. Frida is said to have been furious, as she did not need a man to speak up for her – she could do that herself.

So why am I telling you all this? Perhaps it is the lighting from the side that makes my mind drift as I write. All these memories become part of an interconnecting warp and weft of events, personalities, choices and influences. Our character, our way of interacting with the world – shaped and sculpted by the drifting sand and the direction of the winds and currents that we pass through – like trees grow crooked if they are only exposed to northern wind, or straight if they stand sheltered. Characters, in films, books or virtual reality experiences are a sublimation of all these influences. They reflect patterns in time, society and culture, showing us our level of awareness, or our blind spots. All of this, the backdrop or the back-story, come together when synthesising a story, regardless of the medium.

Inside Frida's house, we sip coffee and eat cakes that the director has brought, and we warm ourselves in the sitting room where my father's cousin – Uncle Dag, who now lives here – has a fire going in the wood stove. The creative technologist sits on the sofa beneath a wall with family portraits; the background of deep green, ornamented wallpaper suits him. Uncle Dag tells him about Frida's husband and the infamous bankruptcy. In his usual tongue-in-cheek manner, Dag repeats the family lore about poor Willem losing the equivalent of … was it four times the Norwegian state budget?

Put like that, the story takes on an almost mythological property. It is easy to forget the tragedy of it all, and to feel a strange kind of admiration for someone who had the guts to fail so gloriously. 'Too big to fail' was not a concept in those days – although one might think that those days paved the way for it, as similar financial crashes devastated communities all over the world in the 1870s and 1880s.

The three of us, still in the warm sitting room with Uncle Dag, soak up the atmosphere in the house that Frida built. We look out through the tall windows and see a squirrel leap effortlessly from tree to tree and onto the terrace. Dag admits that he feeds it every day. As I gaze out of the same windows that once framed Frida's view, I think that the aesthetics and allure of this house is not about materialism; it is about expression. The house expresses – in its curves, its angles, the way the light falls and the airiness of its rooms – who Frida was when she was free to make her own decisions. I get the sense that her traces are everywhere, that how she moved through the day has been carved into the architecture and interior design.

In *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, author Jane Alison (2019) describes how an Irish designer, Eileen Gray, challenged Corbusier's claim that a house was 'a machine to live in'. According to Gray, 'a house is a person's shell, a skin, and should respond to how she lives'. In 1926, she designed her own house on the south coast of France, based on meticulous studies of how she and her housekeeper moved during the day; a ship-like villa that would 'drive the famed architect Le Corbusier wild' (p. 1).

At the end of the workshop, after having gone through the reference material and upended all the 'nooks and crannies' of Frida's house, we settle on an interactive design and a scene for our vertical slice. We agree that the 'core mechanic' will be simple – looking and walking. The rationale behind this is that we aim to create an experience that transports the spectator to an encounter and a mood. It requires a downplaying of other factors that might

disturb the sense of presence. Having to manipulate virtual objects and operate hand-controllers in such a setting might be 'immersive-breaking'.[44]

The creative technologist argues that if we can make the Frida character look at the spectator and establish contact with them as she tells her story, that would be inherently interactive. It would allow us to concentrate on the pacing and placing: the placing of objects and motifs throughout the two spaces – the atelier inside and the dream world outside – and the pacing, or timing, of the reveal of those elements.

We agree that we will build the 'dark scene' following Frida's monologue about the pressed camellia. The creative technologist makes a pencil sketch of four larger-than-life, striding, female figures and we feel that we are, at least in part, in the same brain. Like four Venn-diagrams overlapping slightly – the director and I cannot wait to see what treasures are hidden in the part of the circle to which we have no access.

Doodle-sketch, by Daniel Ernst

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[44] In an earlier, low-fi prototype, we had already experimented with more explicit forms of interactivity – lighting a candle, reading a letter, starting a gramophone – but it did not feel satisfying. It was not the kind of experience we wanted to create.

'You can always go farther but not always step by step.' *Jacques Roubaud (Naimon, 2021)*

October 2022 – II

Back home in Amsterdam after the workshop, I write up my notes and ideas from the Oslo visit. Meanwhile, my eyes dart regularly to the Slack icon in my toolbar. I know that our producer is negotiating the contract with the creative technologist – an agreement on which our next steps depend. I am trying to let go of the anticipation, and the worry, and let things settle the way they are supposed to.

In collaborative art forms, much mental energy is spent on weighing when to say something and when to keep still, when to interfere and when to hold back. I think about the word tact, which echoes both tactful and tactics. 'Trying to find ways, in recognition of the common ground (…) of attending to what is delicate and particular,' is one way Kate Briggs (Briggs, 2017) discusses Barthes' 'principle of tact' in the context of literary translation (pp. 112-113)[45]. In our inter-disciplinary, creative collaboration, there is also much translation occurring, of words to images, from images to spaces, from code to effect.

As a writer, I have learned the value of listening.[46] Allowing others to finish their train of thought can bring many unexpected gifts during research and brainstorming: memories, observations, thoughts and images that float freely once implicit permission is given to think out loud, settling into a sweet spot between tension and ease, directed and undirected attention. Collaborators often want me to tell them what the story is about, but my hope is always that they will tell me. I want them to tell me what they see, and how – what they grasp and what they did not catch on to. Their reading experience informs me of my blind spots and adds new layers and perspectives. An unintentional misreading or mix-up can turn into a gem.

This is why, during the workshop, I was eager to let the creative technologist finish his train of thought, to hear him out – in the same way that I did when the director first became involved. No one has told me more about my story than she has. The creative technologist is now new to the project, and I want to know what he sees before his newness wears off. At some point, we all lose this freshness, and a form of perceptual blindness comes in its place.

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[45] 'Tact: the art of not treating all things in the same way. 'A fine responsiveness to the concrete,' as philosopher Martha Nussbaum defines it in her readings of Henry James; that is, 'the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation.' (Briggs, 2017, pp. 37 -38)

[46] At least in a professional setting – I doubt that my family members will recognise this.

It resembles the 'inattentional blindness' that occurs when your attention and focus is so narrowed that you cannot see what is in plain sight[47].

I worry that, during the workshop, in my eagerness to hear the creative technologist out, I might have stepped on the director's toes, literally and figuratively, for which I apologise. Selfishly, perhaps, I am often more interested in hearing the questions people ask than I am in answering them. The questions help me understand what is not understood, and my best answer will likely be another draft. Coming up with solutions on the spot may result in a detour – a too quick attempt to fix something that may not be broken, but only muddy. If I get to the core of it, I can address the muddiness in the next draft.

What interests me are the brushstrokes, the images and the motifs that linger; the story-events that, separately, may be meaningless, but combined in a sequence – or in space – they can transcend banality. Was it Goethe who said that to dissect something you must first kill it? So, we have to be careful not to go into dissection mode, breaking down the parts, but instead glancing indirectly, with light from the side. The understanding must occur on a different level. By sharing images, atmospheres and beats, we can go somewhere where only the material can take us. We can discover the black swans that we never knew existed.

The director has this ability to go beyond and to explore more than what might seem necessary at first. In a way, it is the same thing as hearing someone out. A while ago, during a previous visit to Frida's house, together with the photogrammetrist who was going to make three-dimensional scans for us, we had set an agenda and made a list of things we needed to do. At the end of the day, we had ticked them all off our list – to satisfaction I thought – but clearly, the director was not ready to leave. I understood that she had to 'hear the house out'; it had more to say.

A little later, we found ourselves inside a small, tucked-away room that Uncle Dag used as storage for old skis, a suitcase, bags and boxes. I felt a little uneasy, as if we were intruding on his private space, but he assured us that it was fine. What the director had realised, which I had not, was that we were standing in the room where Frida used to dye her yarn. It was a room that I slowly recognised from an old, black-and-white photograph in Anniken Thue's (1973) book. In the photo, a young woman – presumably an employee of Frida's weaving atelier – stands next to a huge copper pan, stirring in it with a long wooden

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[47] The book *The Invisible Gorilla* describes the psychological experiment wherein subjects failed to notice a man in a gorilla suit parading through a game of volleyball (Chabris & Simons, 2011).

stick, while heaps of yarn are on the floor, on a table and hanging from the ceiling to dry (p. 57).[48]

The room still contained the shelves and racks where Frida stored the pots with the dried plants, herbs and moss from which she extracted natural colour pigments. Uncle Dag pointed to a wall where the wood stove used to stand, and the covered-up exit-hole for the pipe above. Another wall showed the shadow of a staircase that used to connect the dye room with the upstairs rooms, half a floor higher.[49]

The director began taking photographs of the room, and it ended up being the first environment we commissioned the creative technologist to build – as a style test in the run-up to the vertical slice. Into this room, which is so much smaller than it appears in the old photograph, Frida is said to have descended from her upstairs living quarters every day. I have lived with this imagined world for so long that it feels as if I have a real memory of her walking down those stairs, although I have never really seen, either her or the staircase – only the traces that are visible on the crumbled, stucco wall.

A few days later, I received a message from the director saying that she had found the stairs. They were in the garage – yes, in the garage, which used to be a stable. The director found them there, when she was visiting on her own: listening to the house, enticing it to give up its secrets – excavating staircases and an old, wooden stirring device, still marked with Frida's dye.

And then, as I write this, notifications appear in Slack and the messages tell me that the contract with the creative technologist has been signed, and finally, we can take another step into the *Finding Frida* virtual reality universe. Hurray!

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[49] Yes, half a floor, and a short, wooden staircase. I have still not been able to completely fathom the architecture of this house, with its half-floors, part-floors, back staircases and narrow corridors.

> The opening line of a poem (…) is like finding a fruit on the ground, a piece of fallen fruit you have never seen before, and the poet's task is to create the tree from which such a fruit would fall. *Mary Ruefle* (Ruefle, 2012)

November 2022

As I described earlier, the conversations that we had as a team during our three-day workshop led to a slightly different story design than the versions of the script with which we had been working. We are now leaning towards a simpler approach, by letting the Frida character talk directly to the audience. Frida will be an interactive character,[50] who can give us the illusion that we are being spoken to.

