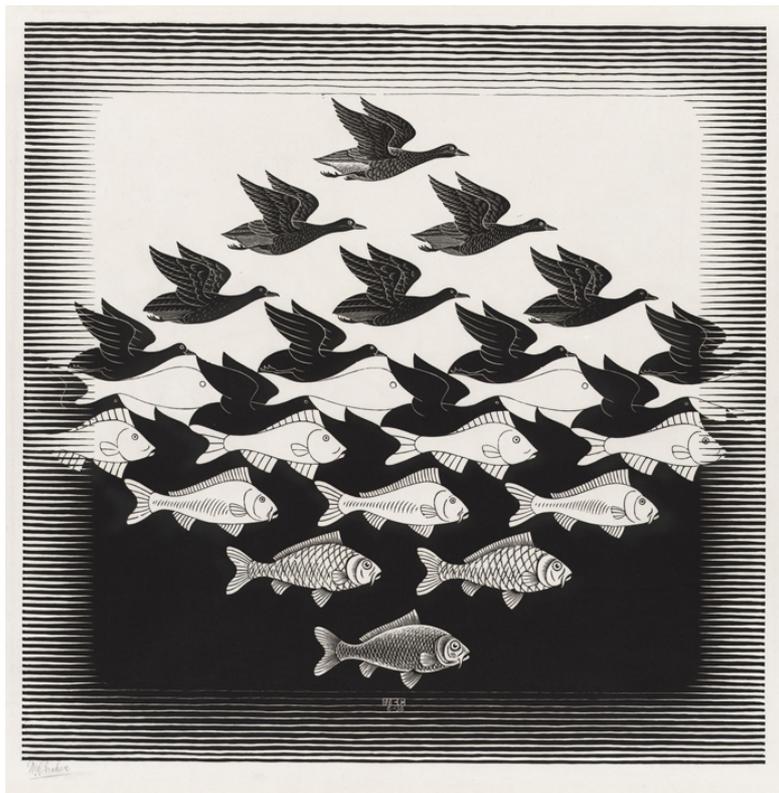


# PEOPLE 2 PEOPLE

Film and Virtual Reality as a Peacebuilding  
Tool in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict



*Aire y agua I* by M.C. Escher

An excerpt from the master's dissertation submitted for the MA Degree in  
Media, Campaigning and Social Change at University of Westminster.

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## Prologue

*Edinburgh to London. London to Stockholm. Stockholm to Tel Aviv.*

*The long flight time and many stay-overs before reaching my final destination Tel Aviv give me time – maybe too much time – to think in depth about the legitimacy of my master’s dissertation and the fieldwork in Israel and Palestine that lies ahead of me. For the first time, I feel heavy self-doubt and slight symptoms of anxiety about what I am doing there. Unfortunately, there is no passenger seated next to me who might help me with such heavy luggage and distract me from my thoughts.*

*Who do I think I am? Why do I think I am eligible to get involved in the peace-building work in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Me, an academic from the Western world, from Germany at that, whose ancestors are jointly responsible for the tragic circumstances the two people are facing today. Perhaps I have the responsibility to get involved precisely because of what happened in the past. Even then, as an outsider, what do I know about life in Israel and Palestine given I never lived there. For the first time, I can feel the historic burden upon which my master’s dissertation builds and the importance of a delicate approach required for any peacebuilding initiatives, especially when pursued by an outsider. In order to not get lost in transit I try to re-direct my thoughts, walking through the stations and stages that brought me to this particular project.*

*The Allgäu-Orient Rally of 2014, a charity car rally from Germany to Jordan, in which I took part marks a significant starting point for this dissertation. The Syrian civil war forced us participants to take a detour around Syria and enter the country of destination, Jordan, through Israel and Palestine. This led to my first unexpected encounter with the beautiful country, its wonderful people, its vast culture and with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I think it was the bold contrast between the country’s vibrancy and human warmth, which I experienced on both sides of the separation wall, and the tension of the ongoing war between the two people that affected me most.*

*A year after crossing the finishing line in Amman, I was working on the production of a web-documentary with my wife Olga – an interview project that explores the human capacity to love and to fear. Conversations with Israelis and Palestinians seemed to be a hugely relevant case study for our project – picturing the human life in a region so strongly marked by fear and conflict between Israelis and Palestinians provided us with deeper insights into the feelings of love and fear. Meeting different people on both sides of the separation wall allowed me to gain a better picture of the complexity and the historical context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, how it permeates people’s everyday life and how it is deeply entrenched into their sense of identity.*

*Simultaneously though, the more people we met and listened to, the less I understood why, for decades, these people have failed to make sustainable peace. The immersion into the hearts and minds of Israelis as well as Palestinians let the omnipresent polarity of the conflict blur and sometimes even vanish. Everyone, every*

*single person we met, was clearly bringing forth the predisposition of a peaceful and loving human being and even the willingness to bring about peace. I will always remember the words of one particular interviewee, whose grandparents survived the hell of Auschwitz, who himself fought three Arab-Israeli wars as a reserve soldier before his 14-year-old daughter was blown up by a Palestinian suicide bomber in 1997. He said: "My father was an Auschwitz graduate. Seventy years ago, while they took my grand-parents to the ovens back in Europe, the free and civilized world stood aside. They never lifted the finger. And today, seventy years later, while the two crazy nations of ours are massacring each other, the free and civilized world is still standing aside...We don't want people to be pro-Israeli. We don't want people to be pro-Palestinian. We demand of you to be pro-peace."*

*Experiencing the deep longing for peace on both sides of the separation wall gave me the impetus to look for a way in which the two people may come to experience the warmth and peacefulness on the respective other side that I had encountered. Arguably, one of the biggest hindrances to creating peace in the region are the mutually reinforcing physical and mental walls between the two people – in theory it's as simple as that. As an outsider, a holder of a German passport, I can physically go back and forth between the two worlds. However, the majority of people in Israel and Palestine cannot. Further, most Israelis and Palestinians are brought up - at home and at school – with a strong us versus them mentality that fosters bias, fear and hatred towards the other. As an outsider, not carrying an Israeli or Palestinian narrative on my back, I do not find myself caught up in this us-versus-them mentality. Whilst the physical and mental walls that both give manifestation to and perpetuate the conflict usually don't allow people from both sides to encounter each other, I can step into and experience a space between them – a space beyond us-versus-them. In myself I am not only capable to step into that space, but I hope to bring to life this in-between space that exists or may come to exist between Israelis and Palestinians, to create a bridge that may transcend the physical and mental walls between them. It is in this light that I started grappling with the question how the physical and mental walls may be overcome in order to facilitate a reconciliation process in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Whilst this question certainly exceeds the scope of this master's dissertation, this project seeks to contribute a small mosaic stone to the larger project of creating peace in one of the most bitterly disputed and intractable conflicts of our time.*

