

Knowing through Making

Napier | New Zealand

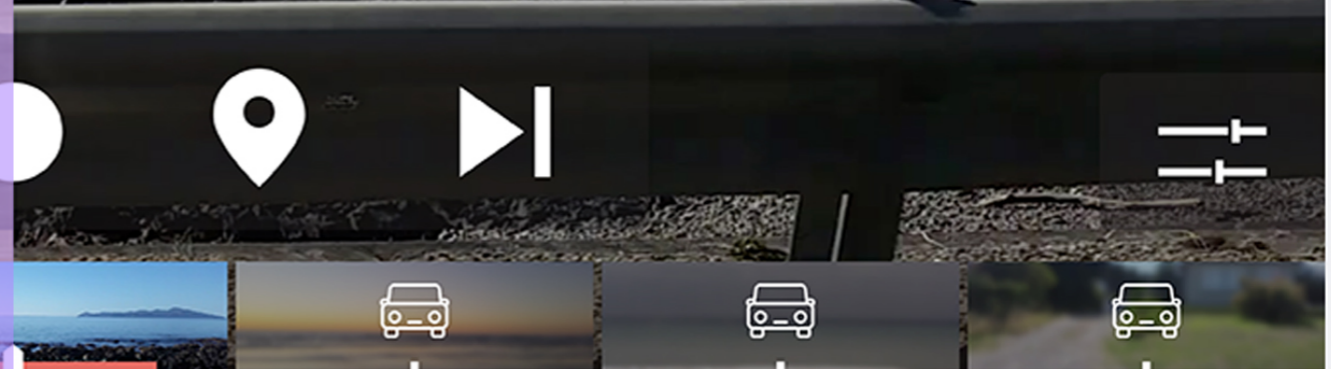
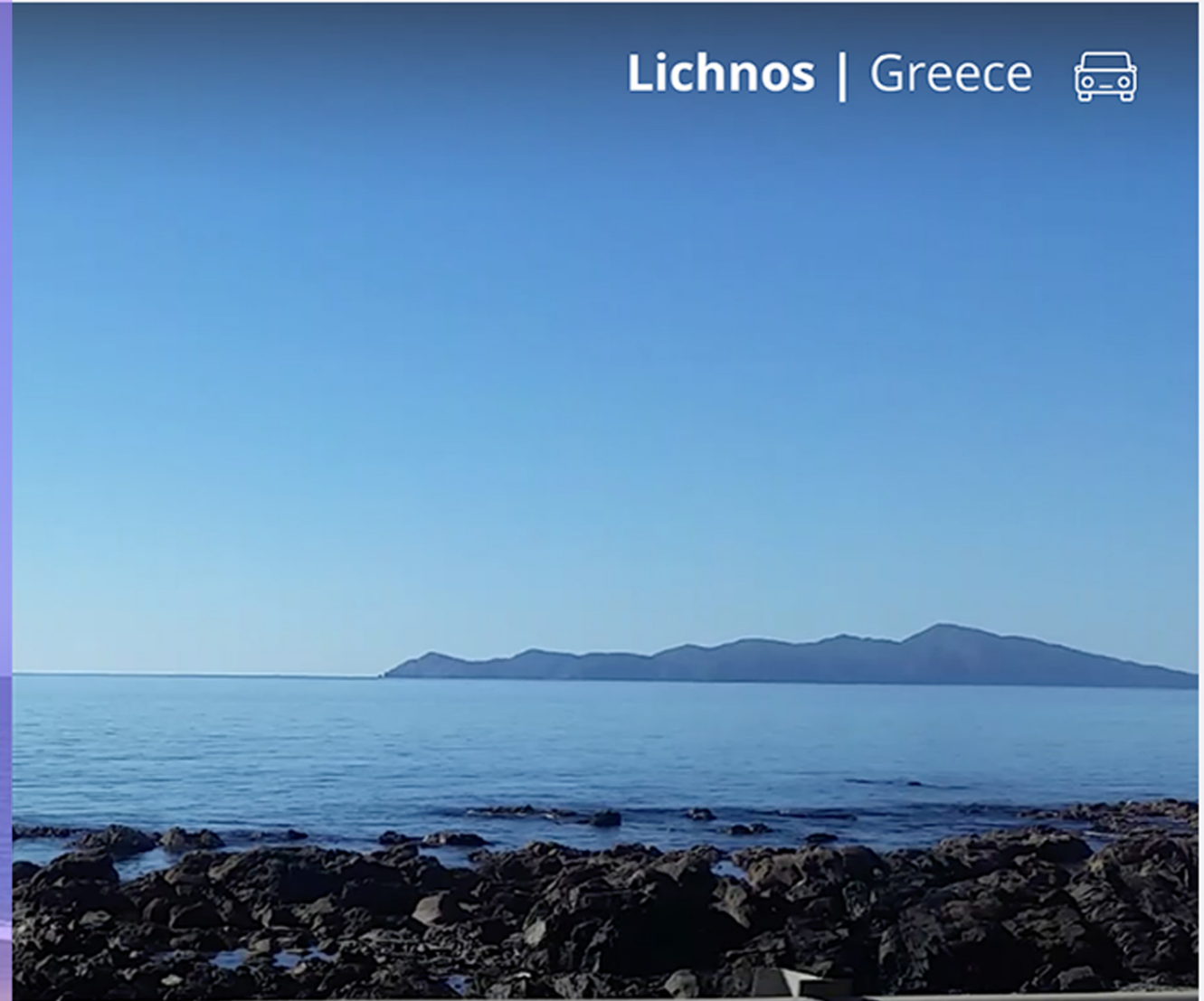
Viewfinders: A Collaborative Travel Film Project: Seeing the World through the Lens of the Pocket Camera