The snippets of conversation that we want to use are based on the interview Frida gave in 1926. The interview sections will be intertwined with more elaborate, vignette-like scenes. In the vignettes, core events from her life will blend with dreamlike sequences to which the director and I refer to as internal landscapes. Through condensing events, psychology and art into these key-moments – contextualised by Frida's own words as she talks to us – we hope to distil a kind of essence: an essence that will resemble Frida's own method of integrating life events into the compositions of her tapestries. With this concept in place, it feels as if we know what the fallen fruit should look like; and now we can set about creating the tree that can bear it. [51]

As I ponder what the Frida character might sound like when talking directly to the audience, I think back on a conversation I had with a film school student. It was during a writing course that I was tutoring at the master's level in Oslo, and the student had asked me about my research project. When I told her I was making a virtual reality experience revolving around my great-great-grandmother's life and art, she looked baffled for a moment, then said pensively that she wondered what kind of novel technology *her* great-great-grandchildren might use, should they ever consider her as a subject for a story. It was bound

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[50] 'Interactive character' in the sense that she responds to the spectator's position and gaze, as opposed to, for example, a video captured character that is played as a film layer in the virtual environment

[51] 'Paul Valéry also described his perception of first lines so vividly, and to my mind so accurately, that I have never forgotten it: the opening line of a poem, he said, is like finding a fruit on the ground, a piece of fallen fruit you have never seen before, and the poet's task is to create the tree from which such a fruit would fall.' (Ruefle, 2012, pp. 1-2).

to be something that she had no way of imagining, just like Frida could never have foreseen a medium like virtual reality. Do I dare to ask myself what Frida might have thought about all this; of being embodied and represented in a synthetic, computer-generated environment, using motion capture and three-dimensional character modelling?

Frida was born in 1850, around the same time as the first industrial textile mills were built in Norway. Growing up during a transformative time of increasing industrialisation and modernisation, she must have been very aware of how rapidly worlds can change. Modernisation had impacted her life in fundamental ways; it is said that her father's reluctance to give up investing in sailing ships for his merchant fleet was a factor in their bankruptcy. As an expert and craftsman in shipbuilding, he held on to the belief that sailing ships would always be in demand and failed to renew his fleet with steamships.

I wonder if Frida would have been more farsighted, had she been allowed any involvement in the business.

In a way, Frida's resolve to revive the old, traditional, Norwegian weaving techniques was also a reaction to modernity. The lesser quality of factory-woven fabric, coloured with synthetic dye which resulted in colours that Frida described as 'garish',[52] might have been a motivating factor. She was protective of her art, patenting her unique transparency-technique[53], and reclaiming the right to sell her manually manufactured, natural textile dye in a dispute with 'Husfliden'.

Although she did revive the traditional way of weaving, she also innovated it and created her own, modern expression. As noted earlier, her art is known as Art Nouveau, new art, but when she died in 1931 it was already out of fashion. In the 20th century, time began moving at a faster pace, with wave after wave of renewal, and artists tumbling over their own tools to reinvent themselves before others did – not unlike the speed with which techniques and possibilities evolve in virtual reality today.

Would Frida have been able to fathom what digital media is and to see that her way of weaving figures, with many small squares that create the illusion of smoothness, is not unlike digitally generated images? In virtual reality, if you look close enough, everything is squared, binary and hard; light and colour generated by code that is either this or that, but nothing in-between. I still remember the early prototype development when the developer yelled in

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[52] In Norwegian: *grelle*
[53] 'In 1897, Frida Hansen patented her transparent technique where she alternated between dense and translucent parts in the weave. (…) The airy and elegant textiles became very popular and could be used as room dividers and curtains.'(Simonnæs)

frustration that there were 'too many squares' – too many polygons to process.

As a child, I was fascinated by the little squares in Frida's weaves, by how the hair of the mermaids that light the moon was prickly and angular if you looked closely, but appeared soft and wavy at a distance.[54] How, then, to recreate the softness, the tactility, the richness of colour and ornamentation that characterise Frida's tapestries with polygons?

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[54] *Havfruer som tænder Månen (F. Hansen, 1895)*

'What counts, in making art, is the actual fit between the contents of your head and the qualities of your materials'. (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 41)

December 2022

The first attempt at a block out[55] in virtual reality comes as a surprise, as it is an experiment. Inspired by our visit to Frida's house, and the shadowy hallways where I cryptically hinted at 'having once seen a ghost', the creative technologist has made a version with the approach with which we played with early on – redirected walking. Straying from the concept we agreed upon (at least in form, if not in essence), his block out has the Frida character lead the spectator through the narrow corridors of the house, discovering snippets of her life story on the way. Frida talks to us as she walks, and we pass through rooms that are dedicated to chapters in her life. In one room, an old, colourised film from Paris in 1900 is projected in a picture frame. In another, two small cradles symbolise her lost children, and the huge female figures from Semper Vadentes are shadows looming over them in the background.

It is an intriguing approach, one that I immediately fall a little bit in love with, even if the design is still very crude, with no texture, lighting or real shape. I like walking through the seemingly endless hallways, and I like the almost claustrophobic tightness of the world that has an uncanny resemblance to my childhood memory of getting lost.

The idea behind this concept, a slightly different 'spin' to the original, is that the house becomes a metaphor for her mind – like a memory palace. There is the dynamic of walking, but there is also the possibility for quiet contemplation and (visual) tactility. In my imagination, I start adding scenes to the 'build'.[56] Perhaps we can see Frida's thin curtain in front of a window, filtering the moonlight, and perhaps the bird from the motif can come to life for a moment, leading us onwards. I envision how the eternally walking Frida character can take us through light and darkness, how the corridors dissolve behind us as we walk, and how she is finally set free in the end, as we leave the house and enter the garden with her, where we see the motif of the dancing women of *The Milky Way (F. Hansen, 1898)* in the night sky. The dynamic quality reflects the eternally walking women in Semper Vadentes and

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[55] Blocking out – or grey boxing – is a very basic mapping of three-dimensional environments using simple, geometric shapes without any texture, colour or finesse. It functions as a three-dimensional sketch that you navigate via the headset, getting an impression of the spatial design, the interactivity and proportions.
[56] Short for virtual environments

the Latin verse at the hem: *Semper vadentes, semper agentes …*

But will it work to tell the story this way? Will the narration, the 'moment-to-moment flow of information' – that which gives us access to the story as it unfolds and that Bordwell likens to 'a building, which we can't grasp all at once' (p. 12) – align with this pace and positioning of the spectator in relation to the Frida character?

After having examined the block out several times via my headset, I struggle to synthesise the narrative elements and the spatial lay out. I begin to doubt everything about this story and its adaptability to virtual reality.

In an interview I come across with American poet Rosmarie Waldrop, I read the line: 'you've said you're not interested in poetry as the exposition of a subject, but need to begin in the stream, in uncertainty' (Palmer & Waldrop, 2016, p. 103). I agree – I am also not interested in exposition of a subject; I am interested in the stream that takes on a life of its own and waters a tree that bears a specific kind of fruit. During these moments of doubt, it feels as if I am too preoccupied with the exposition of Frida Hansen as a subject. I have too much I want to tell, too much exposé and contextualisation for the experience. It is hard to integrate this while letting the narrative flow organically in virtual reality. The words of Murray Smith linger as I attempt to formulate why the directed walking approach does not work for me: 'In order to respond emotionally (…) the perceiver must first understand the narrative situation including interests, traits, and states of the character' (Smith, 1994, p. 42).

It is difficult, in other words, to make a connection with a character without understanding and recognition. And according to Smith, recognition relies on 'a legible and consistent representation of the human face and body' (p. 36), while our virtual representation of the Frida character (as a ghost) will have a degree of uncanniness. A virtual character will not be a source of 'facial and bodily cues' as automatically as a photorealistic film character. This again can interfere with the mechanism of 'affective mimicry', on which one might otherwise rely on to engage the spectator, as it requires less knowledge of context.

As much as I love the idea of the eternal, redirected walking, it feels wrong to launch the spectator into this labyrinth of dark corridors, and it feels wrong to characterise Frida in this way – as an unhospitable housekeeper who walks and talks and never sits down to rest and think. Again, I think about Smith's structure of sympathy and how important some form of recognition is, as an anchor point for the unassuming visitor entering the world: They would have to struggle both to 'catch up' with Frida's pace and to 'catch on' to what she is saying.

Every case of 'killing your darlings' is painful, and in this case especially so, given the

work and inventiveness that have been put into building something different, something innovative and 'cool'. I feel that, if we had enough time and resources to rework and try out this new approach, to experiment and reiterate, we could perhaps make it work. But I would have had to start from scratch, with a new script, and a new syuzhet – and we only have funding for one more month to build the vertical slice.

Having worked with this material for so long, it begins to feel like a piece of old fabric on which I have been trying things out, and now I have cut it, sown it together, folded and reshaped it so many times that it has pinholes and stiches all over, and a backside full of loose ends.

Sometimes, I ask myself if virtual reality is a writer's medium at all, or if it is more of a sculpting-medium; a territory for artists to work with the material of space, abstracted, distilled, free from story and narrative. Like 'the painter who stands before an empty canvas must think in terms of paint' (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 41)[57] I must get used to thinking in terms of space, movement and presence, in place of sequence and pace.

I think about the very first weave that Frida ever made. Coming home from a trip to an isolated valley on the Norwegian west coast – after having learned the art of traditional weaving by a local craftswoman – Frida constructed her own vertical loom.[58] She chose a traditional, figurative motif for her first weave,[59] but she was unhappy with the result. Not attaining the fineness in the weaved motifs as she had envisioned them, she had to resort to embroidery for the final touch, which she regarded as cheating. The reverse side was not even and smooth like the traditional weaves she so admired, and she felt as if she had failed. And yet, she had to make this first piece before she could make another, and another, and another. She had to create again and again to find her form, her skill, and her mode of expression. Only thinking and analysing would never have gotten her there; she had to close her eyes and feel her way, with her hands touching the wool. She had to get into 'the stream, in uncertainty' (Palmer & Waldrop, 2016, p. 103).

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[57] Here, the authors are referencing artist Ben Shahn
[58] Oppstadveven
[59] (F. Hansen, 1889/90; Thue et al., 1973, p. 22)

'point of departure is a certainty

arrival a myth' *Nocturne* (Coleman, 2021)

January, 2023

Having overcome a few hurdles and hitches, we appear to be moving forward again. Somehow, the taking of detours seems to be unavoidable in the creative process. One can lament over time lost and money spent, but even detours can provide pieces of the puzzle that may turn out to be indispensable.