*Still sitting on that sticky aeroplane seat, I come to realize how lucky I am to not have had a chatty travel companion next to me who may have distracted me from my self-doubt and anxiety about this project. The long and lonely travel has provided me and my pencil with time and space to engage deeper with the rationale underlying this project.*

*When I will be entering Israel and Palestine very shortly, handing my German passport to the person at the border control, my privilege to step into the peaceful space that exists between Israelis and Palestinians will unfold. I am convinced that*

*with this privilege comes the responsibility to make use of this ability and to dedicate myself to the best of my ability to the creation of peace between Israelis and Palestinians.*

*22.10.2017 – around 39,000 feet above sea level  
somewhere in-between Stockholm and Tel Aviv.*

## Introduction

At the surface, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a territorial conflict between two peoples over the same piece of land. However, at a deeper level, this conflict, which is said to be an intractable conflict (Kelman, 1999), is based on strong religious, ethnic and nationalist divides and is therefore arguably a conflict over identity. For many decades, Israelis and Palestinians have been facing ongoing suffering and have lost numerous people on both sides, further complicated by a striking power asymmetry towards the Israeli side, and have been separated since 2002 by an approximately 500-kilometre-long concrete wall erected by the Israeli state. To this day, bringing about peace between the two peoples through traditional diplomatic attempts (track I diplomacy) on the state-political level ultimately failed, most notably the Oslo Accords in the 1990s (Chaitin, 2011, p13). Peacebuilding scholars and practitioners have therefore increasingly called for processes of alternative diplomacy (track II diplomacy) - peacebuilding efforts that address the more affective or relational aspects of creating sustainable peace (Lederach 1997; Kelman 2008). These scholars are united in the understanding that building peace requires changing hearts and minds of the respective societies and a profound transformation in their relationship. This shift in turn necessitates people-to-people efforts at the grassroots level. As Chaitin writes, “no peace will hold if it is not constantly supported by people-to-people processes” (2011, p18). However, and significantly, in the case of Israel/Palestine, the existence of the mutually reinforcing mental and physical walls that keep Israelis and Palestinians constantly separated, prevents positive personal encounters and thus severely impedes people-to-people peacebuilding work. As a result, today there are generations of Israelis and Palestinians who have never been to the other side or have never met the respective other apart from brief – and usually negative – encounters, for instance taking place at military checkpoints. The question this reality begs in the quest of peace is how to overcome both the mental and physical walls between Israelis and Palestinians, a question which several local-level peacebuilding organisations in the region have dedicated their work to. This master’s dissertation sought to explore this overarching question. Building upon a theoretical framework that draws on a diverse set of academic scholarship, the aim of this dissertation was to conceptualise and implement a peacebuilding tool that may contribute to the transformation of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians and thus facilitate a peace process at the grassroots level. Whilst this arguably does not represent a traditional campaign for social change, it is pertinent to mention that within the framework of this master’s dissertation, the creation of peace is understood to represent a key form of social change, which situates this professional project in the wider scholarship on media campaigning and social change.

The theoretical part of this dissertation particularly draws on and puts into dialogue theories on peacebuilding, identity formation, empathy and film. Regarding the latter, the latest film technology virtual reality (VR) is of particular interest to this research.

Whilst engagement with the scholarship on peacebuilding and conflict transformation provides the point of departure for this particular professional project, theory on identity formation helps to understand how the mental (and subsequently the physical) walls between the two peoples were built and the way in which they sustain the conflict. Particularly drawing on constructivist approaches to identity formation will allow me to demonstrate that due to the socially constructed character of collective identities, the resulting mental walls between the two peoples carry the potential to be deconstructed. Theoretical engagement with the concept of empathy will further provide a point of departure for discussing how said rigid identities that find manifestation in the physical wall between Israelis and Palestinians may be attenuated. Finally, the theoretically informed section of this dissertation will engage with the medium film and the latest technology virtual reality. In this regard, this research is particularly interested in the way in which film and empathy are linked, i.e. the way in which film may facilitate empathy. In this regard, it will be argued that film and VR, due to their highly immersive nature, provides a potent tool to put cracks into and transcend both the mental and physical walls that continue to separate Israelis and Palestinians.

As part of this dissertation, the findings of this theoretical engagement were translated into a collection of three virtual reality documentaries that portray Israeli and Palestinian individuals. The aim of the documentaries was to pound said crack into the mental and physical walls between Israelis and Palestinians by creating a non-confrontational space within which both sides can (virtually) meet the respective other and immerse themselves in their narratives, thoughts, fears and beliefs whilst reflecting on their own. The practical part of this work came to life in collaboration with and support of the *Parents Circle Families Forum* (PCFF), a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization of bereaved families dedicated to creating peace in the region through dialogue and human encounter.

Clearly, this project does not propose the ultimate solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is too intractable, multidimensional and complex to be solved through one peacebuilding tool alone. However, by collaborating with an established peacebuilding organisation that enjoys a high degree of legitimacy in both societies, this project proposes one approach to facilitating a reconciliation process between the two peoples. In this regard, this media project seeks to provide one stone to the bitterly contested mosaic of creating peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## History

Providing an extensive overview of the history of the conflict is beyond the scope of this dissertation and has been addressed extensively elsewhere (see for instance Grosser, 1983; Said, 1979). However, what follows seeks to provide a brief overview of the conflict's origins and dynamics in order to demonstrate the long history of competing claims to (national) identity between the two peoples.

On the maps of the nineteenth century the territory which is Palestine and Israel today, was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. During that time, Muslims, Jews and Christians were living together rather peacefully. A number of historic events during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century drastically changed the conditions in the region which can be said to be the primary root cause for the conflict. The Jewish people, who had suffered ongoing persecution, discrimination and anti-Semitic violence for centuries (Grosser, 1983) were facing a rise in antisemitism all over Europe. This caused a revival in Zionism, a Jewish national movement predicated on the understanding that Judaism is not merely a religion but a nationality in need of its own country which will be founded on the soil of their religious and historical homeland – Palestine. Consequently, in late 1800, an increasing number of Jewish people immigrated to Palestine and built the first settlements. After the horrors of the Holocaust where 6 million Jews were brutally murdered, the influx of Jewish people into Palestine multiplied drastically.

