

Cinematic VR: A Voluntary Exile into the Pain of Others

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All forms of art contemplate how to empathize with the pain of others. To truly feel the pain of others, voluntary exile is necessary. One must be willing to leave the comfort and safety of one's own world and enter into the discomfort where another's suffering resides. In Han Kang's *We Do Not Part*, the protagonist's journey—battling to find and rescue a bird—is so painful that I could not read it all at once. She falls unconscious into the snow and, upon barely making it to a house, confronts the lifeless bird. Each sentence is so suffocating that I had to close the book repeatedly, only to open it again, inching through the pain. In Grace M. Cho's *Tastes Like War*, the pain of the author's mother—who once lived as a U.S. military comfort woman and eventually died with schizophrenia—is similarly overwhelming. Like someone in a trance, she leaves home and wanders the forest in search of wild mushrooms and blackberries. Even after putting the book down, her actions make the walls and windows of my room feel unfamiliar. Literature, through such profound immersion, is a wondrous art that constructs a world within the consciousness of the reader.

What, then, of cinema? As both a spatial and temporal art, cinema has devised numerous strategies—editing, music, *mise-en-scène*—to create immersion and emotional resonance. A protagonist’s sorrow is conveyed through close-ups of tear-streaked faces, and if that fails, through the mournful strains of a violin. While film often appears to be a powerful medium for inducing empathy, that empathy is frequently fleeting, superficial, and ultimately complicit in objectifying the suffering subject. A line exists between the object in front of the camera and the subject behind it. No matter how absorbed the viewer becomes, this invisible border cannot be crossed. It insulates us, separating our physical and psychological space from that of the world onscreen. This separation allows cinema to so openly turn the pain of others—through sex, violence, or even “poverty porn”—into consumable entertainment. Few media in human history have done so as extensively or as publicly.

Even more troubling are the politics of power embedded in the act of image-making itself. The high cost of live-action production has historically placed the camera in the hands of the powerful: citizens of the Global North, men, and those with capital—these are the ones who have stood behind the camera, wielding authorship and control. Meanwhile, the colonized, the impoverished, women, and those without capital have been positioned on the other side of the lens, reduced to silent subjects. Within this framework, the director—who commands both frame and gaze—has been granted a godlike authority. The voice we believe we hear from the screen may, in truth, be the voice of power disguised as the voice of the subject. What we perceive as empathy may in fact be the consumption—and exploitation—of pain.

360 virtual reality, however, disrupts these established formulas. The boundary between the front and back of the camera collapses. Unlike traditional cinema, in which the viewer looks into a framed world from an external vantage point, VR invites the viewer into a 360-degree

environment. This marks the spatial realization of what was earlier described as voluntary exile. Simply being placed within such a world already undermines one of the foundational psychological mechanisms of 2D cinema: voyeurism.

More importantly, this exile operates on an ontological level. In virtual reality, the viewer—the subject of the gaze—loses their body.¹ The gaze remains lucid, but the physical body capable of responding to what unfolds disappears. This condition is not merely disorienting; it is terrifying, akin to the paralysis of a waking nightmare. In this state—stripped of agency, disembodied, and vulnerable—the presence of the suffering other resonates on an entirely different register. It evokes responses far more acute than the passive reactions elicited by the objectification of suffering in conventional media. A polar bear losing its habitat on a flat television screen may have become a familiar image—even a cliché. But what if the polar bear were clinging to a melting iceberg beneath our feet, encountered not at a distance but through the immersive proximity of a VR headset? Could we remain indifferent?

One might argue that the world encountered in VR is not real—so why should it provoke such a visceral response? Yet, for the brain, the distinction between real and virtual is inconsequential. Information received through the optic nerve translates into identical electrical signals regardless of origin. Even when we consciously remind ourselves that what we see is not real, the affect—the emotional and sensory impressions—can be profoundly unsettling. In this immersive condition, where the viewer has no body and no physical separation from the image,

¹ The characteristics of VR discussed here refer specifically to 3DoF (three degrees of freedom) live-action cinematic VR. In such works, the camera position defines the viewer's point of view within a fixed 360-degree environment. Due to current technological limitations, viewer agency remains minimal, with vision as the primary mode of engagement.

viewer and subject occupy the same ontological plane. Herein lies the potential for a new form of empathy—one that transcends objectification.