We are back to the initial plan for the vertical slice and the creative technologist has blocked out a model of a new interactive environment sketch. This time, it is more in line with the scripted scene that was our point of departure. It is the transition from a dark, empty space, wherein the Frida character sits and talks to us, to the exterior, dream-like environment that gives the spectator access to her darkest moments.

The design of the dreamscape requires an artist, and we feel that it is well assigned to the creative technologist. We are all excited about his sketch of the 'dark scene', as we refer to it: It is a scene where the spectator can pause and reflect – to think, feel and dream away. The exterior dream space does not impose itself on the audience; it is simply there, and the creative technologist has designed it as seen through a window in the dark room where Frida is sitting – somewhat like a life-sized, dynamic diorama.

During our meeting concerning the block out, we discuss the design of the character. The Frida character is an essential, interactive element in the experience and the idea is that it should feel like an encounter. Our uncertainty concerns how to represent this character. Is she a ghost, a restless soul? Do we see her facial features, and should she react to us, by following us with her gaze? Or should she be withdrawn into herself, more like a puppet, acting in a loop?

Throughout the meeting, we go back and forth between two approaches: a dynamic, interactive, three-dimensional, animated character, or a video of an in-depth, captured actor who is (to put it simply) projected into the virtual environment. This latter would give the director more control and a better idea of what the character would look like (tests have been done) than the animated version. The drawback is that once captured, the character cannot be altered. Also, it is neither interactive nor dynamic, a notion that has conceptual consequences, as it might hinder a connection with the spectator. In addition, there is the chance 'that it will

look terrible', as one of the developers says with a shrug: The workflow of mixing 'flat' video with three dimensional, virtual spaces is less than straight forward and optimised.

Even before the director and I have quite gotten our heads around it, the decision has been made to proceed with the three-dimensionally, modelled, interactive character. To simplify the animation process, we will need to do a full-body motion-capture with an actor aged 75 or above, at the latest next week. The team of developers will then do their best to make this 3D character look 'ghost-like' and 'point cloudy', resembling the example from the video capture test. But of course, no promises can be made. Also, no examples or visual references can be provided. The director and I feel like we are stumbling our way in the dark at this point.

It is strenuous, this part, feeling blindfolded. It does not bring out my most friendly side in the conversation, and I apologise afterwards for sounding sharp and irritable. The process of having to ask what things mean, and of having issues either over- or underexplained is wearing me thin. We acutely lack a common language: a common vocabulary that translates the technical procedures and their limitations regarding the stylistic implications – that are, and I repeat myself, narrational choices. At the same time, I realise that everyone is trying their best and perhaps no one yet knows the answer. We are all more or less stumbling in the dark, but we express it through different terminology and attitude.

As few days later, I read a book chapter discussing 'The Interactive Audience in Virtual Reality'. It jumps out at me that the word 'stumble'[60] seems to be a frequently recurring word in this context – so at least I am not alone in my stumbling.

An interesting discussion arises when the director suggests that, in the case of the 'interview situation' – when the Frida character talks directly to the spectator – we could decouple the sound from the image. Rather than seeing Frida talk (via lip-sync), we could see her sit and think, but *hear* her voice as if she is talking to us. It is a well-tested documentary approach, one that can create an intimate feeling of getting access to a character/subject's inner world. It is not a voiceover in the traditional sense; it is more as if a conversation has already taken place, and we sit together afterwards, while it echoes. There is some doubt

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[60] Relevant here are two quotes from Katy Newton and Karin Soukup, in Batty and Waldeback's (2019) *Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches*: 'VR creators, including ourselves, stumble in the dark, looking for things that work. Many things do not, but a great deal of our creative and technical advances are driven by serendipitous discoveries that help define the artistic grammar with which we are trying to speak'; and 'As we stumble our way into this new, mysterious medium, we ask ourselves, "How do we tell a story for the audience when the audience is present within it? "' (p. 152).

about how this will work in virtual reality, when we are next to the character in the room, but there is also curiosity. And at the very least, it solves the issue of lip-syncing.

I find this approach interesting primarily in a non-pragmatic way. It reminds me of the examples that I have mentioned earlier, of virtual reality work that uses the sound of a tape recorder or a telephone to ground the voiceover inside the story world. The director and I are pondering the idea of making Frida's voice sound as if it is played from an old gramophone, as if an actual interview has been retrieved from the archives.

This brings my thoughts to film theorist and composer Michel Chion's (2012) discussion of the *acousmêtre* effect in film: the effect of characters that can only be heard, and not seen. Chion writes that mysterious powers are associated with the acousmatic character as 'neither inside nor outside the image'. The suspense that arises from this mystery is resolved when the character is de-acousmatized, 'when the film reveals the face that is the source of the voice.' Chion writes that this de-acousmatization results in 'an unveiling process that is unfailingly dramatic' (pp. 129–131).

It is something to think about for the whole experience – how to introduce the Frida character – perhaps by hearing only her voice at first, and then to slowly 'unveil' her. In the course of this 'de-acousmatization', Frida loses her ghostly superpowers, but also her restlessness and distress as she is released from limbo and finally finds peace. It is something to remember for later, for when we have 'arrived' with all our plans and hopes for the vertical slice.

Is it still January 2023?

I hope so, because our deadline for working with the creative technologist expires at the end of the month. Time is now speeding up and slowing down at the same time, as it often does when working under pressure. 'Time is what prevents everything from happening at once' is a slightly paraphrased quote by author Ray Cummings, but in this phase of development, everything *does* seem to happen at once.

The director is not only recording the voice of the actor – Tone Danielsen, who has bravely agreed to don a motion capture suit and a helmet to embody Frida's character – but is also preparing a recording against a green screen. The recording is for a video plane of 'young Frida' walking with a lamp that will be part of the exterior dreamscape. As we have neither the time nor money to find another actor, the director will have to make a cameo-appearance. This will give her some control over the timing, which is precarious, but amidst everything else, she also has the hassle of finding and renting a 1880s costume.

In the meantime, the photogrammetrist is scanning objects and parts of the architecture from Frida's house, a process overseen by – again – the director. The scans are subsequently processed by the three-dimensional artist, who turns them into virtual objects. Synchronously, the creative technologist is chiselling out the virtual environments that change in shape, texture, mood and elaboration faster than I can download the versions on my (for this phase, especially rented) expensive virtual-reality-ready PC.

The producer, calmly as always, is overseeing the finances and pulling solutions out of his hat as we hurry along. When we need a camera and a set of lights for the greenscreen, they are there, and when we need a drone for a 360-video capture of Frida's house from above, it is also there. Hours later, the drone is stuck in the top of a tree, and the operation of getting it down takes time and unforeseen expense. Luckily, the video-files can be downloaded remotely.

The animated character is shapeshifting into various iterations and the shader that gives everything a 'thready' look goes in and out of focus. Hours upon hours are spent on fixing bugs. In one version, Frida hovers like a hot-air balloon, and in another she is placed deep down in a virtual sink hole. We do not have time for these hiccups, but the software does not care

Decisions are made 'on the fly', as abstract ideas offer their immediate feedback once observed with the headset in virtual reality. 'No – no gravestones, we need something else.' The creative technologist and the director share a moment of serendipity as they both suggest

'abandoned swings'. I am all for it, as long as there are trees; I dread a bare, outstretched prairie landscape that one early build suggested: a landscape that left me cold inside and that might in itself be very effective, but in another context, please!

I write and I re-write the texts based on the old interview, and the director sends me iterations and tests and asks for a definitive version for the actor to learn by heart before tomorrow at three o'clock. And the creative technologist suggests that, once we have the actor in the motion capture studio, we could also – while we have the opportunity – make a video registration of her body and face to use for texture: preferably in a costume that resembles the photo taken on Frida's 75th birthday, on which we have based the character design. This suggestion comes at the end of the day, and the motion capture studio is booked for the next morning, so how the director manages to come up with a dress and coat that not only have a striking likeness to the photograph from 1930, but also fits the actor, I do not know; it must have been magic.

Slowly, and at a terrifying speed, the elements come together, one by one and all together at once. The scanned objects leave this reality and convert into a virtual one. Frida's chair with a blue velvet seating and a rounded back, a table with an ornamental clock, a Jugendstil chandelier and a rocking horse on which my grandfather used to sit on (and my father, and my sisters, and myself) – they all go into the dark space of Frida's atelier as shivering memories.

In the centre of the space, the Frida character begins to move, movements evoked by the subtle puppeteering of actor Tone Danielsen and the director's instructions. An old photograph gives texture and a slight resemblance to the character's face. It is uncanny, and at the same time a little endearing – at least to me; finally, I can see eye to eye with my great-great-grandmother.

February – March 2023

The assembly of sound snippets and musical phrases begins as the director and the developer apply the final touches to the vertical slice. The storytelling in the score that the composer devises is a chapter in itself; with the tender theme of a children's song woven in, it becomes a small journey from darkness to light – in only seven minutes.

As the lighting in the environments is toned down a little, and then up again a little, and the objects in the room are moved around a final time, the saturation of the colour is weakened, and the timing of the window is tweaked and tweaked again, the pacing and placing comes to a necessary end: not perhaps due to having fully arrived, but to having run out of time, money and people's patience – and arrival indeed turns out to be a myth.

Childrens theme

'To consider the artist as a researcher (desirous, fierce, ravished) who finds at times, a disinterested laborer. (…) To achieve clear formulation. Without too many resayings, without too many explanations.' (Ponge, 2018)

Final thoughts

People keep asking me if I am satisfied with the result of our investigation. They even ask me if I am happy, and I never know what to say. 'Happy' and 'satisfied' are words that do not connect with how I feel about any artistic work in which I have ever been involved. The work is a reflection of how far we have come, of how bold we have been, and how true to ourselves. In this sense, the work contains both light and dark, surprises and regrets, feat and defeat.

What I love about the transitional scene that we have built, is that it is unique – in the sense that I have never seen anything quite like it. It has its own colours, its own darkness and blurriness, and they are all part of a whole. In *The art of Dramatic Writing*, playwright Lajos Egri (1972) stresses that 'no part is more important than the whole,' and that 'all must blend into an harmonious whole' (p. 79). Poet Mary Ruefle (2019) expresses something similar in her musings on bells in connection to tone in writing: 'Bells are so constructed as to give one fundamental tone when struck' (p. 218).