During World War I, when fighting the Ottoman Empire, the British had signed the Balfour Declaration in which they announced to support the building of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. With the end of the war, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and Palestine became a British mandate – British Palestine. A large group of Arabs responded to the rule of the British Empire over Palestine with the development of a distinct Palestinian national identity in their struggle for autonomy and self-determination. Since both, Jews and Arabs, claimed their historical territorial belonging and their religious heritage to the same land under the rule of the British, tensions in the region had grown and their shared bloody history began to unfold. Over the next decades, an increasing power asymmetry between Israelis and Palestinians developed and today, the state of Israel occupies and controls life and land of the Palestinian people. However, what remains is that the essence of the conflict is the struggle of both peoples to secure their distinct national identity in their struggle for belonging, a national sense of identity and, for the case of Palestine, self-determination. Significantly, because the conflict has been going on for decades, what Bar-Tal (2013) calls the “ethos of conflict” has become deeply engrained in the Israeli and Palestinian collective identity, sustaining and perpetuating the conflict (Oren et al, p133). Any peacebuilding attempts in the region will therefore need to take into account this more affective dimension of building peace, that is the competing claims to identity and mutual negation of the respective other side's existence and identity.

# **Theoretical Framework**

### 3.1 Peacebuilding

As indicated in the introduction, the most recent scholarship on conflict resolution and peacebuilding calls for “an integration between bottom-up (grassroots, civil society) activities and top-down (government, formal) negotiation and peace treaties” (Chaitin, 2011, p17), which appears to be particularly relevant for any attempts at creating sustainable peace in Israel/Palestine. Since Allport’s (1954) ground-breaking work establishing the so-called contact hypothesis, which proposes that inter-group contact improves negative attitudes between adversarial groups, a rich body of literature in the field of peacebuilding and reconciliation has evolved building upon and further developing this insight (see for instance Nadler, 2004; Kelman 2008; Chaitin, 2011; Maoz, 2011). The contact hypothesis frequently provides the rationale for people-to-people peace efforts at the grassroots level and scholars and practitioners try to design peacebuilding efforts that bring together Israelis and Palestinians in order for them to get to know each other and come to deconstruct the hardened negative perceptions of each other. Particularly encountering the other side’s personal and collective (historical) narratives of suffering play a key role in this regard (Bar-On, 2000; Chaitin, 2011; Rothberg 2006). However, a comparatively smaller body of literature also points to potentially harmful effects of such inter-group encounters in the case of Israel/Palestine. For instance, Maoz and colleagues argue that due to the profound power asymmetry at play in the conflict, direct contact between Israelis and Palestinians does not necessarily lead to inter-group reconciliation. They found that in a number of cases a personal encounter actually led to increased verbal violence (Maoz et al, 2007). Others argue that dialogue within a context of wider structural inequality may in fact enhance essentialising perceptions of the other (Helman, 2002; Pilecki and Hammack 2014). This implies that creating peace is a sensitive and highly context-dependent endeavour that makes it rather difficult to find one-size-fits-all approaches and practices. However, the above findings point to the need for peacebuilding efforts aimed at creating a space within which members of adversarial groups can encounter each other to be non-confrontational.

It is pertinent to mention that peace is a concept that scholars from a wide array of disciplines have struggled to define, grasp and come to terms with. What precisely constitutes peace? Merely the absence of overt hostilities and violent conflict or also the absence of structural violence and inequality, as well as positive inter-group relations? (see for instance Galtung 1969). Whilst these are questions that go beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would like to turn to a work of major significance within the realm of peacebuilding, Lederach’s book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, in which he explores what he terms the “moral imagination”. Lederach, a well-known peacebuilding practitioner and scholar argues that sustainable peacebuilding requires the emergence of the moral imagination, which implies that individuals and communities have to create a shared vision where they come to see themselves as forming part of an inter-connected web

of relationships, including the enemy. In this regard, the concept describes “the capacity to imagine something in the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not exist yet” (ibid., p29). Lederach argues that the moral imagination is built upon four pillars:

the capacity to imagine ourselves in relationship, the willingness to embrace complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity, the believe on the creative act, and acceptance of the inherent risk required to break violence and to venture on unknown paths that build constructive change” (ibid., p29). Ultimately, and perhaps most significantly, the moral vision of a peaceful future he describes comprises the understanding that “the quality of our life is dependent on the quality of the life of others [and] recognizes that the well-being of our grandchildren is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy's grandchildren (ibid., p35).

## 3.2 Identity

*Nothing in the universe exists as an isolated or independent entity. Everything takes the form of relationships, be it subatomic particles sharing energy or ecosystems sharing food. In the web of life, nothing living lives alone.*

- Margaret J. Wheatley

The introductory quote above by Wheatley not only suggests that relationships are universal and essential to the very existence of everything there is, but further implies that there is an interconnectedness between all things in the universe. In this regard, the quote serves as a fruitful point of departure for a discussion of identity and identity formation for it is the web of relations to other people (Battle, 2009) and the social environments we are operating in from which identity evolves (Krznaric, 2015). In other words, it is the space between the self and the other which enables us to define who we are, and who we are not, as well as the relation between the self and the other.

### *Identity formation*

Within the framework of this research, identity is not understood to be ontologically given, but rather a social construct (Hall, 1997). Broadly speaking, identities are constructed in a process of demarcating a sense of self in opposition to an other, by drawing a psychological differentiation between oneself and an existing or imagined “other” (Hall, 1997; Volkan, 2009; Murer, 2014). Significantly for this research, identity formation reflects a dialectic interplay between similarity and difference. More precisely, when constructing our sense of self in opposition to an other, we look for similarities between ourselves and others. As Hall argues, identity is “constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group” (1997, p2). In this regard, Vamik D. Volkan defines collective identity, or what he refers to as large-group identity, as “the subjective experience of thousands or millions of people linked by a persistent sense of sameness” (Volkan, 2009, p6). Similarly, in his landmark publication on nations, Benedict Anderson (2006) coined the term “imagined communities” to capture the sense of perceived sameness and brotherhood in opposition to an imagined other. However, at the same time, collective identity is simultaneously based “on [its] capacity to exclude, leave out, to render ‘outside’” (Hall, 1997, p5). Significantly then, and somewhat paradoxically, sameness and difference are intimately linked. As Calhoun writes, “[t]here is no simple sameness unmarked by difference, but likewise no distinction not dependent on some background of common recognition” (1994, p9). Hall similarly recognises the interconnectedness between sameness and difference when arguing that identity is “constructed through, not outside, difference” (1997, p4). Parekh perhaps most powerfully describes the way in which sameness and difference are not only connected, but in fact mutually constitute one another. Our identity, he argues, “is a product of a dialectic interplay between the universal

and the particular, between what [we] all share and what is culturally specific” (2006, p124).