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[v]



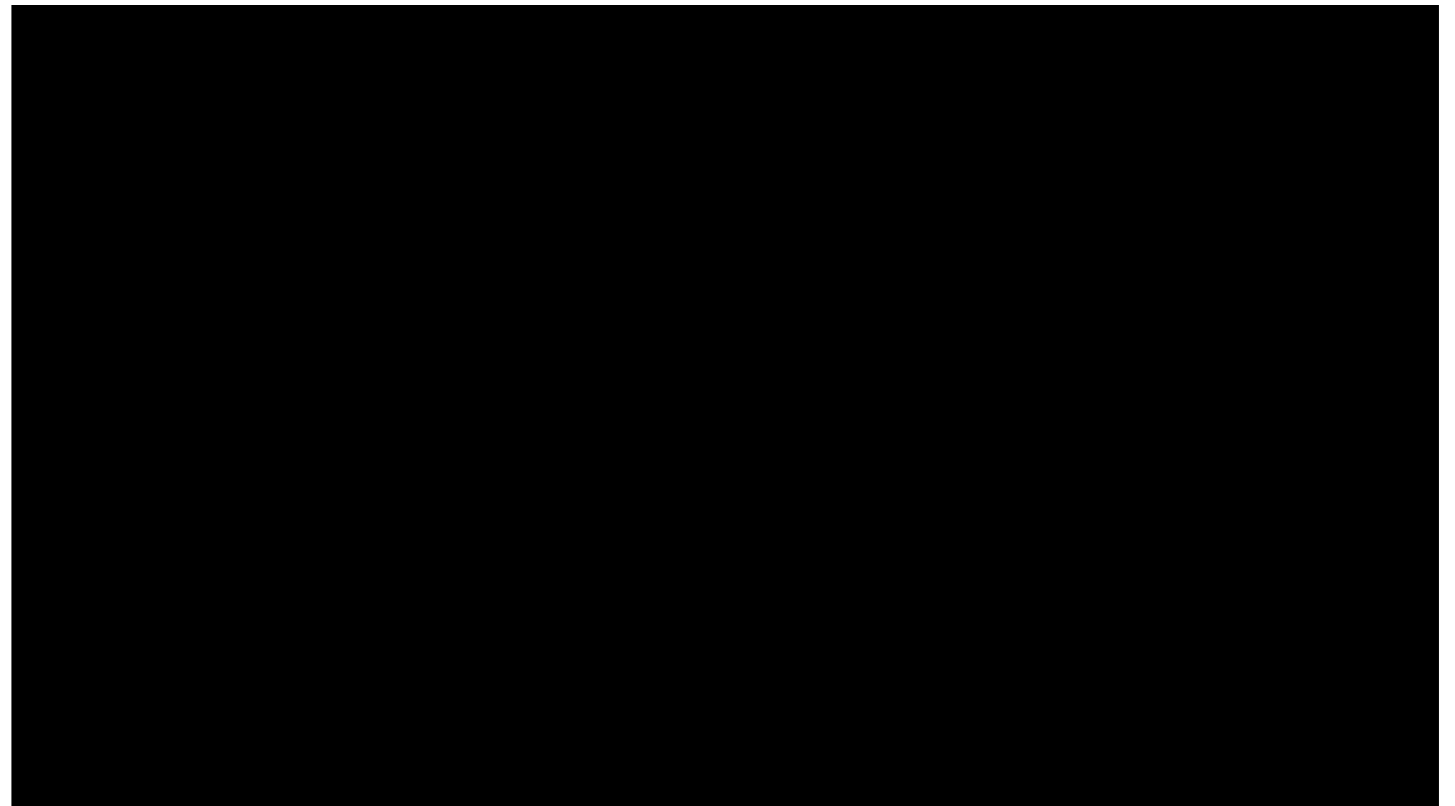
Lichnos | Greece



Viewfinders: A Collaborative Travel Film Project

*Viewfinders*¹ was exhibited and presented at MINA 2016 (www.mina.pro), Docuverse 2017, Mobile Utopia exhibition and the upcoming online exhibition at FLEFF. This practice-led research project was funded by Ryerson Creative Fund and through Massey University's College of Creative Arts.

