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France's VR cinema and theatre in the picture at Digital November

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Virtual reality technology buffs are in for a treat next month. Some of the latest works in VR cinema and theatre will be shown at this year's Digital November in Hong Kong, a series of events about French technology and content production organised by local partners and coordinated by the French consulate in Hong Kong.

According to Louis Bonneau, an audiovisual officer with the consulate, VR is becoming a key market for the cinema industry in France and worldwide, though "in Hong Kong, we thought the VR market for cultural purposes is pretty small and limited", he says.

"We felt that bringing this kind of content to Hong Kong would allow the public to know more about French creativity in the field of cinema through new ways of telling a story," Bonneau says.

One of the highlights of Digital November is an immersive theatre performance that mixes live performance with virtual reality.

The Cliffs of V, a VR production by French company Gengskhan, is one of the first immersive VR experiences of its kind.

Set in a prison hospital in the near future, viewers, with VR headsets on, will share the life of a prisoner who is about to trade his eyes for years of freedom.

"At the beginning of the experience, you are in the waiting room of a medical centre," says Laurent Bazin, artistic director of *The Cliffs of V*.

"You are in the skin of the character who will give his eyes. It is important for us that you wait, you are a little anguished, the light is shooting down and the people are a little scary... we cannot say too much because it is part of the surprise. At the end you will see the actors again."

Actors in the film will interact with the spectators during this performance in the hope of blurring the lines between the real and virtual worlds, according to Bazin.

"VR is not an image, it is a space. You must imagine your spectator lives in the space you have built for him," Bazin says.

"Compared with traditional film you do not have any frames. You have to guide the attention and sight of the spectator. If you want people to focus on my eye in the cinema, you can go closer. But with VR it is not possible. You have to be more subtle, you cannot force them."

Line Bruцена, the producer of

The Cliffs of V, was introduced to VR technology by friends who worked in the video-gaming industry. "There are no shot cuts and frames with VR, so we cannot work with this technology with a regular movie director," Bruцена says. "We had to find someone who knows how to use space and sensations in a different way."

That is why she approached Bazin, originally a stage director, to join the team to work in a hybrid role between film and live performance. "If you want your story to be more impactful, you must combine it with scenography and [live] actors," Bazin says.

Bruцена says one of the biggest technical difficulties in staging the production was "stitching" the images together, a process that involved meshing together the footage shot from their cameras to create a flawless 360-degree space for the viewers.

"When we shot the film in 2016, the technology was not mature at all," says Bruцена. "We are like the first people working with movies 100 ago."

Bruцена says the medium of

VR was so new that they had to come up with new methods and technology to suit their needs. "We are inventing the way we use these tools; they are evolving very fast," Bruцена says.

Despite the constraints that VR technology pose, the duo remain optimistic about its adoption by artists and filmmakers in the future. "VR should not only be a social gaming tool because it is so powerful. We also need [artists and filmmakers] to put a soul inside," Bazin says.

The Cliffs of V will be shown on November 17 and 18 at the Eric Hottig Studio at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Other than the theatre production, there will be a French VR film showcase featuring three award-winning French films with VR technology.

Alteration by Jerome Blanquet will touch on the theme of artificial intelligence. *I Saw the Future* by François Vautier delves into Arthur C. Clarke's vision of the future. *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness* by Arnaud Colinart, Amaury La Burthe, Peter Middleton and James Spinney examines

John Hull's sensory and psychological experience of blindness.

"We hope to give the public the opportunity to attend some of the best and latest VR French films," Bonneau says. "They have been selected in major international film festivals, and it's going to be the premiere in Hong Kong."

In partnership with the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival, the VR film showcase will be open to the public from November 1 to 11 at Openground, 198 Tai Nan Street, Sham Shui Po.

Other events include the French Tech Tour China 2018 Immersion programme organised by Business France and Bpifrance; the Hackathon on Corporate Social Responsibility; "Innovation Contest 4CSIRtech" co-organised by Orange at the University of Science and Technology in Clear Water Bay; and an E-Learning Workshop: Teaching French with digital photography at Alliance Française Jordan Centre in Jordan, Kowloon.

Digital November, until December 4.
Inquiries: 3752 9900



A scene from VR stage production *The Cliffs of V* by French artistic director Laurent Bazin.