A work of art, a poem or a film can also have this quality of striking one fundamental tone. Perhaps this is what I am most 'happy' and 'satisfied' with in the vertical slice: that we have managed to create a universe that – if not coherent, per se – is at least in tune with itself. I think of this as an achievement, in light of all the different techniques, narrative considerations and collage-like approaches that we have used. I am indebted to the director and the creative technologist for a synthesis that is simultaneously rough, fine, hard and soft.

What we set out to do, to create a universe that is coloured both by Frida's life and her work, we have achieved. We have managed to create a form of spatial storytelling, and a kind of encounter that is – however artificial, and perhaps uncanny – hopefully a little bit magical. To me, this vertical slice is, in Ruefle's (2019) fitting words, 'helplessly itself' (p. 207).

Of course, this is only the beginning, and a 'proof of concept' that will only truly prove itself once the narrative building is complete. With the vertical slice, we have created one room only, and as long as you have not navigated your way to this room by yourself, first through the entrance, then via the hallway – as in the exposition and the lead up to the scene

– it might feel abrupt.

Naturally, we wish we could have allowed the spectator to leave the room, to go outside the window and be surrounded by the dreamscape, but for now the diorama solution was what was in reach. And of course, we wish we could have had more time to experiment with the spatiality and the placing of the sound and music, but for now this is as far as we have come. Having seen so vividly in my mind how the objects in the room would be able to move in response to the spectator's gaze – the rocking horse would rock and the camellia flower would blossom – I actually believe I saw it in one of the many iterations. However, according to the developer, I must have imagined it, as implementing these effects will have to wait until the next phase.

A passage in Thue's (1973) book stands out to me as I reread it. She describes how Frida's way of weaving causes some confusion among the critics, as she moves away from the traditional, ornamental imagery towards a more stylised and figurative composition. Thue quotes a letter by Hansen (my translation):

> I have in these years worked with my own development, as I saw clearly that the older works are in many ways (…) hindering for the execution of artwork – I mean, that figurative motifs, that have always been my wish to invoke in weaving, would suffer (…) if we uphold the ancient technique without change. (p. 30)[61]

Thue writes that Frida's choice of motif for her first weave shows her as a 'modern, art-interested woman who wished to have a contemporary expression in the textile-medium as well' (p. 22).[62] It sounds to me as if Frida was operating in a shifting field of converging art forms, and I feel a kinship to her in that sense, beyond the family bond. As Frida borrowed from both traditional weaving and from fine art, in an attempt to create something new, I have borrowed from both film and digital media in my conceptualisation of *Finding Frida*. Parallel to how Frida added the figurative to the ornamental in her first tapestry, *Birkebeinerne (1890)*, I have attempted to weave narrative motifs into the digital, experiential

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[61] 'Jeg har i disse Aar arbeidet paa min egen Udvikling, thi jeg saa tydelig, at de Gamle Arbeider er i mange Dele (…) hindrende for Udførelsen av Kunstarbeider – jeg mener, at Motiver med Figurer, som alltid har været mit Ønske at fremtrylle i væv, vilde lide (…) ved at vi bibeholdt den eldgamle Teknik uden Forandring' (translation C.L.).
[62] 'På den annen side vitner valget også om at hun er en moderne, kunstinteressert kvinne som ønsker å gi et tidsmessig uttrykk også innenfor tekstilmediet' (translation C.L.).

form. The merge may not yet be seamless, but as a layer or an element added to the mix, it is a step on the way towards an expansion of the medium.

The responsiveness of the virtual environment that Ryan (2002) emphasises in *Beyond Myth and Mythology* is subtle in *Finding Frida*, but it is present. It is present in the way that the Frida character looks at the spectator, and in the unlocking of a secret memory world by the spectator's presence. There is also a more conceptual kind of responsive layer hidden in the overarching story: that of the spectator as a redeemer of Frida's ghost. Their attentive gaze and presence are what helps Frida to perceive her story in a new light. My hypothesis as a writer is that the spectator will intuit this emotional undertow in the end, as well as their partaking in a performative exposition of attentive presence. Whether or not this works – as a narrative device and manner of including the spectator in the narrative – remains to be seen once the full virtual reality experience has been realised.

I am excited about the potential of a mimetic, visual language in immersive, digital media and the advances that have been made in this direction by, amongst others, Daniel Ernst (2019) in his award winning *Die Fernweh Oper*, and in the much-acclaimed work of Michelle and Uri Kranot.[63] In the vertical slice, we have delved into both verbal storytelling (the Frida character talking directly to us) and a more implicit, visual–spatial language, in the form of an 'emotional landscape' where Frida's memories and art come together. For me, the magic in virtual reality lies in this kind of spatial storytelling that combines imagination and psychology. In a (2017) book on virtual reality storytelling,[64] experience designer Steve Peters describes that what he imagines an audience would want from the medium is to go places where they cannot go physically – like to the depths of the oceans or to Mars. I agree that being transported to places that are out of reach is an appealing aspect of virtual reality, but I would suggest traveling inwards. It is the kind of space articulated by Rilke, and quoted by Bachelard (2014) in *Poetics of Space,* in which I am interested in: 'through every human being, unique space, intimate space, opens up' (p. 43).

In virtual reality, poetic spaces can be sculpted into representations of inner worlds, abstract ideas or troubling memories. This mode of storytelling is distinct from what I understand as more conflict-driven mimetic narrative in film, where the hidden motivations of characters show us who they are. An example of the former, to which I recently referred to in an introductory, virtual reality writing workshop that I led in Amsterdam, is the (2023)

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[63] *Nothing Happens* (Kranot, 2017), *Hangman at home* (Kranot, 2020).
[64] *Storytelling for virtual reality: methods and principles for crafting immersive narratives,* by John Bucher.

production *End of Night* by director David Adler.[65] This story is conveyed through the main character, sitting in an old, wooden rowing boat, floating through a memory world of war-torn Copenhagen. The boat is connected to his deepest pain – his failure to rescue his Jewish wife by rowing to Sweden during the Second World War. As a spectator, sitting opposite the old man, you get a sense that, in his mind, he has been rowing ever since, unable to get away from his loss – except perhaps in death.

In the same writing course, I asked the scriptwriting students to brainstorm objects, spaces or vehicles that carry meaning and are emotionally charged in the context of a childhood memory. I asked them to look for the metaphorical 'rowing boat' and to create an action, a scene or a movement around it. In addition, I asked them to write a scene without characters where only the space, the objects in it and their states were telling a story. In short, I believe these two approaches are good starting points when conceptualising for virtual reality, through a connection between emotions, physical space and objects. Interactions can be added to this, and although we chose not to include explicit mechanics (apart from walking and looking) in our concept for *Finding Frida*, I am interested in actions that can simulate, or activate, emotions in the audience – for example, by inducing frustration or confusion. Interactive illustrator Daniel Ernst has played with this in an early work (that has only been described to me by the creator), with an environment where light switches and other domestic appliances can be manipulated, but without effect. Another example is the mobile game Florence (2018) in which the painful dawning of incompatibility in a relationship is simulated in the user when they realise a puzzle is impossible to solve.

In Finding Frida, the approach was not as straight forward as in the exercise from the workshop, since the insights were accumulated along the way, but the leading dramatic motif – somewhat similar to the rowing boat – was Frida's art as a source of life and vitality. The gradual assembly of features and the de-fragmentation of the environment is a visualisation of Frida becoming unforgotten and at peace with herself throughout the experience. The seed that inspired the symbolic landscape in the vertical slice was present in the very first conceptual draft. However, in a written screenplay, which may favour dialogue above scene description, it did not necessarily stand out as a transitional scene. It was through the close reading of the director, who raised the scene to the attention and the imaginative, stylistic treatment of the creative technologist, that it has manifested. This kind of implicit storytelling is dependent on a collaboration that is sensitive and open, with the willingness to 'not

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[65] Winner of Best Narrative Award at Venice Immersive, 2022

understand'. I believe it is not a coincidence that the works mentioned earlier, of Ernst and Kranot, are by creators who are animation and interactive artists themselves; a more direct approach from imagination to execution by individual creators might allow for a more personal, innovative and virtual reality-specific style. A question I ask myself, and that I believe deserves more attention and research, is how to think about a workflow and a common language in virtual reality production that can accommodate this personal, intimate and medium-specific style in an interdisciplinary team. Coming from film, where a common language is well established between the disciplines, I have experienced how enriching it can be to have a film editor, a production designer, a cinematographer or a sound engineer contribute to and strengthen the story through close readings. They can all provide valuable feedback from their own expertise, but in support of the whole. Will there be room for a similar use of the script as a 'common-brain holder' in virtual reality production?

Based on my (limited) experience, I have encountered two complicating aspects in this regard: One is the unwillingness of some developers to read at all (*N=2*) and the second is the intuitive, abstract and symbolic nature of the kind of spatial storytelling on which I have focussed. With Ryan's (2002) observation in mind that 'narrativity is independent of tellability' (p. 583), this kind of storytelling seems to be inherently less tellable and therefore harder to convey in written form. How then to develop alternative means of communication, ways of entering the 'common brain' that allow for writers and directors to contribute from their expertise on storytelling and style, on equal terms with the technologists who have the know-how and means for execution?

The collaborative development of the vertical slice for the *Finding Frida* experience was enriched and enhanced by its interdisciplinary team. The challenges in translating 'Fingerspitzengefühl' and in communicating about style – and the frustration that can arise from being unable to create hands on, or straight from intuition, but having to align with the intuitions of others – is what has led to this particular result: good and bad. None of us could have come to this on our own. We have built on each other's ideas and suggestions. The creative technologist was largely the one who spoke both languages, that of story and style, and that of technology and code. It is inherent to translation that things get lost, but then again, new meanings emerge, although the role of the translator can be difficult.

Kate Brigg's, in her (2017) book on translation, at one point uses the concept of a table as 'a device to think with' (p. 120) or an analogy – the 'pointing to something familiar or readily understood in order to clarify or explain something more complex' (p. 121) – to explain the art of translation. The comparison of a table to a translation remains mysterious to me, but it

made me think about an analogy that I had been using for my own research: Being a writer for film, teaching myself how to write for virtual reality, is like learning to play a new instrument. In my final presentation in the Artistic Research Spring Forum in Oslo, 2023, I likened it to a piano player learning to play the organ, noticing that the keys sound differently when pressed, and that the effect of the instrument in the room is unfamiliar, and that the cords and melodies must be arranged differently and at a different pace. Learning to play a new instrument makes you acutely aware of how the old one works. You see how your hands automatically place themselves in a certain way, anticipating a certain effect, only to discover that this instrument is different. One unexpected finding, when exploring a new medium, is the rediscovery of the old. The new and the old feed into each other and expand in both directions.