Movie 8.1



"Viewfinders" trailer

Introduction: Mobile Explorations

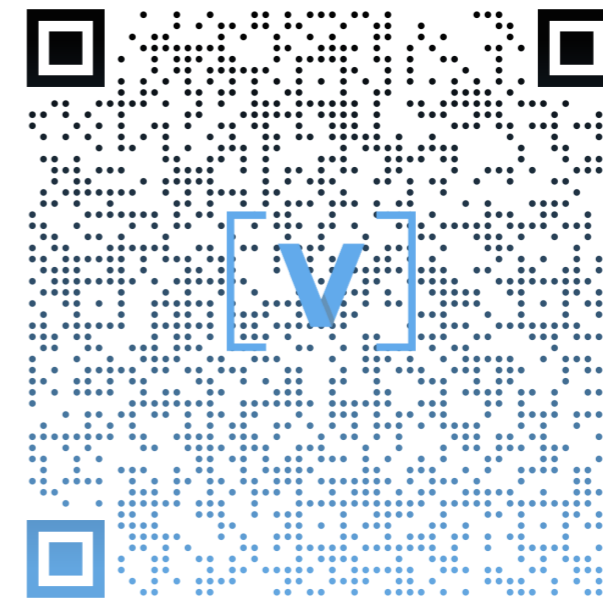
Viewfinders is an online curation platform that allows participants to expand short video shots captured on smartphones into an experimental documentary that both situates travel images into the world and creates a world around them. The project is collaborative, participatory and immersive: by uploading one-minute traveling shots — video taken while on the move, for example from moving vehicles — participants contribute to an ongoing creative and conceptual investigation into the content and aesthetics of travel films made on mobile devices.

The videos map individual experiences of travel, which are curated by image-recognition software into a playlist of multiple experiences². All the individual videos are tagged with GPS metadata, adding to already existing geographical data about the different locations. The resulting short videos can be displayed via the project’s website and a short video³. *Viewfinders* thus provides participants with a collaborative travel experience, while they can also participate in a collaborative film project.

By combining multiple videos about a particular location, the project generates connections between different experiences of the same location. *Viewfinders* allows its viewers to move through different, new or well-known environments, online and in the future we hope to develop an app for exploring augmented travel

experiences on location, letting them highlight, emphasise and share their own experiential encounters as a form of expanded documentary (see [image 9.1](#)). Much like border crossings are experienced differently based on our nationalities, the perception of different spaces changes according to who we are and who else occupies these spaces.

Image 8.1

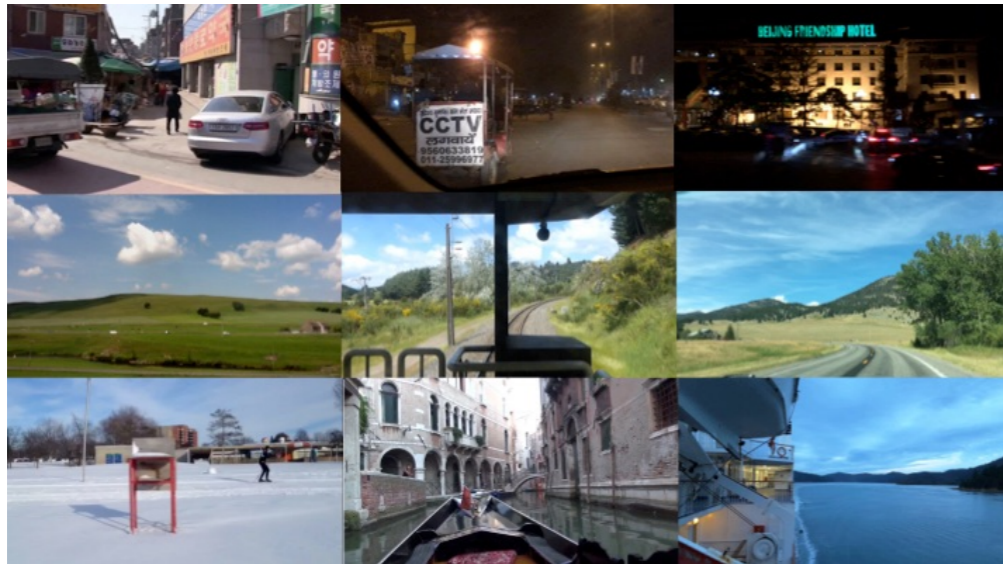


Scan with your Android device to launch the “Viewfinders” AR app.

Viewfinders offers participants the opportunity to see and think about how others have experienced spaces through which they move and discover a new view that they see forming before them. It offers viewers an experience of space that “redefines the self within a constantly shifting elsewhere”⁴. It lets the participants to be transported to different places on the spot and in the moment,

inspired by the place where they are, and that place's specific sights or points of interest, as is illustrated in our video [trailer](#).