It needs to be emphasised that the process of othering, or creating an out-group vis a vis an in-group is not problematic per se. Most of the time, it is a complexity-reducing device, a mental space within which we can operate and that provides us with a sense of safety and belonging. In that respect, the notion of home is of great relevance. In his book *Home Territories*, David Morley clearly illustrates that home has to be understood as a “fictional construct” rather than just a physical space (Morley 2000) and such an imagined home, as Rapport and Dawson point out, is “socially homogenous, communal, peaceful, safe and secure” (ctd. in Morley 2000, p246). In this light, I suggest that the sense of large-group identity and its safe confines allow for the feeling of security and belonging. Ashcroft’s remark that freedom of borders is perceived as a threat to identity (Ashcroft, 2009, p19) is to be understood in this vein, as is Baumann’s argument that “[o]ne thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns... ‘Identity’ is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty” (1997, p19).

However, and of great significance for this research, the dichotomous thinking undergirding identity formation and the resulting us-versus-them mentality may become dangerous, since “[i]t is within [the] polarities of white/black, masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual, where one term is always dominant and the other subordinate” (Rutherford, 1990, p10). In other words, when one group stands in opposition to another a power hierarchy or moral judgement in terms of superiority-inferiority is implied. This is particularly likely in instances of “geographical proximity and economic interdependence” (Young, 1996, p126) and during times of social crises and upheaval. Then said mental barriers demarcating in-group from out-group become even stronger and the resulting us-versus-them perception is more pronounced (Volkan, 2009; Murer 2014).

The worst outcome of us-versus-them mentality as Chaitin argues is dehumanisation (2011) which is the result of what Leyens and colleagues call “infracommunitarianization” (Leyens et al, 2007). Infracommunitarianization describes the perception of an in-group to be constituted with more human features as the out-group. Consequently, the in-group is defined as a fully adequate human being while the out-group has a lower status of humanity (Viki and Calitiri, 2008). The existence of infracommunitarianization within the Israeli society is a major problem to the conflict which, as Nagar and Maoz argue, leads to the “Jewish-Israeli (un)willingness to recognize Palestinian pain and suffering” (2015, p372).

For this project it is pertinent to emphasise the processual nature of identity formation as well as the role that imagination plays in this process. The ongoing attempt to create a homogenous and definite identity never reaches a conclusion. Identity is constantly under construction – an ongoing process – that is never complete or fixed (Calhoun, 1994; Hall, 1997). Hall notably writes, “[t]he total merge it suggests is, in fact, a fantasy of incorporation” (Hall, 1997, p3). This suggests that, arguably, we define who we are, our sense of identity, based on an imagined other that does not

exist in this form which is further emphasised by Butler who argues, “identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment” (1993, p105), which again reflects Anderson’s insights that a sense of nationhood is rather imagined. However, this imagination of the other, this perceived other, then becomes manifests because we create our sense of self in alignment with this imaginary construct. With reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this suggests that the physical walls may be read to be built on an imagined reality or understanding of the other side that does not necessarily reflect the reality on the ground in the first place. In this regard, I would like to mention that narratives play a crucial role, for it is the narratives we adopt about the other and about ourselves that form part of our identity and thus come to define “who we are as a people and a place” (Lederach, 2005, p142), or, as Winskell and Enger write, “identity is now widely understood as the story we tell about ourselves” (2014, p189).

As shown above, theoretical engagement with identity formation demonstrates that the process of creating collective identities provides a blueprint for the construction and maintenance of the mental and, subsequently, the physical walls that have been separating Israelis and Palestinians. Significantly, however, since identity is a social construct and therefore not given, but made, the same construction plan, i.e. theory of identity formation, entails the potential to deconstruct these walls that undergird and sustain the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Herbert C. Kelman, a scholar in the field of peacebuilding, has therefore called for a transcendent identity between Israelis and Palestinians that may transcend the exclusionary confines of collective in-group/outgroup identities (Kelman, 1999). Such a transcendent form of identity would be marked by acknowledging the identity of the other and by integrating the relationship with the other into one’s own sense of self (Kelman, 1999). In more practical terms, I would argue what peacebuilding efforts need to achieve in order to attenuate hardened in-group/out-group perceptions, is to create a non-confrontational (mental) space which allows for embracing both, sameness as well as difference, and within which the narrow confines of collective identity constructs, the us-versus-them mentality, can be transcended. To put it with the words of Homi Bhabha, we need to create a “third space,” a space in which “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha, 2003, p39). This throws us into the heart of empathy, a concept that may provide the path towards such a widened space.

### 3.3 Empathy

*“Imagination will often carry us to worlds that never were.  
But without it we go nowhere.*

- Carl Sagan

The concept of empathy, as Lawrence argues, is not only a relatively new concept, but one “with a somewhat tangled derivation, and whose meaning, in fact, is far from clear cut” (2015, p13). The following section therefore seeks to provide a brief overview over the concepts origins and how we may understand it.

Its origin is generally linked to Adam Smith’s conceptualization of sympathy. In his work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith explored “the idea of an essential binding force between humans” (Lawrence, 2015, p16) and lay the foundation for what later became to be called empathy. Smith suggested that sympathy builds an connection between humans, which allows one person to feel another person’s emotional state (Smith, 2011). Significantly, Smith argued that this connection, i.e. the ability to sympathise with another person, is primarily ensured through our power of imagination (MacLean, 1949).

About a century later, the German philosopher Robert Vischer established the concept of *Einfühlung* (engl. feeling into) from which the English term empathy would later be derived. Vischer’s concept was situated within the realm of aesthetic theory and sought to explain the human capacity to “feel into” an object, i.e. to establish an emotional connection with an object (Lawrence, 2015, p16). The German psychologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps, who also studied art and aesthetics, would then come to expand Vischer’s concept of *Einfühlung* by suggesting that the same concept applies not only to inanimate objects, but also to human beings (Curtis, 2012, p428), which arguably paved the way for the notion of empathy. What is of particular relevance to this research is Martin Buber’s exploration of the relationship and connectedness between human beings which is also widely associated with the concept of empathy. In his books *Between Man And Man* and *I And Thou*, Buber argues that our existence can either be based on what he terms an I-It relationship, i.e. a relationship where the other is the object and perceived of as a separate entity, or on what he refers to as I-Thou relationship, i.e. a relationship where the other is perceived of as being part of our own sense of self. Significantly, Buber further argued that it is only through relationships with others that we are able to create an encounter with ourselves and unfold the fullness of our humanity (Buber, 1947; 1958).