As I write this, I wonder what the future will hold for virtual reality storytelling, and for storytelling in general, as the emergence of artificial intelligence looms on the horizon with the promise, or the threat, of making everything effortless: even writing. Considering writing as a tool for thinking, and the dissemination of that writing as what comes out of the aided thinking, outsourcing writing to an artificial intelligence system seems to leave us with a thinking problem. It would be like asking a computer to do our physical workout for us: This would not build our muscles, any more than having a machine do our writing or artmaking would develop our thinking. Author Toni Morrison (2009) opened her Noble Prize Lecture with the following words: 'Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge' (p. 1). The extension of that thought is that narrative is also a way to create knowledge, and to hold knowledge of the world and the experience of being human. It is an important distinction, as 'merely entertainment' reduces narrative to a commodity and a consumer item that, in terms of productivity, can just as well be mass-produced by 'thinking' machines.

Recently, during a lecture on artificial intelligence and large language models in Amsterdam, author and poet Hannah van Binsbergen drew a parallel between the emergence of artificial intelligence and that of photography.[66] With photography offering exact replicas of the world at the push of a button, the effect on painting and fine arts was a shift from the naturalistic and figurative, towards the abstract. Perhaps, in reaction to the generic, innately average[67] and polished artificial, the strenuous, unpolished and stylistically 'messiness' of the

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[66] (Binsbergen, 2023)

[67] Average, as in derived from large numbers, statistically 'skewed' towards the most the probable – not the most truthful – answer

artist might be an urgently needed antidote – and the signature of the human hand. In light of this, the stylistic choices that are narrational choices in the Finding Frida universe, also touch upon the ethical.

In the vertical slice, we have taken effort to create a virtual environment that is idiosyncratic to this story, while it would have been easier and more affordable to resort to standardised, generic forms of animation and world building. This has led to a slower production process, and technical challenges, but nevertheless rewarding through its explorative quality. The signature of all who have been involved is visibly human, and I believe that is a good thing. My intention behind the *Finding Frida* experience has been to create a world that invites contemplation and attention, rather than offering smooth spectacle. Sometimes, having to adjust your eyes and mind to an unaccustomed view, can nudge an audience towards a more open mindset.

Weaving this project together has at times left us all threadbare, but having completed the vertical slice, we are eager to proceed with the rest of the production. Our next step will be to create the environment of Frida's garden, and the director and the photogrammetrist have already experimented with scanning Frida's original plants and flowering bushes. A quote from Michel Foucault's *Of Other Spaces (1986)* provides unexpected inspiration as we move on to the next phase:

> As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space). The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. (p. 26)

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Appendix

The script samples attached here are work-in-progress drafts, from the very first, playful, everything-is-still-possible draft (from which connections and pivotal moments surfaced) to the toned down and simplified sequence that we produced as a vertical slice.

The drafts are not polished or copy-edited, and language and spelling mistakes are on account of the impatiently, composing writer.

Attached are also a selection of stills/impressions from the vertical slice.

Impressions

Impressions
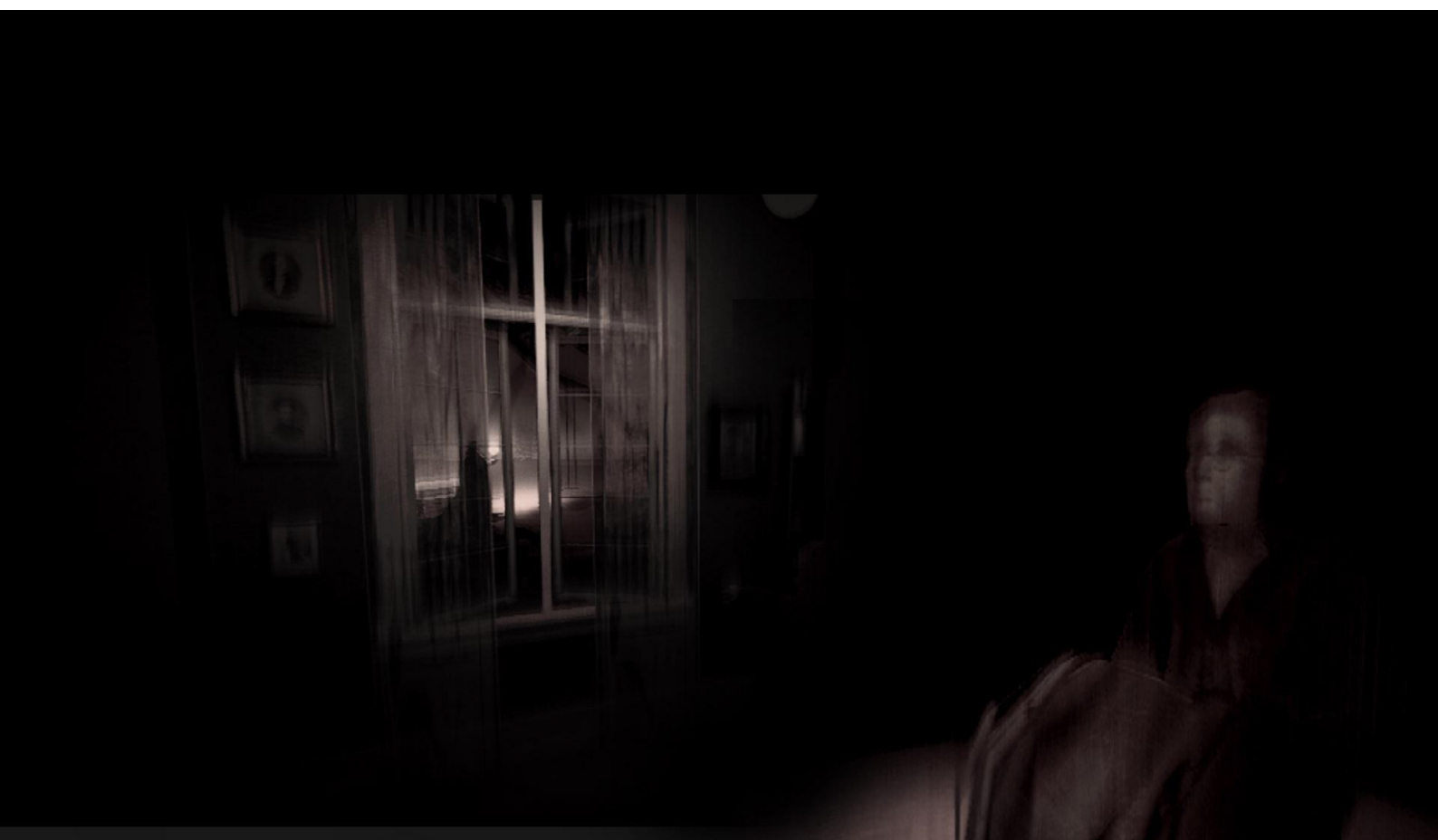
Impressions
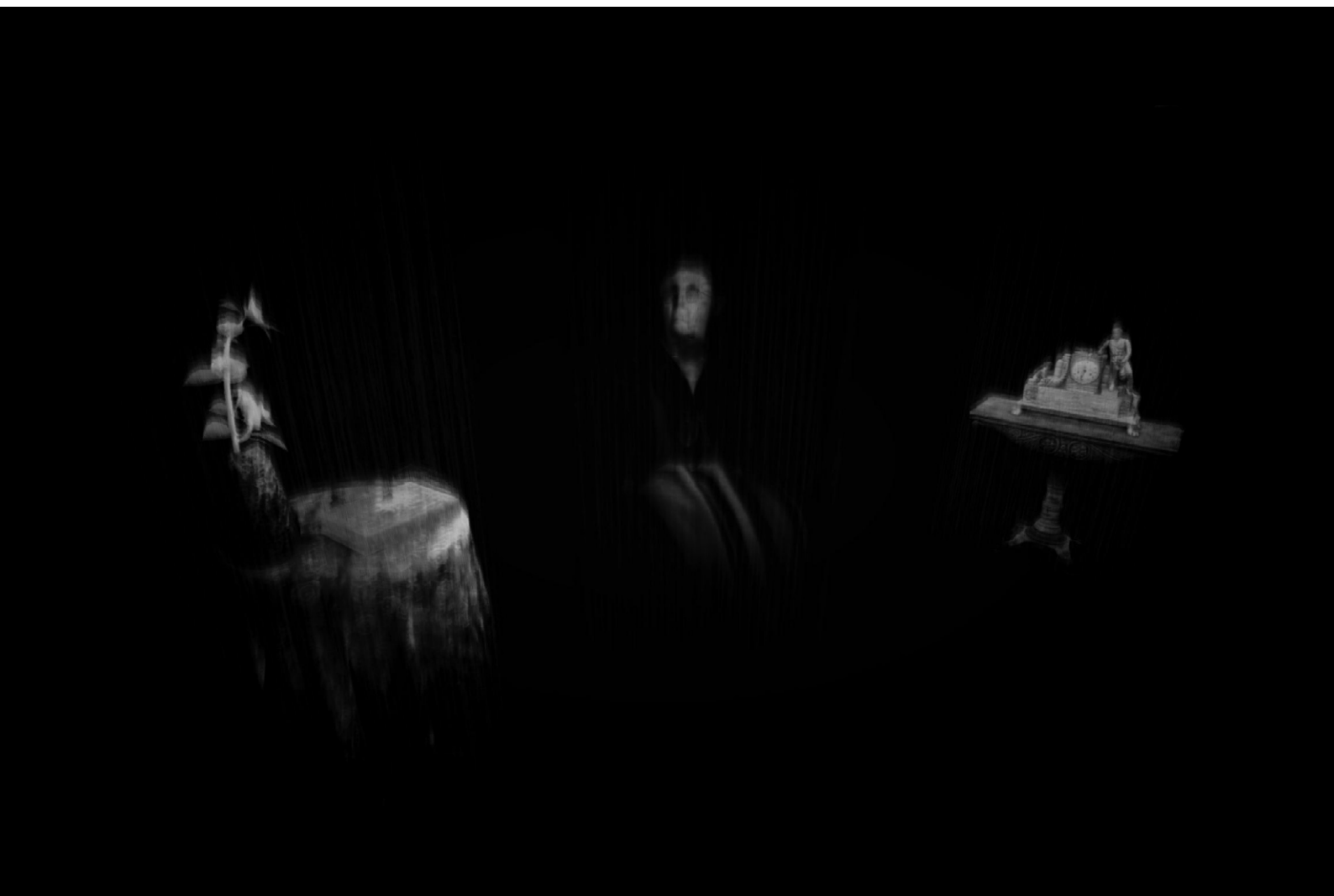
Finding Frida

Vertical Slice

CONCEPT ART BY INNA HANSEN

Directed by
Hilde K. Kjøs

Written by
Cecilie Levy

Creative Technologist
The Shoebox Diorama

Produced by
Bjørn-Morten Nerland
Stargate Media/Qvisten XTND

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INT. NONDESCRIPT SURROUNDINGS/INTERVIEW. DAY

Old Frida sits on a chair in a darkened room. Only a few
objects and pieces of furniture indicate the space around
her. A vase on a table holds a white camellia. In the
background is another table on which an artful clock is
placed.