Image 8.2



Frame captures from different clips submitted to "Viewfinders"

A Ticket to Elsewhere: Experiential Representations of Travel

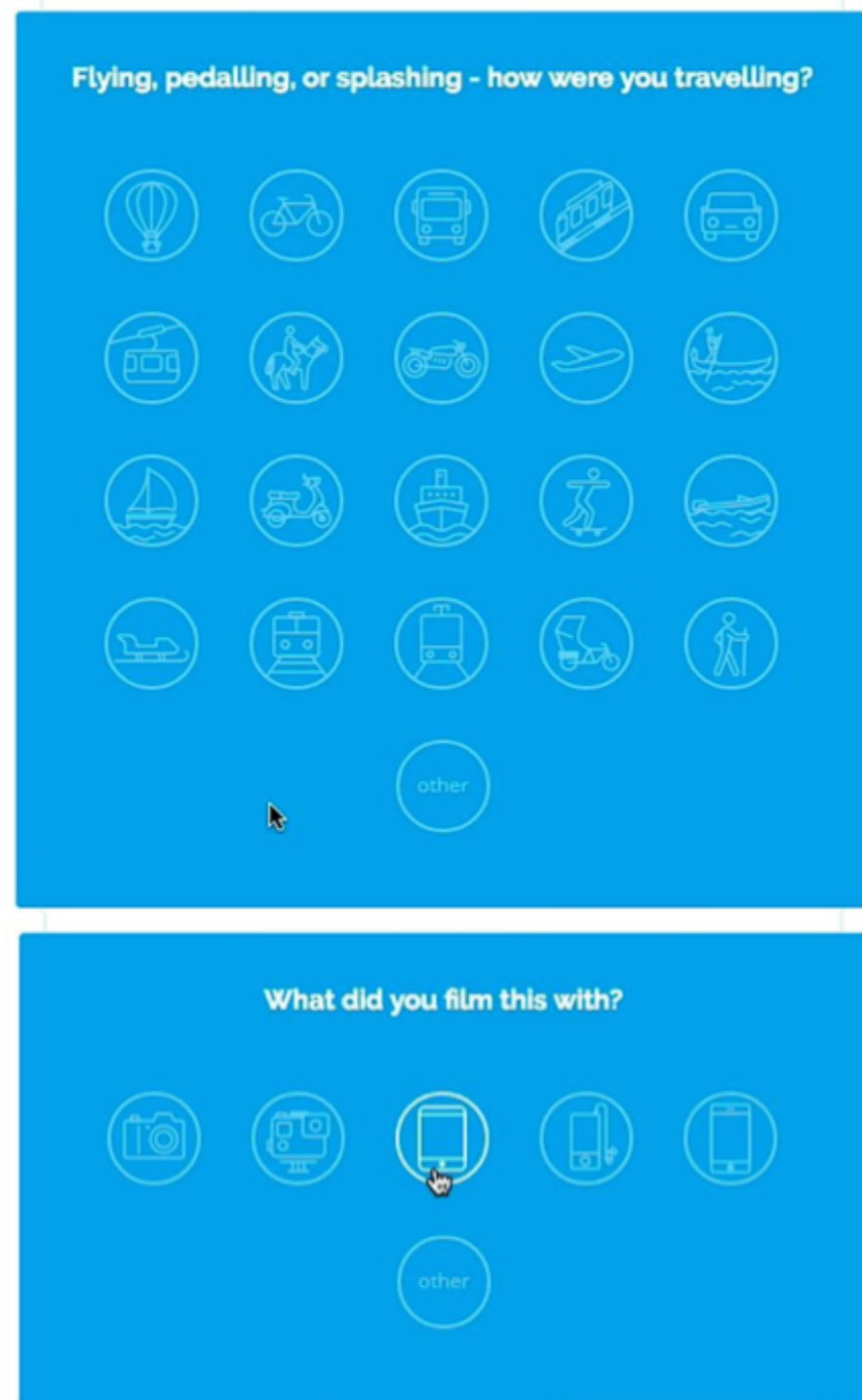
Film history is full of attempts to bend the parameters of screen space with fancy camera movement. Thanks to new small portable cameras this has only become more feasible. Mobile media literally contribute to more mobility, both off screen and on screen, and the screen itself has become mobile. This is why *Viewfinders* is built exclusively with travelling shots or tracking shots filmed on mobile: they represent best the experience of movement and travel, the freedom to travel, different modes of travel and the trajectory of travel. This is also reflected in the "tags" provided to choose from when submitting short videos to

Viewfinders, including the mode of transport and the type of mobile camera used (as illustrated in [image 9.3](#)).

Note that the term "tracking" is generally used to refer to any shot that travels through space, not only those in which the camera literally moves on tracks. Tracking shots go back to the early days of silent cinema and a genre known as phantom rides. Similar to phantom rides that create virtual movements and scenic changes as if the viewers are travelling themselves, *Viewfinders* aims to create a virtual travel experience for the audience that transcends documentary and other cinematic representations of travel. It aims to present moving images of the world as a *non-linear* voyage on mobile devices that can be accessed anywhere and everywhere, expanding both the experience of travel *and* the experience of cinema.