The most widely used understanding of empathy today is, as Krznaric puts it, to step “*imaginatively* into the shoes of another person, understand their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions” (2014, px, emphasis added). In this regard, empathy differs from sympathy, which may be defined as feeling “pity or feeling sorry for somebody” (ibid.). Empathy has

increasingly come to be seen as a key concept associated with reconciliation and peace in deeply divided societies (Halpern and Weinstein, 2004; Urbain, 2015) and as Haslam and Stratemeyer suggest, dehumanisation occurs when empathy is diminished. (Haslam and Stratemeyer, 2016), which makes the concept particularly relevant to this research.

The fact that empathy, just like processes of identity formation, is concerned with the relationship between the self and the other furthers its significance for this work. What follows seeks to explore the process of empathising, arguing that it mirrors the process of identity formation, and to demonstrate how this discussion is of relevance to this particular peacebuilding project.

Significantly, like identity formation, empathy draws on a demarcation between the self and the other, in this case between empathiser and the one being emphasised with. However, whilst in identity formation the focus is delineating a sense of self, empathy is arguably about exploring a sense of the other. This act requires imagination. As Landsberg powerfully argues, “[w]ith empathy there is a leap, a projection, from the emphasiser to the object of contemplation” (2009, p223). Whilst, intuitively, this might be thought to imply that the distinction between self and other collapses, Landsberg argues that the “leap” she speaks of “implies that a distance exists between the two” (2009, p223) and in fact requires a distance. It is, according to Landsberg, the act of imagination that is at the very core of empathy. As she puts it, “[t]he experience of empathy requires an act of imagination – one must leave oneself and attempt to imagine what it was like for that other person given what he or she went through” (Landsberg, 2009, p223). Put differently, the key is not a process of identification with the other, but an act of imagination, for empathy requires one to imagine “the plight of the other ... and what it might feel like, while simultaneously recognizing one's difference from her” (ibid.). Similarly, and perhaps even more poignantly, Lawrence sums up that empathy is “a way both of overcoming perceptions of dissimilarity, and of accepting others’ difference” (2015, p22). This is of great relevance for this project, for it is empathy that provides us with a means that allows us to consciously oscillate between similarities and differences. As Lawrence puts it,

In empathizing, we, while retaining fully the sense of our own distinct consciousness, enter actively and imaginatively into other’s inner states to understand how they experience their world and how they are feeling, reaching out to what we perceive as similar while accepting difference, and experiencing upon reflection our own resulting feeling, appropriate to our own situation as empathic observer, which may be virtually the same feeling or different but sympathetic to theirs, within a context in which we care to respect and acknowledge their human dignity and our shared humanity. (2015, p24)

However, due to the key role imagination plays in empathy as established above, the emphasiser will arguably never be able to fully see things the way the other sees them and will never completely feel into the life of the other. What I am suggesting here is that a person, contrary to common conceptualisations of empathy, is never able to truly step into the shoes of another person, but only imagine what these shoes might feel like. This line of thought has been pursued by Gillian Swanson, who

argues that “the imagining of the inner life of others may actually be based on the projection of the individual’s own feelings into the object, rather than an authentic understanding that derived from an engagement with the *particularity* of the object” (2013, p142). Ainsley Sutherland, who takes Swanson’s argument as her point of departure, makes the link between empathy and reflexivity even more explicit. She argues that in Ainsley Swanson’s interpretation

empathy is an almost Freudian notion, where it serves as a projection of the subject’s unconscious on to another. This interpretation also describes the source of the empathy’s limitations as an egocentric mode of gaining knowledge. However, it does position empathy as a successful behaviour for externalizing one’s own assumptions and beliefs (2012, p23).

In short, through the act of empathising we come to be able to reflect on our own imaginations and phantasms (ibid., p28). This reflects earlier insights by philosopher Edith Stein, who similarly recognised the reflexive nature of empathy, noting that the more different the other is, the more we are able to reflect on our own self in relation to that other (Stein, 1989, p116). In this regard, I would argue that through the act of empathizing, the emphasiser can bridge the distance between the self and the other, the in-group and out-group and thus bridge – to stay with the project’s overarching metaphor – the walls between deeply divided groups.

Significantly, whilst this approach to and understanding of empathy moves us away from the metaphor of stepping into the shoes of the other, i.e. from the idea that empathy is a mode of seeing the world from the other’s point of view, such an approach suggests that the power of empathy may lie precisely in that it allows the empathiser to come to see how he or she is situated in the world and how he or she imagines the other. This is of crucial significance for this project, for it is primarily the hardened and rigid (imagined) negative perceptions of the other side that continue to sustain intractable inter-group conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian one (Bar-Tal 2013). In conclusion, if empathy is a tool to introduce a degree of reflexivity and allow the adversarial groups to reflect on their own perceptions of the respective other, then empathy ought to be facilitated by any approach aimed at transforming inter-group relationships, facilitating reconciliation and building sustainable peace.

The above section sought to draw out the parallels I see between the processes of identity formation, on the one hand, and empathy, on the other. Both are processes that go to the heart of the relationship between the self and the other and both rely on the oscillating interplay between sameness and difference. However, whilst in identity formation the focus is on demarcating a sense of self, empathy is arguably about exploring a sense of the other. Furthermore, by accomplishing a leap between the self and the other it delineates the relationship between the two by introducing a degree of reflexivity into the self-other relationship. The question this begs is what constitutes these different foci. I would argue that since both identity and empathy circle, as outlined above, around the notion of imagination, it is in the imaginative act that provides the key for transforming relationships. Through empathy we can come to enlarge our scope of imagination, our mental space, which may then allow us to see beyond and deconstruct hardened us-versus-them perceptions that come to

define the relationship between the self and the other. The question that arises out of this insight is how to facilitate empathy in order to enlarge said scope of imagination in the ongoing process of creating and maintaining a stable and safe sense of identity to widen the narrow confines of exclusionary in-group/out-group identity constructs. In short: how may we best create and open up this empathic space?

It has been established that the arts, literature, and film provide a means through which to create and foster empathy. The following section therefore explores the medium film and the most recent technology virtual reality, and its relationship to empathy and the imaginative act.

### 3.4 Film/VR

*“Film neither recognizes time nor space,  
only the limits of man’s imagination.”*

*Nicholas Ray*

Film, more generally, and VR, in particular, have been identified as key tools to foster empathy, and, relatedly, the imaginative act. As Krznaric argues, “film [has] the ability to take us on imaginative journeys into lives that are profoundly unlike our own, and also to inspire empathic acts on the behalf of others” (2015, p135). This chapter tries to explore Krznaric’s rather broad argument by carving out links between the process of empathising and, relatedly, the imaginative act, on the one hand, and the medium film, on the other.

