



**BFI EXPANDED**

**Laika**

+ Q&A with Asif Kapadia

Walking beneath the graffitied railway arches where the smell of spray paint lingered in the damp air on the way to the London Film Festival's VR venue at Leake Street, there's a sense of having left more traditional festival fare behind. But this year's visitors to the LFF Expanded strand, which was made up of immersive art and VR experiences in a programme called The Expanse, may well have noticed familiar names from the world of film and television on offer. Last year, Abel Ferrara made his LFF debut with a VR experience about a never-made film, *Missing Pictures: Birds of Prey*. This time around, the second in the Missing Pictures series featured one of Taiwan's most acclaimed filmmakers, Tsai Ming-liang. It was a sentimental – and cinematic – journey that juxtaposed both old and new moving image media. Also showing was Asif Kapadia's *Laika*, an ode to the dog launched into space by the Soviet regime in 1957. When filmmakers of their calibre are paying attention, you know a new medium has arrived.

While Kapadia has never shied away from trying new things, with his work spanning genres from award-winning documentaries (such as *Senna*, 2010, and *Amy*, 2015) to period drama (2016's *Ali and Nino*), his venture into VR was not straightforward. Nevertheless, following his association with the StoryFutures Academy, the UK's National Centre for Immersive Storytelling (which co-produced *Laika* with the LFF) and a stint on the VR competition jury at Venice last year, he decided it was time. 'I saw some of the best work in the world,' he says, 'and it made me realise, OK, this is happening, this is a real thing. When done well it is equal to any other art form.'

He decided to adapt the 2007 graphic novel *Laika* by Nick Abadzis. The 15-minute VR experience, which played in early October, situated viewers in an animated lab. There were three protagonists: Sophie Okonedo's dog-loving scientist, Tobias Menzies's gruff project commander and the furry, and (spoiler alert) doomed, star of the show, Laika. What inspired him to tell the dark story of one of the few space travellers not to have their return to Earth planned as part of their mission? Partly, he says, it was his love for Abadzis's source material. 'And it's interesting,' he goes on, 'to think that we can only do any of this because of Laika. Because of the space race, we have satellites. Because of satellites, we have the internet, we have TV signals, we have mobile phones. Everything that you need to watch a film using VR technology would not exist were it not for that dog!'

By turns sentimental and documentary-like in its modes of address (the film uses archival footage from the 1950s), it honours Laika's important, if tragic, legacy. Working in a new medium presented enormous challenges, though. 'Writing an immersive screenplay was hard,' he reflects. 'It's quite like theatre, it's more like a stage that you're creating for each scene. And you have to use tricks to get people to look where you want them to look. You want to touch the audience and to have narrative drive, but you can't intercut. You can't say, 'I want a close up here' and 'I want to cut to a wide shot there'. Twenty-five years of making films and I was unlearning everything I know.'

If adapting to new ways of working proved difficult, you wouldn't know it when you're immersed in Laika's shadowy, *Dr Strangelove*-like environments. Shifting from the dog's limited perspective in a rocket to her all-encompassing view of the Earth is vertigo-inducing and demonstrates the medium's capacity for spatial storytelling. 'The idea of being in a confined space in the kennel, and then in lots of small environments, was how I was trying to control the frame,' Kapadia explains. 'Then when you go to space, I wanted you to feel dizzy, because you're floating. If you watch it a second time, there's a lot more going on. And then on a third viewing, you can move around and create your own shot. I always stand up so I can lean or walk around a corridor. You can look behind the curtain.'

When I mention that the surprise shift in perspective as Laika orbits Earth nearly made me fall off my seat, Kapadia laughs and recalls the opening sequence, in which a van drives toward you. 'A lot of people lean away because they think they're going to be run over,' he says. 'Especially if they've done it before, they're like woah, woah, woah! If you see a van driving towards you on a cinema screen or a TV, you're not going to worry that it's going to hit you. But people do worry because they're absorbed in it [the immersive environment] straight away. The very first Lumière film of the train coming into the station, people thought it was going to come off the screen and hit them, they were ducking under their chairs. There's an element of that in VR. And I think the language is still being created – it feels like early cinema, because this is just one little step.'

Is he concerned about losing pioneering VR work in the same way that early films disappeared from the public record? 'In theory, that film will exist for the future,' he says, because it's stored as a digital file. But there are issues with hardware upgrades, and there's a 2D version of *Laika* in production that will help preserve it for posterity (it'll be available to audiences via streaming service All4 in 2022). *Laika* will also have a VR afterlife. The plan is to tour it at international VR festivals, as well as UK cinemas. 'You could arrive a little early and sit down for 15 minutes, watch this and then go watch a film.' It's a glimpse into a viable exhibition future for VR, but Kapadia offers an intriguing alternative. 'I know a few people who have VR headsets who watch movies at home on them. It puts them in a dark room with surround sound while sitting on their sofa.' For those of us who struggle to immerse ourselves in films at home, it sounds appealing. 'I don't think you get that from watching something on your iPad; you cannot be in a VR film and be on your phone.'

When VR first emerged, many filmmakers were suspicious of the new medium, with even technological innovators like James Cameron voicing their scepticism. Now it's gaining fans among filmmakers and filmgoers alike. Will Kapadia return to VR again in future? 'Why not?' he enthuses. 'It's exciting.'

**Rebecca Harrison, *Sight & Sound*, December 2021**

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## LINK

Directors: Asif Kapadia  
Production Companies: Passion Pictures, Sheep Thief Films  
In association with: Film4  
In partnership with: StoryFutures Academy  
Executive Producers: Katie Grayson, Debbie Crosscup,  
Andrew Rubenstein  
Produced by: Asif Kapadia, Jack Anhaltrott, Rebecca Gregory-Clarke  
Technologists: Johnny L Johnson  
Written by: Nick Abadzis  
Based on the graphic novel by: Nick Abadzis  
Director of Photography: Roman Osin

## Voice cast

Sophie Okonedo  
Tobias Menzies

## UK DVD

18 mins

Courtesy of Passion Pictures and  
Sheep Thief Films

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UK Premieres: **SOULMATE** - Playing with Reality: A Virtual Reality  
Installation  
8-18 May Daily 14:00-16:00  
Talks + Q&A with Asif Kapadia at both screenings  
Thu 10 May 16:00 & 18:15

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