Our project is still related to travel essay films in the way they highlight and emphasise experiential encounters that most generally test and reshape the subject: being elsewhere, exploring the spaces of the world, being on the move. However, the project goes beyond what travel films do, as it has no "meaning" in the conventional sense. It's meaning comes from the relationship between the viewer, the various film clips and how these are experienced. The representational geographies created are emotional geographies: they belong to a world that is constructed, understood and lived through emotions evoked by travel experiences or memories of travel by the participants. This

Image 8.3



“Tags” provided to choose from when submitting short videos to “Viewfinders”

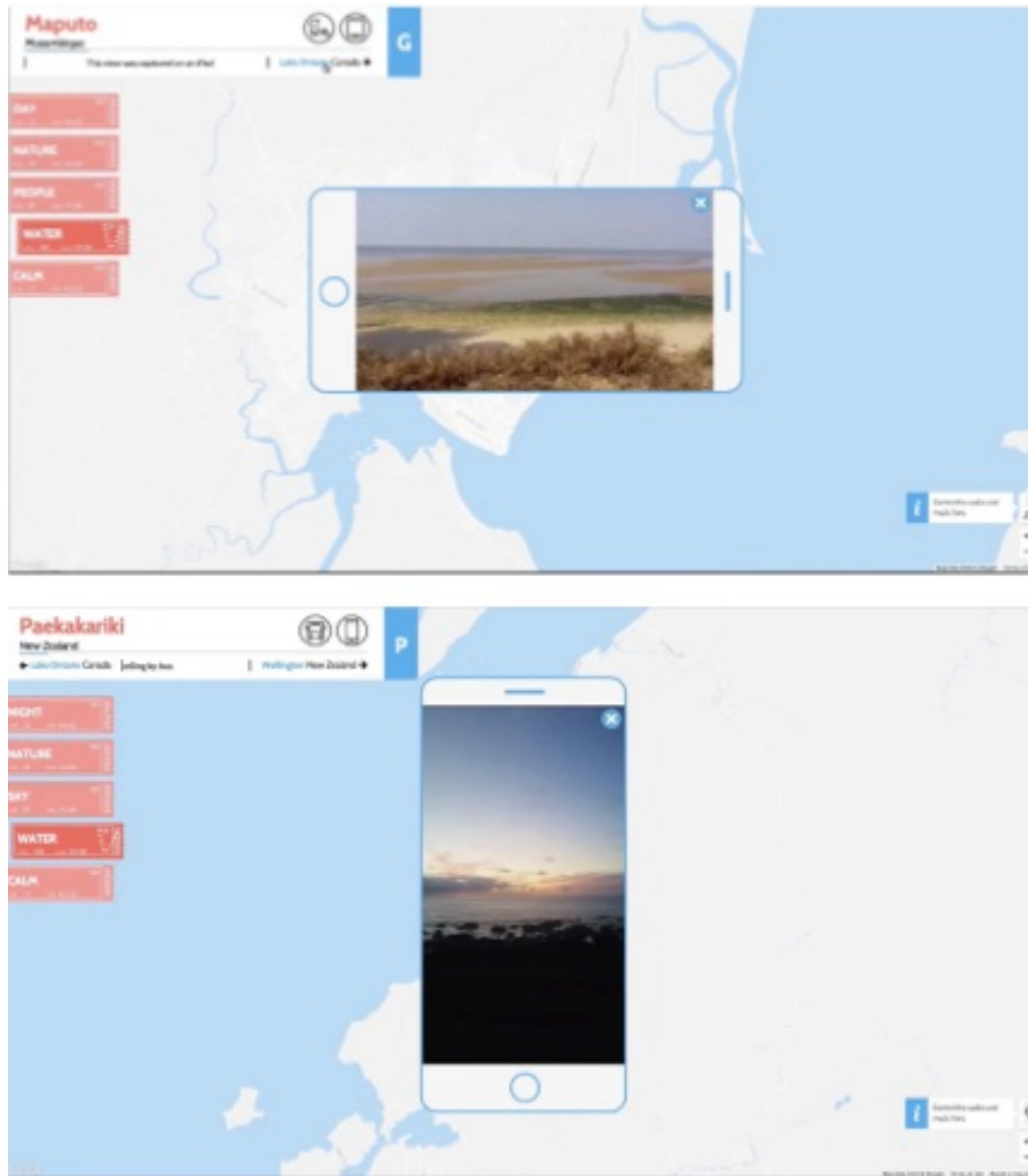
is encouraged by the different tags the viewer can choose from in the form of travel tickets, that include one to choose a mood, elements of the landscape and the time of day. Every person submitting a video clip can add any tags they think are relevant, which allows for an even broader emotional spectrum to be attached to each shot (see [image 9.4](#)).