As mentioned in the previous section, Theodor Lipps expanded Vischer’s concept of *Einfühlung*, which described the possibility of human beings to feel into an object, arguing that the same concept also applies to inter-human relationship. By broadening the concept, Lipp “sought to describe an inclination he believed was common to all humans to quite literally feel into (i.e. sich einfühlen) or empathize with other creatures and objects, whether they be animate, inanimate, or indeed phenomena such as atmospheres, colors or sounds” (Curtis, 2012, p428). This widened concept suggests that humans have the capacity to empathise with creatures as much as with objects. Consequently, in this light, the medium film which can be understood as an object in itself as well as a composition of various objects such as protagonists, sound, props, allows for the process of empathising. Additionally, it needs to be emphasised that Lipps establishes the idea of a self-other relationship between a human and an object. For him “every object is [...] an individual, perhaps not as a consequence of a logical perspective but rather as a psychological fact. A multifaceted kind of activity is exuded by the object and as such a unified self is felt to be within that object” (ctd. in Curtis, 2012, p429).

Lipps widening of the concept of *Einfühlung* provides the foundation to understand film as a medium to facilitate empathy within the viewer. However, what Lipp does not provide is further insights into how precisely the process of empathising, which was explored in the previous section of this theoretical framework, is facilitated by film. In this regard, the work of Adriano D’Aloia is particularly insightful. D’Aloia is particularly concerned with “the psychological dynamic of filmic experience”, applying “the structure of empathy” to the medium film. In this regard, his work builds upon and reflects Edith Stein’s understanding of the concept (D’Aloia, 2010, p495). D’Aloia argues that

In the empathic process ... first I perceptually face a filmic object (emotion) that attracts my attention and my senses...then I move closer and place myself “at” the Other, on the “Other’s side,”...then I exit, I move back and detach myself to face the object again, to cognitively perform a new objectification....Before empathy, I am too far, and the initial distance must be

filled. After the empathetic fulfilling, I am too close and I need again to set myself at distance to better understand. Distance, proximity, and distance again. Einfühlung allows this psychological “round-trip” of approaching, fulfilling and detaching. (ibid., p496)

By describing the process of empathising that takes place in the encounter with an “other” via the screen, D’Aloia provides, film facilitates the emergence of empathy. First, he importantly notes that there is a distance between the recipient and the object, here the protagonist, on the screen. Through an imaginative leap, after an emotional first encounter, the emphasiser sets out to what he calls a psychological round-trip, the oscillation between the other and oneself. I argue that this moving back and forth between proximity and distance, a motion that, according to D’Aloia, ultimately facilitates deeper understanding, mirrors the reflexive nature of the empathic process outlined above. Significantly, D’Aloia further suggests that without empathy we would not be able to bridge the distance between the viewer and the protagonist and consequently, would not get the full immersive experience that the medium film requires. This, suggests that we have to be empathetic to fully immerse ourselves and thus be able to connect to the protagonist on the screen. Significantly, inversely this implies that precisely because of the psychological dynamics at play in the exposure to film, it is through film that we can instigate the process of empathy and, relatedly, the imaginative act.

In the latter regard, for film to be an empathetic media, requires it to enlarge our scope of imagination, our mental space within which the self, the other, and the relationship between the two can be reflected upon and subsequently altered – which, as outlined above, is key to transforming relationships. I would argue that our imagination or, to remain with the focal point of this dissertation, our perceived image of the other, is not primordially. Consequently, things we imagine to be real are predicated on things we have previously seen, heard and experienced. Stories and narratives about ourselves, others and the world in principle, are a key source for as well as a result of our imagination. I briefly touched upon this in the chapter on identity formation, noting that identity is intimately linked with the narratives we tell about ourselves and others (Hall, 1996). As Bruner writes, “it is through narratives that a culture provides models of identity and agency to its members” (1996, pxiv). Since storytelling lies at the very core of the medium film, the latter therefore influences and potentially alters what we imagine and thus carries the potential to bring about empathy.

With regard to the critical role narratives play in this regard, I would further like to refer to Alison Landsberg’s (2009) idea of what she calls “prosthetic memories”. Prosthetic memories are memories that we did not live through personally, but which are mediated to us through film and which we come to experience as if they were our own. Significantly, Landsberg draws a link between such prosthetic memories and empathy, arguing that film is a tool through which to bridge difference between one’s own lived experience and the lived experience of others, and to embark on exploring the relationship between the two. To demonstrate this argument, I would like to provide a rather lengthy quote from Landberg’s own work:

[...] cinema has the capacity to bring us into intellectual and emotional contact with circumstances that lie well beyond our own lived experiences, and in the process can force us to confront, and enter into a relationship of responsibility and commitment toward, “others.” Because this coming to terms with the other requires intellectual work, it lays the groundwork for the development of empathy. Films that depict historical traumas are particularly well suited to this task, but only if they force us to negotiate new terrain on both the emotional and intellectual level, if they construct a form of identification structured not on sameness and similarity, but on distance and difference between viewer and subject. (2009, p225)

The above section sought to demonstrate that film facilitates the emergence of empathy and, relatedly, the imaginative act which in turn, allows for the deconstruction of negative inter-group perceptions. Although there is strong evidence suggesting that humans are generally psychologically and biologically predisposed to be empathetic, which has been addressed extensively elsewhere (Keysers, 2011; Krznic, 2015, Rifkin, 2009), I argue that empathy and the imaginative act require space and conducive circumstances in order to engage with and reflect upon the relationship between self and other. Film, I would argue, can create these circumstances. Mavroudi, in his work *Creating Geographies of Hope Through Film: Performing Space in Palestine-Israel*, points to the necessity for the creation of such conducive conditions when arguing that “space in the region is often conceptualised as divided and separate; it is constrained into categories of us and them and does often not necessarily allow for more critical engagement with space that imagine and construct Palestinians and Israelis as connected” (2013, p561). He further contends that film allows for borders to be “transgressed” (ibid., p563) and that in film “space is used in order to provide pause for thought and reflection” (ibid., p565). In this regard, he refers to Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “third space”, the space beyond the dichotomic polarities and boundaries introduced above.

Furthermore, I propose that film has the capacity to create not only space, but one that is both non-confrontational and dynamic both in a temporal and spatial sense. What I mean by that is that film has the capacity to capture one space in time, which can then be transported to and brought to life in another time and space. Applied to the case of Israel/Palestine this implies that film can physically cross borders, which many Israelis and Palestinians cannot, and thus grant insights into life “behind the wall” that would otherwise remain obscured. Finally, film has the ability to overcome the language barrier, another key obstacle to fostering mutual understanding and thus to creating sustainable peace in the region. By providing subtitles or voice over, film may thus allow Israelis and Palestinians to listen to each other in a way they may not be in a personal encounter.

