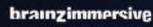
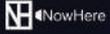


www.darkeningvr.com



a VR immersive film
about depression and hope

DARKENING

Scream out your inner demons



Frame Films, NowHere Media & BRAINZ IMMERSIVE present:

DARKENING

An animated, interactive, immersive VR film by
Ondřej Moravec

Czech Republic, Germany / 2022 / 25'
System: Oculus Quest 2

PRESS NOTES

World premiere

Venice International Film Festival 2022
Venice Immersive Competition

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)

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SYNOPSIS

How is the world perceived by someone with depression? Director and protagonist Ondřej guides us through diverse landscapes associating the story of his struggle with depression since puberty. We share his feelings during the first depressive episodes at a family trip in his childhood, at university when striving for perfect results, at work in his everyday fights with the depressive “darkening”. Through animation, combining a stylized form of Ondřej’s environment and abstract images of his emotions, the viewers will experience and understand what it is like to live with this illness, how to tackle it and what mechanisms are used by people with depression to feel better. Most of the interactions are voice controlled. The main character Ondřej finds out that his tool to get the depression under control is his voice. He uses humming, singing and even shouting as a calming and relieving technique.







ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



Ondřej Moravec

Ondřej Moravec (b. 1988, Prague) is a filmmaker, journalist and writer. He also works as a VR programmer at several film festivals in the Czech Republic and promotes virtual reality in the film industry. The interactive film *Darkening* is his VR debut. He was a Program Director at One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival for seven years. He also worked for Czech Television at the Culture Newsroom department. Ondřej studied Screenwriting at FAMU and Journalism at Charles University.

Filmography

Darkening

2022, 25', VR

Aesops, hold the line

2015, 48', linear documentary

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I have heard many times from my friends in the 13+ years that depression has been a regular visitor: 'I can't imagine what you are going through'. I found out that a VR film could be a great way to answer this question, better than a clueless silence. So I embarked on the journey of my personal psychological "coming out". People also ask me: 'Do you think the film will help people?' I'd be glad if it did, but unfortunately even great new technologies like VR are not magical objects with supernatural powers. I hope that our film will at least show people who have dealt with depression that they are not alone and that there are ways out of the dark labyrinth of the mind. And that's not a small thing.

Ondřej Moravec, August 2022

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ONDŘEJ MORAVEC

The story of DARKENING grew obviously from your personal experience. When was the starting point for creating a story - and ultimately a film - about your struggle with depression?

I was trying to find some forms of expression when dealing with depression – e.g., in the form of therapy. They asked me to write about my story, about my feelings. As a screenwriter that was not a big deal for me, I am used to writing things down. So, this was somehow the beginning of using creative tools to help me in the process of getting better. Somehow it worked, or not – I don't know. It did not feel that powerful.

Why or when did you decide to tell your story as a VR experience, not as a linear film?

I started to work at ONE WORLD FESTIVAL as a programmer, then program director. That was around 2015, when virtual reality evolved more and more, and I was really into that medium. I also wanted to go back into the more creative part of film – filmmaking – which I initially studied in school. The thought of creating something in VR that connects with me really got me. So, I started to think about doing a project about depression. From experience I learned that VR is the best form for simulation of states of mind. It can be a very powerful tool as your feelings are very involved in it as a viewer. Therefore, I thought I would tell the stories of other people in DARKENING and how they are dealing with depression. But from the beginning I knew I wanted to include voice control as a main tool into the project – a very specific form of therapy which helped me on my way. It was difficult to find other people who used this form and therapists told me that it would be hard to tell a universal story based on voice control. So, it turned out that I must be the protagonist of the story.

In terms of turning it into a classic narrative: that was not a real option. There are a lot of great short and feature films which are dealing with depression and mental health, but at the time we were developing DARKENING, only very few VR projects were based on those themes. Now we have more of them already, so I guess more people had this idea. Still, it made more sense to me to do a VR experience with this story.

We see forests, villages, big libraries - the sets remind of a classic adventure video game meeting the horror genre. What inspired the landscapes, the forms, the colors of them?

Basically, there were two main points. The first was that during the experience you are about to rebuild something. The intention is to give you a feeling of power – with your voice. I asked myself what those things could be. Should they be the monument? What should be the object of rebuilding? Then the idea of the village came up and that it could be a metaphor of the mind. That the houses you enter are parts of your memory, of your past. The village as a place where the memories are living. That is why the village is the main set, in general. When it collapses in the beginning, it can be rebuilt in the end.

When it comes to the visuals, I was working closely with my art director Bára Anna Stejskalová. We had this expressionistic vision. In the beginning we wanted to have the houses even weirder shapes that they end up having. That they remind you of nothing like a building. We stuck with something more traditional in the end because of the part when they get destroyed. It would be difficult to combine them with very specific architecture when they needed to be rebuilt again.