We are more interested in what *Viewfinders* does with the viewer than what it represents to them, what the viewer experiences rather than what he or she “understands” or what it means to them. The project is based on a kind of feedback and interconnectedness that is not possible in conventional cinema.

The viewer is forced to create along with the film, to interpret for himself what he is experiencing. If the information (either concept or design) reveals some previously unrecognized aspect of the viewer’s relation to the circumambient universe - or provides language with which to conceptualize old realities more effectively - the viewer recreates that discovery along with the artist, thus feeding back into the environment the existence of more creative potential, which may in turn be used by the artist for messages of still greater eloquence and perception⁵.

It is this constant “feeding back into the environment the existence of more creative potential” by its participants that makes *Viewfinders* a true collaborative and participatory project.

Image 8.4



“Viewfinders” tagging system

There is no master narrative. Different stories emerge from the participation of the viewer and the relationship of the viewer with the short clips from all over the world.

As with any collaborative project, the final outcome is dependent on the number of participants and the quality of the videos

submitted, something we are still working on. *Viewfinders* has not reached its full potential yet, and we are still in the process of recruiting more participants to submit video clips. The *Viewfinders* filmmaking process is more like developing software than a “traditional” film project, similar to what Gaudenzi summarises in *Software and Design Process Versus Film Process*⁶. So far our project was exhibited at the Mobile Utopia Exhibition in the UK⁷ and it will be exhibited online as part of the Finger Lake Environmental Film Festival in the USA⁸. After these events, all audience and participants’ feedback will be incorporated into the project and used to determine its future direction.

Another important element contributing to creating an experiential travel experience is the reliance of *Viewfinders* on the inherent montage aesthetic of digital and mobile cinema. As Kristen Daly notes, with digital cinema

montage can expand from a purely juxtapositional action and becomes a matter of choice with other options available such as the non-cut and multiple simultaneous-action windows combined with text or animation, where the screen is not purely representational but fulfils a number of roles such as remix surface, textual and graphical information table, and map⁹.

This “remix surface” is very relevant for representing travel experiences. When traveling, the viewer can choose where to

look or what to look at, how much time to spend in one place, has to try and find relevant travel info on maps or information boards (textual and visual data), or can simply let the landscape glide by seen through the consecutive windows of the train he or she is on (the non-cut and use of multiple windows). Note that not all travel is planned in detail, or happens according to plan, which is why there is an element of chance, or even chaos, built into the project. Moreover, travel is often a collaborative experience and creates various new connections. In other words, *Viewfinders* offers a combination of filmed-on-the-move and lived in-the-moment travel experiences that enhances what we generally understand a cinematic “montage” can be.

When montage was introduced by Soviet filmmakers Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein it referred to a type of creative editing that comprises of a series of short shots, but due to how the media have evolved using composite frames, our mode of viewing now relies on more complex and active forms of montage. The frame functions as an instrument panel, and “the image is constantly being cut into another image, being printed through a visible mesh, sliding over other images in an ‘incessant stream of messages’, and the shot itself is less like an eye than an overloaded brain endlessly absorbing information”¹⁰. Hence, viewers compose their own stories relying on what Alexander Galloway called “proleptic montage”¹¹: “proleptic montage creates a necessarily interactive aesthetic of cinema and a new

experience of diegetic time and immersion in that the viewer must decide at each moment where to look and what to hear”¹².

As stated earlier, these kinds of decisions are very similar to those we make when traveling. Similarly, in *Viewfinders* the viewer is involved in multiple screens and a complex mise-en-scene that comprises of various travelling shots as well as the actual scenery they are viewed in, expanding the kind of interactive web browser aesthetic referred to by Galloway. But in contrast to proleptic montage that infers cognitive decision processes, *Viewfinders* has a more playful purpose: it is more in tune with the interactive aesthetics of videogames and the visual and ephemeral qualities of (utopian) travel experiences. It is meant to be a tool for exploration and for a creative engagement with the world. We therefore propose the term “ludic montage” to describe the experience embedded in both the collaborative creation and viewing experience of *Viewfinders*. Ludic montage is playful in a spontaneous and undirected manner, both referring to the idea of play and of chance. The element of play is important for our project, as play is by definition both representative and creative¹³. Similar to ludic interface design, the ludic montage aesthetic we created is playful in that sense that it stimulates self-motivated exploration based on curiosity and wonder¹⁴. *Viewfinders* embodies these qualities, and it is its ludic montage that helps to stimulate a greater geographical awareness and imagination, similar to how the power of play to represent experiences (and learn from them) is the foundation of all imagination.