All media are value-neutral, and virtual reality is no exception. The medium of VR does not inherently produce empathy or humanitarian insight; its immersive properties can just as easily be mobilized to construct violent or sensationalist narratives. During the so-called “Year One of VR” in 2016, many commercial ventures gravitated toward exploitative forms of horror and violence. Popular examples included simulations that placed viewers in the position of a comatose patient immobilized in bed, or as an abducted individual forced to confront an assailant face-to-face. Notably, these works rarely reproduced voyeuristic spectacles of violence directed at others. Instead, they positioned the viewer as the victim. Such configurations align closely with the formal conditions of VR: in a medium where the body is absent and only the gaze remains, viewers are more readily cast as immobilized subjects rather than active agents. In documentary contexts, this condition has often been framed as ethical strength. However, within the mainstream film industry—where agency and narrative action are central—it has posed significant commercial limitations. This tension has contributed to the difficulty of sustaining investment in VR and remains a key obstacle to its wider popularization.

Although these conditions constrained VR’s commercial viability, they also revealed its profound potential as a medium for engaging the pain of others. It was the collapse of spatial, psychological, and ethical proximity in virtual reality that catalyzed the *Comfortless Trilogy*.² To recount the story of a South Korean camp town woman brutally murdered by a U.S. soldier in

² “Comfortless Trilogy (2017-2023) Trailer,” YouTube video, accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj6cgpw44sQ&t=5s>.

1992 required more than traditional 2D cinema. To represent her death in a format that might once again objectify the victim—even under the guise of empathy—was ethically untenable.

What does it mean to remember the loneliness of a woman who bled to death over several hours in a single-room tenement in Dongducheon? How can we carry forward the unspeakable violence of that moment—not as a footnote in forgotten history, but as a living event reawakened each time a viewer enters the world? These unresolved questions compelled to the creation of *Bloodless* and later shaped the eight-year process of completing the full *Comfortless Trilogy* in virtual reality.

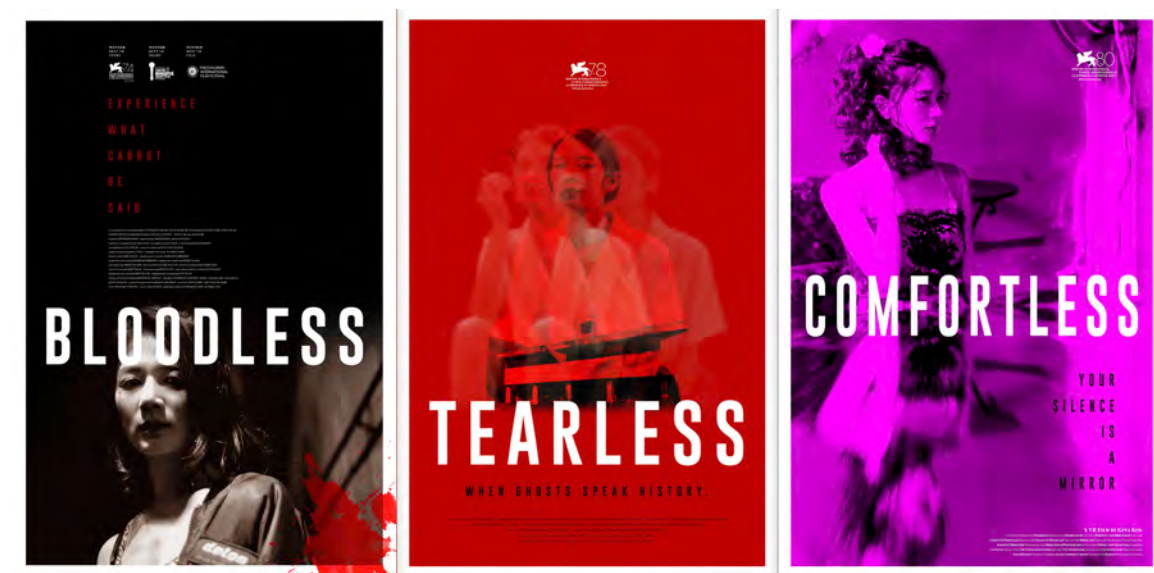


Figure 1. *Comfortless Trilogy* – *Bloodless*, *Tearless*, *Comfortless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 2017–2023.

Many critics have approached the *Comfortless Trilogy* through the lens of metaphor and historical symbolism, often focusing on the ghost as narrator. These are valid readings. And yet, they do not reach the core. The heart of the trilogy is not about “seeing” a ghost who speaks from within spaces of trauma. Rather, its essence lies with the audience—in the moment when we, as viewers, lose our bodies. It is not an experience of ghost-seeing, but of ghost-becoming. This transformation is made possible through the ontological exile uniquely enabled by virtual reality.