Next to us on the floor is an old rocking horse. In the
space around us and hanging from the ceiling are old
fashioned lamps providing dim light. A chandelier above
Frida shines a faint light on her face.

Frida shifts in her chair and looks into the distance.
Then she looks at us for a moment, inquiringly. When she
finally speaks, we are not sure if we can see her lips
moving, or if we are listening in on her thoughts.

                    OLD FRIDA
               (transcript interview)
          That morning, after a sleepless night, I
          went into the winter garden. A beautiful,
          snow white camellia had just burst into
          flower. I broke it off, went inside and
          took the bible from the shelf, I picked
          the petals ruthlessly from the lovely
          flower and pressed them inside the book.
          I closed the book tightly and put it back
          in the shelf. It was a burial. Now I had
          buried my passion for flowers, yes,
          perhaps all of my previous life.

Next to us, in the darkness, the faint contours of a
window begin to take shape.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          They say an accident never comes alone.
          And so it was.
               (heavy voice)
          Within two years I lost my little son and
          my oldest daughter. My husband went to
          America, then to London.
               (pause)
          My only child and I lived with mother.
          These were hard days.

Frida looks towards the window that has now appeared to
our left. We can walk towards the window and look
outside.

EXT. WINDOW. DUSK

Outside, we can see a deserted, windblown landscape: grey
and weatherbeaten, as if in a frozen desert. Trees with
twisted branches are visible. Low stone fences criss-
cross the landscape in the distance.

Ominous, black crows are hovering in the air.

The wind howls and the crows caw. Beneath a tree, we see
the slight, cloaked figure of Young Frida. She stands
with a storm lamp at her feet and looks dejected at a
pair of empty swings that blow in the wind.

In the far background, to the left, we see a faint light
approaching behind the trees.

Young Frida bends down to pick up the lamp, she turns and
walks away into the deserted landscape.

Then she pauses, as from behind the trees, four,
unnaturally tall female figures wearing long, draped
dresses walk stridently towards her.

Young Frida looks up at the women, one carries a lamp
like herself, another a purse with money, a third carries
a box of jewellery and the fourth a bouquet of flowers.

They are singing softly as they walk: *Semper Vadentes*.
Semper Agentes... *(Always walking, never resting...)*

Young Frida looks at them for a while, then she falls in
with their strident pace and follows them through the
landscape while holding her lamp up.

Light and colour gradually return to the grey, dusky
landscape. From the trees, that are now in full bloom, a
rain of flower petals falls.

The world fades out.

Fade back to the atelier setting:

INT. NONDESCRIPT SURROUNDINGS/INTERVIEW. DAY

Old Frida sits with a heavy gaze, looking at no one in
particular. She feels the sorrow and struggles to contain
it all, without self pity. She is quiet for a while.

                                        FADE TO BLACK

VR SPHEREPLAY
"FINDING FRIDA"

Illustration by Daniel Ernst

Cecilie Levy
September, 2020

Synopsis

Deep in the forgotten corners of a dilapidated house lingers the ghost of Frida – an art nouveau textile artist and entrepreneur. Dwelling in the shadows of her atelier, she ruminates on her life choices and artistic career that came at a cost.

When her great-great-granddaughter turns up in her atelier, after getting lost in the corridors of the old house, she urges Frida to tell her life story. Together, they revisit Frida's past using her colourful, imaginative tapestries as a portal. The little girl gets a glimpse of what it was like to be a woman with an independent mind and artistic ambitions in the late eighteen hundred. She also gets to see how tragedy can be a source of creativity and a burden of guilt at the same time.

In the end, both Frida and the little girl are changed by their adventure. Frida can let go of her guilt and embrace her life as meaningful, and the little girl has connected with a role model that will be a source of inspiration and strength later in life. Finally, the identity of the story's narrator is revealed, as being the little girl's future self, reflecting on the memory of her great-great grandmother and how it has influenced her.

In a beautiful, tactile world of the past and the present, *Finding Frida* is a creative documentary about relying on one's own imagination, resources, and inner child in the face of numbing hardship.

Short description

Finding Frida is an interactive virtual reality experience inspired by the life and work of turn-of-century tapestry artist Frida Hansen. Set up as a virtual encounter with Frida's 'ghost', the audience can unravel her life story by exploring her atelier and her tapestries.

The source-material for the scenes is found in the letters and writings she left behind, although artistic freedom has been taken in the visual and dramatic interpretation. In its symbolism, her work contains autobiographic elements, and these are referred to throughout the experience, in props and environmental design. The experience will give you an impression of her art and its connection with her life's story and struggles.

Specifications

Finding Frida aims to be experienced both in a headset at home and as a room scale, location-based installation. The estimated length is 25 min.

The final experience and installation will feature examples of her work, an original loom, real-life photographs, and a replica of a chair she produced. It can be experienced in e.g., an art & craft museum.

Frida's work is included in, amongst others, collections at the National Gallery in Oslo, The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology, Stavanger Art Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, The Nordic Museum, Stockholm, Design Museum Denmark, Copenhagen, and Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna.

FADE IN:

TITLE IN BLACK: FINDING FRIDA

We can hear wind blowing, an owl hooting and the creaking of
tree-branches as the world around us fades in:

FADE IN:

1   EXT. DILAPIDATED HOUSE. NIGHT

A dream-like world. An endless, starry, night sky.

We are at the front steps of a dilapidated, two-storey,
wooden house, built in curvy, wavy art nouveau style.

Clearly, this was once a stylish house, but now it looks
gutted and deserted. Dark, vacant windows, broken in places,
and wind tearing through the attic. The blue paint is peeling
off the stately entrance door.

Close by, as if in our head, we hear a soft, female voice,
half whispering, as if confiding in us:

                    VOICE OVER
          Is this a ghost story?
          Or is it a dream?
               (beat)
          There are places we can go only in
          our dreams. People we can see only
          with our eyes closed.
               (beat)
          Who are we in our dreams? Am I you,
          and are you me?

We, the audience, step forward, across the doorstep, and into
the next scene.

                                        FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

2   INT. DESERTED HOUSE. NIGHT

Inside the house, the environment has the same dreamy,
fragmented atmosphere as outside. The front door slams shut
behind us.

Before us lies a dim, moonlit hallway with in the opposite end a pair of French garden doors. To the right is a wide, broken staircase. The roof is only partly there, and the moon and the stars can be seen through it.

To the left are en-suite doors that lead to a spacious room. The doors are loose on the hinges and emit a soft creak in the draft.

Next to the doors is a fireplace covered in cobwebs and dirt. A few dried out logs have been left there.

Interaction: In our hands, a matchbox and a match light up, if we strike it, the fireplace will be lit.

A soft glow spreads from the burning fire. We can hear the sparks and crackling.

It lights up the hallway, and where it shines, the interior 'magically' restores to how it must have looked in better times:

Ornamented stucco ceiling, intact wallpaper, wooden floor with a beautiful, narrow carpet with meandering patterns of flowery motives.

We now hear cheerful voices of invisible guests talking in the hallway around us.

We see a semi-transparent, male figure sitting by the fireplace with its twisted cast iron grids and columns.

He pours mulled wine into cups with a ladle and hands them out to invisible (or semi-transparent) guests that we can hear, but not really see.

> VOICE OVER
> I know this place. I used to come
> here as a child.

A soft, warm light seeps into the corridor from the en-suite doors that are now open and magically hinged in place.

Voices from a Christmas party can be heard from inside.

The man by the fireplace dissolves and disappears.

From the drawing room, where the party is, we hear Christmas hymns sung.

After a beat, we see a little GIRL come out of the room and into the hallway.

She is dressed in a red, velvety Christmas dress (80ties style) with white stockings underneath. Her shoes are black and shiny, with a little strap around the ankles.

She stops for a moment when she sees us, or rather senses us. She looks a bit uncertain, as if she is aware of our presence, but not quite sure what to make of it.

She seems to decide to ignore us and steps over the ornamented carpet, and where her feet land, the floral pattern opens up and blooms like a real flower.

TRANSITION: SCENERY CHANGES BY FADING.

3   INT. DARK CORRIDOR. NIGHT

The corridor we are in now is an old servants passage that curves along the rear of the house.

There is a pre-war, black telephone attached to the wall on our right, with a small table beneath it. We can see a note pad and a pencil stub on it.

There is also a hatrack in dark wood with a row of pegs on which an old winter coat and some long aprons with spots of dye are hanging.

The girl walks on, looking around and inspecting the environment with curiosity. As she reaches the end of the corridor, she turns right again and disappears out of our view for a moment.

TRANSITION: SCENERY CHANGES BY FADING.

4   INT. DARK CORRIDOR. NIGHT

We are in a new hallway, just as dark and narrow as the last.

The little girl has stopped in front of a row of old photographs on the wall.

We can look over her shoulder and see old fashioned photographs in black, oval frames hanging on the wall to the right.

On one we see two WOMEN and a little GIRL, in very old-fashioned dresses (1880ties) and wide brimmed straw hats.

They are standing in front of a white house in a beautiful garden.

The Rose Garden, is written in fine script on a paper strip beneath.

Another photograph is of a very young, sweet looking WOMAN posing next to an older MAN in an 1880ties photo studio. Underneath, in the same fine script: *Frida and Willem, honeymoon in Denmark, 1879*.

There is also a photo of an old, frail WOMAN sitting on a chair, posing for the camera with a calm, thoughtful look. *Frida, 75 years old*, it says underneath it.