A Ticket to the Future: The Challenges of New Technologies

Viewfinders explores the opportunities of the digital domain and tried to use these for its creative practice of collaborative filmmaking. Working internationally is no longer only for large multinational co-corporations. The connections between Toronto, Melbourne and Wellington were only difficult in terms of time zones. Like us, more and more creatives find like-minded producers and develop work across continents. Craig Hight quotes Burgess reminding us in *Shoot, Edit, Share: Cultural Software and User-Generated Documentary Practice* that we need a new vocabulary outside the celebratory rhetoric and discourse that has surrounded participatory culture to properly map this ecology¹⁵. Despite the celebratory rhetoric associated with participatory culture¹⁶, there is still only a comparatively small proportion of online users that are actively engaged in audio-visual production, that could be termed “practitioners”. Coded videographic practices are shaping, generating and reinforcing specific software literacies and the expectations of users, and these tools together, with a host of technologies supporting online platforms such as YouTube, are already clearly shaping the popular imagination over what exactly “video” is nowadays, and how it can be employed. New assemblages will inevitably inform and shape the development of “documentary” practices that emerge within this ecology.

Next to the emerging opportunities, *Viewfinders* also documents and deals with the challenges within a digital Docuverse environment. Every two or three years, an interesting and potentially promising non-linear digital video editing software or app for collaborative video production is launched. Some examples are EyeSpot (2006-2012), JumpCam (2013-2015), or Google’s YouTube video editor (2013-2017) in the creator studio. While there are a number of cloud editing services for independents, with WeVideo, or for the feature film industry ShareEdit, the open-access and non-subscription based models are the ones that make a difference to community groups and creatives engaging in the digital vernacular. These collaborative editing softwares realised what Vertov called in *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) “an international film language” and “cinematic communication”. Using participatory editing processes, the filmic text becomes a conversation. In the context of making meaning editing is a key moment. By means of the collaborative nature the films are thus more inclusive and provide a different outlook as works edited by one isolated editor in an editing suite.

The recent discontinuation of YouTube’s video editor illustrates the dilemma when conceptualising collaborative projects. Just when producers and creatives understand their potential, some of these services are abruptly discontinued in the fast-moving global media and start-up economy. As for the collaborative video apps mentioned earlier, the same is recognisable in AR applications,

such as Metaio. The screen production environment is positioned between tech giants like Apple, Amazon, Adobe, Microsoft, Facebook or Google, and more traditional content providers such as film studios and broadcasters. The future directions and their preferred methods of tech applications, such as Apple's drive toward AR and YouTube or Facebook working with Samsung to enable VR and 360 video production will keep us closely connected to these big players. For the creative crowd changes in the screen production ecology include new cameras in the form of mobile phones, smartphones and pocket cameras as much as technical changes related to the dissemination and distribution environment. One key change in the direction for online video was the introduction of HTML 5. First launched in 2012 by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) with a working draft, by 2015 YouTube switched to HTML 5 and it began providing a new infrastructure for online tools.

This wired and wonderful online world cannot be implemented into a production format as such. The never-ending discussion around vertical video¹⁷ is a great example of an industry trying to impose a filmic grammar onto a not fully understood grassroots environment. Furthermore, one can note that online video now has reached a critical mass and is recognised by enterprises who finally see the potential of the "creative crowd". Emerging forms of social media and growing networks of practitioners on YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, demonstrate that a new space is opening up. While collaborative filmmaking¹⁸ has long

embraced social media, now broadcasting media has begun to value i-Docs and Facebook as outlets for story assets¹⁹. As an i-doc, *Viewfinders* has the characteristics of both the participatory and experimental modes. Writing in "Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field" Aston and Gaudenzi point at the significance of the interaction with a user community²⁰. In *Viewfinders*, as much in this chapter, we shift away from the terminology of user. Aston and Gaudenzi choose the terminology of co-producer. In *Viewfinders* participants are not only involved in the production process, but shape the project and its direction through an open and evolving database, which Aston and Gaudenzi define as characteristic of the i-doc²¹.

The definition of peer-production is a response to the developments in the dynamic screen production ecology. Within the creative process we applied horizontal hierarchies as one can recognise these in collectives. Inspired by Vertov's Kino-eye, we conceptualised a format that anyone with a smartphone should be able to use and produce. Dovey and Rose state that

our technological moment produces the need for a new generation of Kuleshovs and Eisensteins to develop montage aesthetics for the database. This development will need rigour and care if the documentary project is to survive in a recognizable form in the chaotic environment of online mediation"²².

Viewfinders utilises this chaotic online environment and replicates it with short tracking shots in the format of a collaborative travel film. There is something about serendipity and chaotic states that triggers creativity. When one is out and about one can let the mind drift and focus on things that one might otherwise not actively engage with. As a creative strategy the exposure to new environments, people and in the case of *Viewfinders* moving landscapes, can lead new associations and viewpoints. As a provocation this text was written while being on the move on trains in Melbourne's transport system (Australia) and on a plane to Zurich (Switzerland).