### *Virtual reality*

This finally brings us to virtual reality, the most recent development within the realm of film. Virtual reality is widely used to describe the immersion of a viewer into a 360° virtual environment, preferably through a VR viewer, i.e. a screen in a goggle that is placed right in front of the eyes and thus shields the immediate environment from view. Whilst VR can screen animated, fictional and documentary film, the latter two require special camera equipment to record the film in. What is particularly significant

about this film format is that it creates the impression that the viewer is physically located in the environment he or she is visually exposed to.

Significantly for this project, VR film – within the framework of this dissertation particularly referring to 360° documentary film – is said to be an “empathy machine” (Constine, 2015), because it allows to immerse oneself in the environment of the life of an other, thus granting insights into his or her perspective. As outlined in some detail above, empathy requires a self-other relationship and distance between the empathiser and the one being empathised with. Based on above engagement with the relevant literatures I would propose that by using VR to portray somebody else, due to VR’s immersive nature this distance diminishes. Arguably then, this makes VR less of an empathy inducing medium than film more generally. However, I think that it provides a potent tool to transport a feeling for the environment and lived experience of another person, which is of great relevance for this particular project, given that most Israelis and Palestinians have never or rarely been to the other side. Further, I argue that what makes VR a particularly powerful tool for this project is that it allows for the creation of a non-confrontational enclosed space where Israelis and Palestinians can meet. This perhaps becomes clearer when contrasting VR with traditional film. Whilst the latter is consumed on a screen of, depending on the venue, varying size, even when watched on a large screen, it merely provides a comparatively small and one-dimensional frame showing other people’s life, placed in the environment of our own life. VR, on the other hand, especially when watched in an immersive VR viewer or in a large VR dome, i.e. a 360° screen surrounding the viewer, we literally enter a physical space, separating us from our everyday life. To reiterate, it is this particular immersive quality offered by VR technology that may allow members of adversarial such as Israelis and Palestinians to focus on the other, to immerse him or herself in a non-confrontational space in the lived experience of the other and to thus come and reflect on his or her own relationship towards the other.

It is here that I would like to turn to the practical part of this dissertation, which is based upon the conceptualisation and implementation of a pilot peacebuilding tool utilising VR technology and bringing together the insights drawn from the rich literature on peacebuilding, identity formation, empathy and film.

# Practical Implementation

#### 4.1 Conceptualisation: *People2People*

The practical component that forms an integral part of this dissertation is a pilot project in response to the urgent question how to overcome both the mental and physical walls in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Building upon the above theoretical framework, the overall aim of this dissertation is to conceptualise a peacebuilding tool to support and facilitate the people-to-people peacebuilding efforts at the grassroots level, and to produce a pilot/prototype to provide the foundation for an implementation on a larger scale.

Broadly speaking, the idea behind *People2People* is to create a compilation of virtual reality documentaries portraying individual Israelis and Palestinians to create a space within which the two peoples can (virtually) meet the respective other and immerse themselves into their narratives, life experiences, thoughts and beliefs – and to reflect on their own. As outlined in the previous section, the medium film allows to overcome physical distance and enables the creation of a non-confrontational and safe space in which Israelis and Palestinians can encounter the respective other. In this regard, it is designed as a tool to overcome the physical walls separating both people and deconstruct the mental ones outlined in the theoretical framework above.

The focus of this section is to outline how said theoretical framework informed the conceptualisation of the filmic content, i.e. the production of the prototype VR documentaries produced within the framework of this dissertation. The primary intention behind the documentaries is to foster empathy and increase the scope of imagination among Israelis and Palestinians alike, in order to instigate a transformation in their relationship and thus improve hostile and hardened inter-group relations.

The portrayal of each protagonist is designed based on a narrative that allows the recipient to gain insights into and reflect upon both similarities and differences between him/her and the person portrayed. Allowing the audience to oscillate between similarities and difference is to further enhance the process of emphasizing beyond the inherently empathetic nature of the medium film. This oscillation between sameness and difference is sought to be translated into practice by picturing each protagonist in two different contexts and spatial surroundings – the desert and the person's everyday life. Particularly the latter seeks to provide visual imagery capturing differences on the background of similarities. To reiterate, identity evolves from our web of relationships and social environments in which we operate. Images of a person's everyday life – for instance at home, at work, surrounded by family or friends – provide insights into the places and spaces that have shaped who they are, that have come to define them. Mavroudi writes, “[i]t is within everyday spaces that people deal with differences” (2013, p568) and I would argue that it is precisely because the concepts of home, family and work are universal regardless of religion or ethnicity, we are able to identify differences as well as similarities between ourselves and others.

The desert, on the other hand, which is understood to represent a visual and spatial counterpart to the protagonist's everyday life, plays an important role in the documentaries. First, the desert is the location where the interviews with each protagonist take place. Since the desert is a place of solitariness and transparency, it allows me as a film maker to separate the protagonist from his/her social environment and picture him/her in a rather neutral environment marked by an audio-visual stillness. This arguably creates similar spatial surroundings for both Israelis and Palestinians to express themselves and this neutral environment allows the recipient to focus on the other and what he or she has to say and on the relationship between the self and the other. Furthermore, establishing the desert as a shared space for Israelis and Palestinians throughout the collection of portrayals, goes in line with calls made by peacebuilding scholars and practitioners to create a space, a common ground upon which Israelis and Palestinians can meet.

Simultaneously, as David Jasper writes in his book *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (2004), the desert is a place of extreme conditions far away from civilization where no one desires to be. The harsh conditions which the desert provides for human beings may thus be understood as a metaphor for the devastating conditions, the desperation and absence of life which the conflict causes for both sides. Another critically important point Jasper addresses and which influenced the choice to shoot part of the documentaries in the desert is that the desert "deconstructs and cleanses our categories of history" (2004, p47) and allows for identities to be "lost and discovered" (2004, p2). I think this is due to the desert being a place without any borders, seemingly infinite. By portraying individuals within the setting of the desert thus arguably opens up a space that does not exist between Israelis and Palestinians – a space that is safe and non-confrontational, a space that allows for the wider imagination to unfold, a space that transcends us-them perceptions. A place, in short, that seeks to reflect Homi Bhabha's "third space". Arguably, the words uttered by the protagonists in this setting do create borders and thus highlight and bring about the persistent us-versus-them mentality and perceptions of recipient. However, against the backdrop of the desert's bleakness, this may precisely precipitate the reflexive moment this project seeks to bring about. Without seeking to diminish the importance of the visual component of the medium film, the interviews, i.e. the protagonists' responses to the questions asked – make up the core of each documentary.