> LITTLE GIRL
> Who is Frida?

The little girl looks at us, pensively.

> LITTLE GIRL (CONT'D)
> Maybe this is her house?

A soft thumping sound can be heard from behind a semi-transparent curtain. The girl turns and looks at us, hesitantly.

Then she moves forwards, holds the curtain aside and walks past it. When it falls back, we can see a red and blue bird with a curly tail woven into the fabric.

For a moment it seems to come to life as the curtain moves. Its colour becomes vibrant, just like the carpet earlier.

TRANSITION: SCENERY CHANGES BY FADING.

5   INT. ATELIER. NIGHT

We are in an atelier. The thumping sound has become louder.

To the right we can see a vertical loom and the contours of an old woman sitting in front of it, working quietly.

The sound comes from her tugging at the wool with an iron fork, although we can not see precisely what she is doing.

The room is lit by moonlight from a tall window to the left.

On the floor are old, woven rugs, lying crisscross on the worn, wooden floorboards.

The walls are covered by large tapestries. We can barely make out the motives in the dim light. One shows three dragonfly-women with wings, with a cupid figure in front, dancing against the backdrop of a setting sun.

On the wall opposite from us is another tapestry, depicting Salome's Dance (Dance of the Seven Veils).

The wall to our right is blocked from view by the loom where the woman, OLD FRIDA, is sitting in her long, black dress.

She looks like a ghost from a different time (turn of the century, 1900 style dress).

The little girl looks at her with big, spooked eyes, then she turns quickly to look at us, questioningly.

The woman, Old Frida, turns her head slightly in our direction, as if sensing us, but not really seeing us. Her eyes rest for a moment on the little girl, squinting.

                    OLD FRIDA
              (softly, as if talking to
               herself)
          The only things I see clearly these
          days are in my head. The rest is
          just a blur.

She bends towards a basket of wool next to her on the floor and starts searching through it.

She holds one of the balls of yarn up to the moonlight in an attempt to discern the colour. Then she holds it up to the girl.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
              (to the little girl)
          Tell me, is this blue?

The little girl, a bit anxious, walks over to her. She bends over the basket and picks up a different ball.

                    LITTLE GIRL
          This is blue.

Old Frida reaches out and takes the yarn that the girl holds out to her.

                    OLD FRIDA
          Thank you, that is kind.

The little girl looks over her shoulder at us again, smiles a little. She seems more at ease.

                    LITTLE GIRL
              (to Frida)
          Is this your house?

The old woman nods proudly while pulling the blue yarn into the loom with practiced hands. She straightens her back.

                    OLD FRIDA
          Do you like it?

The little girl nods.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          It is a pity, the state it is in.
          No one seems to care anymore.

The little girl looks around, and if we do as well, we can see the dilapidation beginning to set in.

A humid spot in the roof, windowsills that haven't been painted in a long time.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          Beauty needs attention, and energy.
          Otherwise it fades.

She stops working and seems to sink into thoughts for a moment.

The little girl looks tentatively at her.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          I believe beauty brings out the
          best in people.
              (beat)
          "Never put anything in your house
          that isn't either beautiful or
          useful."

The little girl looks at the tapestries on the walls.

                    LITTLE GIRL
          Did you make these?

Old Frida nods.

                    OLD FRIDA
          They paid for this house.

The little girl looks impressed, Frida looks as if something
tempers her pride in the accomplishment, she looks pensive
and weary.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          Though the critics called it
          'women's art'. Or foreign. Not
          traditional enough.

She looks indignantly at the little girl, who glimpses a bit
nervously at us. (Frida does not seem so take notice of us,
maybe her gaze strays across her now and then, but for all
purposes she ignores us for now.)

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          While this...
               (she points at the loom)
          This is the old way. If it wasn't
          for me, no one would know how to do
          it.

She looks at the little girl again.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          Who are you? What are you doing
          here.

                    LITTLE GIRL
               (bashful)
          I am here for the Christmas party.

Frida looks unimpressed by this.

                    LITTLE GIRL (CONT'D)
          Why aren't you at the party?

                    OLD FRIDA
               (with a sigh)
          I am too old for parties.

The little girl looks at the old woman with apprehension.
Frida looks over her shoulder at us, a bit pensive,
sceptical.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          Tell me, do people still talk about
          me? Do they know my work?

The little girl looks uncertain, gazes quickly back at us,
then shrugs and shakes her head.

Frida sighs and looks disappointed.

                         OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
                    So the critics were right after
                    all.

She moves the yearn into the threads of the loom, her
shoulders drop and she looks sad.

                         OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
                    It felt so real, you know. More
                    real than anything. As if my work
                    really mattered.

She smiles sadly, again a quick glance in our direction, as
if she is shy about us, but less so towards the little girl.

The little girl looks around at the tapestries on the wall.
She walks closer to inspect them.

We can look over the girl's shoulder, and see that the women
who resemble dragonflies in the motive begins to move. They
dance with their dresses flowing around them.

We hear music from the male figure who is playing a lyre in
the foreground.

                         LITTLE GIRL
                    Did you always want to make
                    tapestries?

Old Frida shakes her head.

                         OLD FRIDA
                    When I was your age I wanted to be
                    a painter.

She gets up an looks for something in a shelve. She comes
back and gives it to the little girl.

It is a childlike drawing of a dragonfly as a woman in a
beautiful dress.

The girl takes the drawing and looks at it. She holds it up
to the tapestry and sees the likeness.

                         LITTLE GIRL
                    Why didn't you?

Old Frida thinks for a moment, her hands working the loom and
the wool.

> OLD FRIDA
> I got married. I was only nineteen.
> And then I became a mother.

Frida sits down at the loom again. She works in silence. The motive on the loom in front of her grows steadily, although we can still not see what it is.

The little girl gazes at us, then she becomes aware of the tapestry on the wall to our left.

It is the 'Salome's Dance' tapestry and it lights up in the same way as the first.

The woman in the centre of the motive starts to dance, rhythmic and enticingly. She is half naked, with only a light vail-like skirt draped around her hips and a string of pearls curling around her waistline.

The little girl looks at it, amazed.

We hear soft music coming from the tapestry: middle-eastern, a raw, tantalising rhythm, tambourines and chanting women.

The little girl moves closer, with a hesitant look over her shoulder at us.

Then, the women in the tapestry reaches out to the girl and pulls her into the scene.

The little girl motions for us to follow her before she disappears into the tapestry.

On the 'event-horizon', we can see the threads, the fabric, the dust and the light between the fibres. Then, as we move past the edge, the world 'absorbs' us.

6   INT. TAPESTRY, SALOME'S DANCE. DAY

In contrast with the gloomy room where we came from, this world is vibrant with colour and music.

The motive is now three-dimensional and we can explore the tableaux around us: the dancing Salome in the centre, the mother, Herodias, watching to the left, the woman carrying a dress to the right.

In the background colourful patterns are spiralling hypnotically, like abstract coiled up snakes, the same pattern as in Salome's skirt.

The characters in the tableaux are not round and alive as Frida and the little girl, they are flat vignettes, caught in a loop.

From our left, the little girl peers from behind one of the backdrops and waves at us to follow her.

7   EXT. MEMORYWORLD/GARDEN. DAY

If we follow the girl we can see, in the distance, a fragile, faint memory world that lights up like a bubble, or a flare in an otherwise deserted universe.

The little girl stops at the verge of a scene that takes place in a garden.

A young woman, that we may recognise as a YOUNG FRIDA, seventeen years old, is sitting in a field with an painter's easel in front of her. She is struggling with a motive, and a FEAMALE TEACHER is leaning over her, giving her instructions.

                    TEACHER
          Paint what you see, Frida! Not what
          you think is there.

Frida listens, but it is clear that she finds it hard.

From behind us, from the dark, a voice calls:

                    FRIDA'S MOTHER
          Frida!

Frida looks up, distracted, torn between the painting and obeying her mother.

The little girl looks at something behind us.

If we turn, the scene in the garden fades. Behind us, we can see another 'sphere of light', another fragmented memory:

8   INT. DRESSINGROOM MEMORYWORLD. DAY

New front-centre is a fragmented impression of a dressing room, without clear walls or borders, but centred around an old-fashioned, tall mirror in an oval, wooden frame.

Frida is standing in front the mirror and is being dressed by her MOTHER in a luminous, white wedding-dress.

Her mother hangs a string of pearls around her neck.

The mother takes a step to the side and admires her daughter. The young Frida clutches the pearls nervously with her hand.

The image resembles the motive in the 'Salome's Dance' tapestry.

Behind and around the mirror tableaux, the spiralling snake motives from the tapestry appear in the darkness, creating an unnerving, surreal atmosphere.

Tantalising music is heard again, tambourines, women singing.

Then we hear Old Frida's voice.

The world around us fades and we find ourselves back in the atelier.

9   INT. ATELIER. NIGHT

We are standing with our backs to the Salome's Dance tapestry now. The little girl is in front of us, opposite Frida.

Old Frida is sitting by the loom, her left side towards us. She looks at us briefly over the head of the girl while absentmindedly working the loom with her hands.

                    OLD FRIDA
          Those first years were like a
          dream.

Her eyes fall on the tapestry on the wall behind the loom, right in front of her.

If we look to our left, along the loom, we can glimpse it.

                    OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
          I couldn't paint, but I had my
          garden. It became quite famous.
          People would come from town to
          picnic in it on Sundays.

She nods to the tapestry behind the loom, the little girl takes a step towards it.

The tapestry on the wall, 'The Rose Garden', shows a ornamented garden with beautiful women in stiff dresses, posing decoratively. They are surrounded by abundant rose bushes, and the women carry roses themselves as well. The women almost seam like stylised roses themselves, with dresses as sharp-edged as thorns.

If we walk towards the tapestry, following the little girl, we hear music again and see that the figures begin to move.

The figures in the tapestry are not dancing like in the others, but handling the roses gracefully: cutting them, arranging them into bouquets, trimming the bushes – tamed, confined.

The untamed looseness from the previous motives is gone, now it is more contained, as is the music. A harp maybe, delicate and harmonious.

> OLD FRIDA, VOICE OVER
> We had three beautiful children,
> two girls and a boy. And everything
> was joy and delight.

The beautiful roses and the decorative women become frozen and static, as a pop up book, or a stage set.