When working with content as fluid and ludic as online submissions, the editing process becomes key. The unexpectedness of the clips we received was the most exciting part and essential to the creative strategy. Interval editing demonstrated to be a good starting point to work with movement and rhythm and to sync the travel shots from around the world. We draw here on Dziga Vertov's documentary and conceptual approach of interval theory, which is defined according to the "art of organisation"²³. Vertov was primarily interested in the space between the frames. He utilises movement and rhythm to create a kinetic resolution²⁴. Dziga Vertov and his kinoks (production crews) identified a cinematic practice and visual languages based on filmic intervals, a kinetic editing approach. *Viewfinders* applies this technique to synthesis the various travel shots into a short compilation. Movement and rhythm defined the selection of

different travel shots from the YouTube database which were then edited in YouTube video editor. This **short video** will be further developed as the database evolves. The music was produced by Simon Longo (a.k.a. Dithernoise) and based on field recordings from various locations around the world. *Viewfinders* thus moved beyond an indexical recognition of audio-video, while at the same time embracing GPS aesthetics (as seen on the *Viewfinders* website). Smartphone filmmaking is characterised by its intimate and ephemeral qualities, which also resonate in and can be ascribed to travelling shots.

Conclusion: Last Call Before Departure

Deleuze characterises cinema as a time-image: "The cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world"²⁵. Corrigan noted that cinematic space "has described a wide variety of representational geographies ranging across narrative organisations, experimental explorations, and documentary representations"²⁶. Within a dynamic screen production environment, there are now new possibilities to expand cinematic space and representations of travel that can make them more interactive, inclusive and immersive, to not just present images but to surround them with a world. In i-Docs it is through the actions of the participants that the story is moved forward and as they gradually discover new locations, the cinematic space becomes a form of narrative on its own. *Viewfinders* mimics this aesthetic but also makes the filmmaking process itself part of the

viewing experience. It is a collaborative experimental documentary project that uses what we termed “ludic montage” for its creation and viewing, offering the participants multiple options so that they can create their own visual and virtual travel experience.

Notes

1. Gerda Cammaer, Max Schleser, and Phillip Rubery, *Viewfinders*, 2017 2015, <http://www.viewfinders.gallery/>.
2. See https://viewfinders.gallery/beta_web_app.html.
3. See <https://youtu.be/AZrtSKxcaic>.
4. Corrigan, Tim. *The Essay Film: From Montaigne After Marker*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 105.
5. Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. Boston: E.P. Dutton and Co, 1970, 65.
6. Gaudenzi, Sandra. “User Experience Versus Author Experience. Lessons Learned from the *UX Series*”. In *I-Docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary*, edited by Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi, and Mandy Rose, 119. New York: Columbia University Press / Wallflower, 2017.
7. See <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/t2mc2c/>.
8. See <https://www.ithaca.edu/fleff/geographies/>.
9. Daly, Kristen. “New Modes of Cinema: How Digital Technologies are Changing Aesthetics and Style”. *Kinephanos Journal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 3.
10. Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema II: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 274.
11. Alexander Galloway cited in Daly, Kristen. *New Modes of Cinema*, 15.
12. Ibid., 11.
13. Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1949, 15.
14. Gaver, William. “Designing for Homo Ludens, Still”. In *(Re)searching the Digital Bauhaus*, edited by Thomas Binder, Jonas Löwgren, and Lone Malmborg, 177. London: Springer, 2009.
15. Burgess cited in Hight, Craig. “Shoot, edit, share: Cultural software and user-generated documentary practice”. In *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses*, edited by Kate Nash, Craig Hight and Catherine Summerhayes, 233. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
16. See Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006; Tapscott, Don, and Anthony Don Williams. *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. New York: Portfolio, 2006.
17. Ross, Miriam. “Vertical Framing: Authenticity and New Aesthetic Practice in Online Videos”. *Refractory*, 24 (2014): n.p. <http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2014/08/06/ross/>.
18. Schleser, Max. “Collaborative Mobile Phone Film Making”. In *Handbook of Participatory Video*, edited by E-J Milne, Claudia Mitchell, and Naydene de Lange, 397-411. AltaMira Press: Blue Ridge Summit, 2012; Schleser, Max. “From ‘Script to Screen’ to ‘share’” In *Truth, Dare or Promise: Art and Documentary Revisited*, edited by Jill Daniels, Cahal McLaughlin, and Gail Pearce, 93-111. Cambridge Scholars: Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2013.
19. See for example recent participatory broadcasting projects using smartphones such as *Journey to Europe*, 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09dh6jn>; #uploading_holocaust, 2016. <http://uploading-holocaust.com/#screen/start>.

20. Aston, Judith, and Sandra Gaudenzi. "Interactive documentary: setting the field". *Studies in Documentary Film* 6, no. 2 (2012): 125-39.
21. Ibid., 127.
22. Dovey, Jon, and Mandy Rose. "We're happy and we know it: Documentary, data, montage". *Studies in Documentary Film* 6, no. 2 (2012): 170.
23. Vertov cited in Michelson, Annette. *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 5.
24. Ibid.
25. Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, 66.
26. Corrigan, Tim. *The Essay Film*, 109.

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<http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2014/08/06/ross/>.

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