The moment the audience becomes aware of this transformation arrives without warning. In *Bloodless*,³ the first work in the trilogy, the viewer begins as an idle observer, taking in the textures of the military camp town with detached curiosity. Then, something shifts. At the periphery of vision, a woman appears—not merely a passerby, not a soldier. Something in her presence draws our gaze. We begin to follow her with our eyes. Yet she remains elusive, leaving behind only the sound of footsteps. Eventually, within the narrow alleyways, she approaches us directly. Just as we expect to finally behold her, something unexpected occurs: in an alleyway too narrow for two bodies to pass, she walks straight through us. If she is a ghost, then we, too, have already become one.



Figure 2. *Bloodless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 12 minutes, 2017.

In *Tearless*,⁴ the second work in the trilogy, the subject no longer merely meets our gaze. Instead, the viewer becomes her vocal cords, her breath, her embodied voice. We wander

³ Gina Kim, *Bloodless* (2017), accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.ginakimfilms.com/#!/bloodless-2017/>.

⁴ Gina Kim, *Tearless* (2021), accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.ginakimfilms.com/#!/tearless-2021/>.

through the ruins of the medical prison, tracing the daily lives of the women once detained there. Without warning, we find ourselves standing at the edge of a rooftop—the place where she ended her life. Neither her body nor ours is visible, yet her ragged breathing does not come from beside us; it resonates from within, somewhere between our ears. Her breath stops. Night falls over the mountains and sky. Down the corridor, her weeping begins—quiet at first, then swelling into cries, sobs, and grief. Once again, we realize: the voice does not echo from outside. It breaks open from within.



Figure 3. *Tearless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 12 minutes, 2021.

In the ontological space of virtual reality—where subject and viewer occupy the same plane—the subject is no longer an object to be observed. On the contrary, the subject can now look back. This reversal reaches its fullest expression in *Comfortless*,⁵ the final installment of the trilogy. Here, the dynamic between seer and seen is mediated through the symbolic use of mirrors. In every room of American Town, Inc.—a military prostitution complex built around the

⁵ Gina Kim, *Comfortless* (2023), accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.ginakimfilms.com/#/comfortless-2023/>.

U.S. Air Force base in Gunsan—mirrors appear, emphasizing the hyper-voyeuristic nature of the space. Yet when the viewer looks into these mirrors, their own reflection is absent. The viewer has no body.

Night falls, and with it returns her presence, accompanied by the sounds of the town in its heyday. Now, in the mirror where the viewer should appear, she emerges instead. We see a woman moving through the rituals of another night of labor. Later in the morning, she steps out into the already bright yard, and the viewer watches her collecting laundry. Then something unsettling occurs: she sees the viewer. She approaches. She asks a question. At this moment—when the subject recognizes the viewer, when the one who is seen becomes the one who sees—the viewer undergoes a reversal of being. A moment of inversion. The ultimate exile.



Figure 4. *Comfortless*. 360 3D cinematic VR, 16 minutes, 2023.

The fundamental limitation of 2D cinema—its tendency toward objectification—finds, in the medium of virtual reality, an unexpected and symbolic counterpoint. It is in this context that the term *experience*, often used to describe VR, becomes deeply ironic. For it is precisely through the loss of one's body that one comes to embody the pain of the other. The viewer, having relinquished physical form and become a ghost—an incorporeal presence—can no longer

remain within the safety of a familiar world. The viewer is exiled. Yet once one has lost the physical boundary of the self, one can become anything. Not only another person, but also any object or element of the world. The potential for *becoming*—of merging into the other—opens beyond the human.

In a world where only vision and consciousness remain, I may become you, a tree, a cat, a rock, a wave, the Earth. And what if I do not merely witness the polar bear perched precariously on a melting iceberg, but *become* that polar bear—not only spatially displaced, but ontologically transformed? What if I were the narrator of *We Do Not Part*, setting out alone into the snowstorm in search of a bird? What if I, too, collapsed in the blizzard, only to rise again and continue, unable to abandon the fragile creature? Or more devastating still: what if I were the bird—confined in a cold, dark cage, unaware that anyone was coming, slowly freezing? This is the visceral power of virtual reality. It renders the pain of others not as spectacle, but as an exile of being—a spatial and ontological displacement so complete that it unsettles the very notion of the self.

And yet, the most critical point remains: the world that matters is not the virtual one, but the real world to which we return after removing the VR headset. In that virtual space, you became them. You saw, heard, and felt their pain. But you could do nothing. Now, with the headset removed, you have a voice. You have a body. What, then, will you do with them?

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