> OLD FRIDA, VOICE OVER (CONT'D)
> And yet, there were feelings of
> emptiness, and a longing for
> something I had lost – I didn't
> know what.

The lighting in the weave changes and becomes gloomier. One of the women in the tapestry, with a likeness to Young Frida, looks directly at us with a lost, bewildered look.

The little girl looks apprehensively at Old Frida who sits with sunken shoulders by the loom.

We can look at her through the blur of threads. We can see the weariness on her face.

> OLD FRIDA
> (to the girl)
> And then everything changed.
> (beat)
> Do you know what a bankruptcy is?

The little girl shakes her head. Frida gets up from the stool. She walks over to a low shelf by the door.

> OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
> When I married, everything I had,
> everything my father had left me,
> become my husbands property. I was
> not even allowed to hold a bank
> account of my own.
> (MORE)

> OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
> (beat)
> My husband was kind, but not a very
> good businessman I'm afraid.

She bends to look for something in the shelf. When she stands
up again she has a black book, a bible, in her hand. She
looks at us.

> OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
> One night, I was told we had lost
> everything. We would have to leave
> our house and everything in it the
> next morning.
> (beat)
> I went into the winter garden and I
> broke off a freshly bloomed white
> camellia. I pressed it inside the
> book.

Old Frida walks over to us with the bible.

She stands solemnly opposite us and opens the book. If we
look down, we can see the dried, pressed camellia flower.

> OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
> It was a burial, of my old life, of
> all that I had been.

The little girl stands next to us and looks up at us,
wearily. Old Frida nods at us as the flower lights up,
invitingly, tempting us to pick it up.

INTERACTION: WE CAN REACH OUT AND PICK UP THE FLOWER.

If we pick up the flower, the moment we lift it, it crumbles
and dissolves into tiny, white fragments that scatter around
us as in an explosion.

The explosion expands to the atelier's walls, the roof and
the floor and they break up and disperse as well.

10   EXT. DESERTED WORLD. DUSK

Before we know it, we are in a different world, a grey, vast
deserted landscape, where wind blows and howls, and crooked,
dead trees cling to sandy, desert-like ground.

(We are alone now, the little girl is nowhere to be seen.

For a moment, we may be disorientated and at a loss for what
to do.

Then we see the light of a lamp in the distance, moving towards us.

After a while, we can see that it is Young Frida holding up a storm lamp in front of her while walking aimlessly, looking lost.

She seems like a shadow of her former self; thin, drawn, despairing, in a dark mourning dress.

She walks towards us, then straight past us as if she doesn't notice us.

>   OLD FRIDA, VOICE OVER
>   Within two years I lost my little
>   son and my oldest daughter. My
>   husband went to America, then to
>   London.
>   (pause)
>   My only child and I lived with
>   mother. These were hard days.

Young Frida walks on in the deserted landscape with low, stone fences cutting across it diagonally in the distance.

In the shadow of a crooked tree we can see two small graves, freshly delved. Black crows hover in the dry branches above. (Outline of a church/church yard in the distance.)

We can (walk closer and) see that Frida tries to put flowers on the graves, but they wither the moment they hit the ground.

Young Frida pulls herself loose, gets up and walks further, the wind tearing at her dress.

Then, after a while, she stops abruptly and gazes in front of her.

We can stop as well and see what she sees.

A small distance away, we can spot an incongruent element in the weary landscape. It is a loom, like the one in Frida's atelier. In front of the loom, we see Old Frida working. It is as if the two scenes have merged into each other and overlap.

Young Frida walks closer to the loom.

As we approach, we can see that the tapestry on the loom has grown into a recognisable motive. We can see four women figures walking in a windblown landscape.

One of them, like Young Frida, is holding up a storm lamp.

Young Frida steps even closer and holds up the lamp, taking a closer look at the figure that mirrors herself in the tapestry. She looks amazed and bewildered.

Then she looks at Old Frida who looks back at her with an inquisitive look.

Old Frida stands up, vacating her footstool in front of the loom. She gestures for her younger self to take her seat.

Hesitantly, Young Frida sits down and picks up the thread that Old Frida left for her. She starts working the loom, tryingly at first, but she soon gains confidence as Old Frida looks over her shoulder and encourages her.

The scene fades into blackness and we are back in the atelier.

11   INT. ATELIER. NIGHT

Back in the atelier, Old Frida sits by the loom in the darkness.

The tapestry that she has been working on –'Semper Vadentes'– is now completed: the four women walking, one with a money purse, one with a pearl necklace, one with flowers and one with a lamp.

The little girl sits next to her on a low footstool and listens while looking at the motive that Frida describes.

>   OLD FRIDA
>   A restless wandering towards the
>   sea of eternity, always rushing,
>   never resting, that is how we live.

Frida lets her gaze rest on the four women, the little girl follows the gaze.

>   OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
>   The first woman carries a bag of
>   money, because money matters a
>   great deal. You discover that when
>   you lose a great deal of it. The
>   other carries jewellery, that is
>   vanity. The light is eternal love,
>   and the flowers the human yearning
>   for art and beauty.
>   (MORE)

>   OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
>   (thinking)
>   They are all me.

She looks at the little girl, who looks back at her.

>   GIRL
>   Were you very sad when your son and
>   daughter died?

Frida nods, a shadow over her face.

>   OLD FRIDA
>   I was so sad, that I did not want
>   to live.

Frida and the girl sit in silence for a little while.

>   OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
>   It was my work that saved me. My
>   work and my little girl.

A subtle change in the light can be felt. On the wall
opposite us, slowly the contours of a window become visible
with a very faint, morning light.

>   OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
>   Things lightened a little when a
>   cousin I helped with the mending of
>   a dress suggested that I should
>   open a shop in my mother's living
>   room. For embroidery, repairs and
>   the like... And this is how I got
>   to work with textile.

Frida looks at the window that is gradually becoming more
distinct, then she turns and looks straight at us, perhaps
for the first time.

>   OLD FRIDA (CONT'D)
>   It swept through me, like a fire,
>   this is what I wanted to do. To
>   revive the old weaving technique,
>   and make it accessible both as
>   decoration and as a working field
>   for many.
>   And so my life's work began, that
>   has filled my mind, my creative
>   force and my life.

The window is now clearly visible, and through it we can see a colourful world appear – a garden in which we see the young, eager Frida sitting, weaving, drawing and painting motives

The little girl gets up and walks to the window, she climbs over the window sill and walks outside. We can follow, an as we approach the window, the scene outside opens up and we can enter the garden.

12   INT/EXT. COLORFUL WORLD. DAY

Outside we are surrounded by the garden landscape that mixes in with Frida's weaves. We can play with the fabric and push them aside with our hand, go from the one to the other. Birds come to life, flowers open up. The motives from the weaves, ornaments and fantastical creatures, blend with the environments – an explosion of creativity, and vibrant light and colour.

Then the colours begin to fade and the whole scene follows.

13   INT. ATELIER. NIGHT

As the world fades out, we are back in the atelier again, but Frida is not there anymore. The low chair in front of the loom is empty.

The girl looks at it, then she looks at us, as if trying to understand. Then her movements become restless.

                    LITTLE GIRL
          Do you know where the bathroom is?

She doesn't wait for an answer, but walks past us and disappears into the hallway.

FADE TO BLACK

14   INT. OLD-FASHIONED TOILET. NIGHT

FADE IN:

We are in a cramped, old fashioned bathroom.

The little girl sits on the old toilet pot, skirt pulled up and feet dangling. Next to her, a rusty flush-chain is hanging from the water reservoir.

To our right is a art nouveau sink, with cracks in the surface and a very old, dried up piece of soap on a tin-dish.

Behind us, the door is ajar to the dark corridor.

On the wall next to the toilet hangs a water colour sketch (framed in and behind glass) - a study for one of Frida's tapestries.

It is 'The Milky Way', light clad women dancing across the night sky carrying a veil of stars.

> LITTLE GIRL
> (to us, excited)
> You saw her too, didn't you? Old
> Frida... She was really there!
> (beat)
> I wonder what she wanted…

She gets up, straightens her skirt and pulls the chain to flush. She looks up at the sketch as she washes her hands.

> LITTLE GIRL (CONT'D)
> (pensively)
> Maybe she just wanted us to
> remember her?

The little girl slips past us into the corridor again, and we can follow.

15   INT. CORRIDOR/HALLWAY. EVENING

As the girl walks in front of us through the corridor, she transforms from a little girl to a grown WOMAN in contemporary clothes; jeans and a jacket.

She turns a corner and if we follow, we are back in the hallway by the entrance.

The woman walks ahead of us, then pauses and looks around at the neglected state of the house.

We hear the same voice over as in the beginning, close by.

> VOICE OVER
> I have never forgotten this
> mystical meeting with my great-
> great-grandmother's ghost.
> (beat)
> (MORE)

> VOICE OVER (CONT'D)
> As I became older, and embarked on
> an artistic career as a film maker,
> her story became important to me.
> (beat)
> It helped me believe in 'the stuff
> that dreams are made of', and to
> carry on through hard times.
> (beat)
> I feel like thanking her for it.
> (beat)
> That night, at Christmas, when I
> was eight years old – I promised
> myself that one day, I would make
> the world remember her.

The woman looks around at us and smiles as if we share a
secret.

> WOMAN
> (to us)
> Now I have.

The woman opens the front door and goes outside.

FADE TO BLACK

16   EXT. DILAPIDATED HOUSE. NIGHT

FADE IN:

We are outside as the woman comes walking out the front door.
Behind her, the shabby house restores itself to it's former,
handsome state.

The walls are white, the shutters blue, the windows and the
roof are not broken.

The woman looks around in the starry night. We are next to
her and look up as well.

High on the night sky, we see stars appear and a vague,
shimmering light. The motif from the sketch in the bathroom
appears: The Milkyway – ethereal, light-clad women dance over
the sky as they pull along a veil of all the stars of the
milky way.

They are luminous and sensual in their movements. They
radiate strength and playfulness – they are goddesses, but
entirely on their own terms.

Then we may notice that Frida is standing next to us. She is at her most clear and manifest as a character now. Her body language has changed. She stand more straight up and she seems lighter. She looks up at the dancing women.

The image of the women in the sky seems to contract and become a fabric. It falls softly from the sky and wraps itself around Frida's shoulders as if to keep her warm.

Frida draws it tighter in her neck and looks content.

Airy music is heard.

FADE OUT.