The methodological challenge with regards to composing the questionnaire for the documentaries was that I needed to compose a framework that would allow the viewer to get to know the individual interviewee, on the one hand, and to create a dialogical space that may draw out thoughts and feelings of the protagonist. I therefore adopted German sociologist Fritz Schütz's narrative interview method, a research method that has been widely used to generate biographically oriented qualitative research (Küsters, 2009), as it offers an interview technique suited to the nature of this particular project. Schütz's method comprises and distinguishes between the following three interview phases:

Phase I is marked by inviting the interviewee to narrate his or her life or a period of

life that is particular relevant to the research. Key about this first phase is to give the interviewee space to let him/her tell what he/she would like to talk about and not broach him/her during its telling.

Phase II is initiated once the interviewee has reached the end of his or her personal narrative. Only then the interviewer begins to ask specific questions that focus on experiences and events in the interviewee's life that appear to be relevant for the research. The interviewer invites the interviewee to recall these events and experiences in detail.

Phase III shifts the conversation to a rather abstract level, allowing the interviewee to theorize his/her life experiences and to universalize biographical correlations.

Within the framework of this dissertation, Schütz's method served as a point of departure in developing the set of questions asked in the interview situation and guiding the interviews by utilising it as a flexible framework allowing the interviewee to open up to the interviewer.

The interviews were projected to be held in the protagonist's respective native language. Language is a primary characteristic that defines as well as separates different cultures and it is through our language that we are able to express ourselves. Therefore, I think it is important to show Israelis and Palestinians speaking in their own language as much as it is important to attempt to bridge the language barrier between the two sides by providing subtitles or voice over.

Once the documentaries are edited these will be mediated to the respective other side. In so doing, Israelis are invited to embark on a (virtual) reality encounter with Palestinians and vice versa, Palestinians are invited to meet Israelis in this way. In this regard, this project is intended to support and is situated within the wider peacebuilding work of the *Parents Circle Families Forum*, a joint Israeli and Palestinian group of about 620 families, who have all lost one or several immediate family members to the conflict and who work together towards peace and inter-group reconciliation. This particular professional cooperation makes this project particularly attuned to and deeply rooted in local-level peacebuilding on the ground, undergirded by the organisation's overarching objective to facilitate human encounters between Israelis and Palestinians in order for both sides to meet the respective other side, get to know the other, share each other's stories and narratives and ultimately create and foster a shared vision of peace. The rationale behind collaborating with the PCFF within the framework of this dissertation is that it is a long-established peacebuilding organisation, in fact, one of the comparatively few which have survived the breakdown of the Oslo peace process after which many organisations ceased their activities (Maoz 2004). Furthermore, the PCFF is characterised by a striking symmetry in the organisation's organisational structure, marked by equal offices and staff on both the Palestinian and Israeli side. This is arguably not only a key requisite for building sustainable peace in an environment marked by a profound asymmetry between Israeli and the Palestinian side in favour of the former, but, in more practical terms, allows for access to and provides an infrastructure on both sides both during the production and subsequent dissemination of the documentaries. In the later

regard it is further noteworthy that the organisation enjoys a high degree of legitimacy in both societies.

Currently, two possible ways for the PCFF to implement *People2People* in their work are envisioned. The first is to create an app that allows Israelis and Palestinians to view *People2People* on their smartphones via VR cardboard viewer. These cardboard viewers could be handed out and used at lectures by members of the PCFF at schools and other institutions, and in the group-internal dialogue meetings that form an integral part of the organisation’s work. Furthermore, the VR viewers could be handed out to the wider public within the framework of the organisation’s public awareness work. This way, the documentaries are disseminated on the streets to invite Israelis and Palestinians who might either not be able or willing to take part in a PCFF event as this may seem too confrontational to some. Particularly in this regard, this project can utilise the novelty factor that comes with the new VR technology to get people to watch the documentaries that may otherwise perhaps not do so.



The second method is to publicly screen *People2People* in a VR dome, also within the context of the organisation’s wider public work. A VR dome is a mobile, igloo-shaped tent with a 360-degree film screen inside, which allows the audience to be surrounded by the screen. Depending on the size, VR domes can host between fifteen and several hundred people.

These domes could be used as a sort of traveling cinema and put up on various public places on both sides of the separation wall, inviting Israelis and Palestinians to immerse themselves into the life of a person on the other side. I think that this form of dissemination will be particularly valuable in addition to the organisation’s



peacebuilding efforts for it grants both sides access to the *People2People* documentaries, the dome allowing them to physically, yet safely, take an immersive journey into the life of the unknown.

## Conclusion

This master's dissertation combined theory and practice to design a peacebuilding tool that will contribute to overcoming the physical and mental walls separating Israelis and Palestinians. It is pertinent to mention that this concept by no means provides an ultimate answer to resolve this conflict. However, as outlined in the theoretical framework of this dissertation, academic insights from the fields of identity formation and empathy were drawn upon to understand how the mental walls that sustain the conflict may be deconstructed. Discussing the particular characteristics of the medium further allowed for the translation of these theoretical findings into practice. Building upon relevant academic literatures, the medium film more generally, and virtual reality, in particular, was demonstrated to provide a potent tool to bridge the physical walls between Israelis and Palestinians and allow for a (virtual) encounter between the two sides in a safe and non-confrontational space. Film and, again, VR in particular, allow to create a space within which empathy and, relatedly, the imaginative act can emerge and thus provide the foundation for reflection upon and the transformation of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. Whilst the focus of this research was the conceptualisation and production of a pilot project, future research would be required to evaluate and determine the extent to which this is actually the case once the professional project has been launched, disseminated and incorporated into the *Parent Circle Families Forum's* peacebuilding work. To reiterate, VR documentary as a peacebuilding tool is no panacea for conflict resolution. Creating peace in the Middle East, as scholars like Caitlin (2011) rightly point out, requires the existence and integration of both state-institutional top-down and bottom-up grassroots efforts. However, the current political climate in Israel/Palestine, where the two peoples are again pitted against one another has led to a renewed wave of violence that has hardened the mental walls and thus come to sustain the physical walls, making peace appear impossible. This – seemingly paradoxically – renders peacebuilding efforts on the ground of utmost importance. As this piece of work has demonstrated, utilising the immersive powers of film and VR in a way modelled by *People2People*, has the potential to support local-level peacebuilding efforts of individuals, communities and organisations dedicated to creating peace such as the *Parents Circle Families Forum* and thus provide one small mosaic stone necessary to paving the path towards peace in one of the most prolonged and disputed conflicts of our time. I would like to conclude this dissertation with the words of one of the portrayed Palestinians, which captures, in the midst of ongoing conflict, violence and occupation, the moral imagination of a shared peaceful future that Lederach evokes:

*“Look at the Second World War. They killed each other. They damaged each other. Today, there are no borders all over Europe. It's possible. Everything is possible.”*

- Wajeeh Tomeezi

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