The mentioned horror genre was a struggle for us. We did not want to create a scary vibe and put the viewer into it. We wanted to create some specific atmosphere which is very tight and dark in some way, maybe even a bit anxious. Like the scene in the library with the huge shelves. Or using red as a colour. Bára always told me it could remind people too much of a gore horror, of blood. To me it is more a colour of life. Those moments made us think about a kind of genre for DARKENING, but less in a classic horror way.

In contrast to the rather dark sets, viewers will cross paths with the *Starboy* on several occasions. A mysterious figure, not scary or aggressive at all, but rather calming. What role does he play in DARKENING?

Starboy was not in the script. It came out when we were working on the storyboard. With this project, you are entering the mind of an actual person and are embodied into it as a viewer. I was inspired by different books and stories, where you are also visiting the memories of someone. In the case of DARKENING, this somebody's me, but I did not want to show all of myself in it. So, I came up with the idea of *Starboy* – this fading figure, which is also part of all those memories, returning at several stages throughout the journey. In some way, he is a representation of me. At some point it was tricky. People who watched the film asked where I was in the film. I always responded: 'Well. It's partly me, and partly you.' Those embodiments are interesting throughout the journey. At some point you see my younger self in the mirror. You see me, as yourself. Whose story is it? I like those twists and this uncertainty. It is part of the project to confuse at least a bit. Confusion is part of the human mind.

Some quotes from the narrator - from you - are digging deep into your past with your family. Especially your parents and brother. Did talks happen with them before or after the script was finished?

Of course, they know that I am doing it. Especially my parents were a bit worried if it is not too sensitive and if I am sure that I want to dig into it, but I assured them that I want to try it as I see it as part of my process to speak about it. Also in terms of a manifestation – to talk about depression and mental health. In our family we did not talk much about sensitive topics, even today it still is a bit like that. So somehow, I just got the feeling that I want to do it. Still, although it is a film about me and my experience, my family is just a small part of it. It won't be that super intensive.

At certain parts your identity as a gay man surface throughout the journey - is DARKENING in parts also a coming-of-age story?

Totally. I think it is a coming-of-age story. I have been dealing with depression for quite a long time already, which is why I felt the importance of showing a part of my life when I was a teenager. That is the time when fragile things are happening, and you are very sensitive. At the same time, it is a place where you can still somehow work well on you. From the beginning, me and Hana Blaha Šilarová, the producer, had the idea of DARKENING being a coming-of-age story to which a lot of young people could have a connection to. Even though I am mentioning different topics – coming out, anxiety, this pressure to always being the best – people already came to me, telling me that they can find them in certain themes. I am glad about that.

As personal as your story is, it is also in a way universal, especially when you as a viewer experienced depression yourself. Was it important to you to remain accessible for the audience?

There were talks with our consultant from the National Institute for Mental Health if the story needed to be more universal. We were told it would not be necessary, as it is my story and at the same time representative enough, so viewers are able to recognize themselves in it. I did not have to make the effort to make it more accessible. It gladly worked out on its own.

Are there any reactions you are concerned about regarding the project?

It is a personal thing, so of course I am a bit concerned about how people will react to it. In some way, when people attack your work, they are also attacking you. I want people to talk more about their feelings, that is the goal. To talk about things that are concerning them. As one of many who is dealing with mental issues, I am always a bit worried that audiences might think of me as this poor, pitiful boy who has to share his story. Yeah, I am a bit afraid of that. At the same time, it is part of the way. I am going to share this with you, something personal and intimate, but at the same time there are boundaries. There are things I shared, others I did not. It was kind of a good exercise to learn where I put the line for myself. It is good to speak about intimate, personal stuff, but it is also important to know where you set your limits. This film was and is definitely a good training for me.

How does it feel to have your world premiere at the Venice Biennale Cinema?

It was kind of our dream from the beginning to be in Venice. I am looking forward to it, but at the same time nervousness is involved. Having a VR installation is different from a classic film – much more technical things and logistics are involved. You are worried if everything works out, of course. At the same time the installation in Venice will be very intense - for the whole team, but perhaps a bit more for me. It is not just about putting a helmet on and experiencing the technology, but also about human connection. I will try to combine those things. However, I am more worried about showing the project in the Czech Republic, where people I know will see it mostly. That will be a challenge.

Another important part of the campaign is the life of the project outside of film festivals and galleries. We want to show it in those venues, but also bring it to schools. We prepared a one-and-a-half-hour program for young students, including a conversation with therapists about

depression and learning some vocal control exercises, besides watching the film. That is something we are very excited about.

You are also working as a curator for VR instalments at different festivals and events. How would you describe the position of Virtual Reality in the film industry now? Did it change throughout the last few years?

Regarding the market itself, it is progressing. For example, more and more people are buying helmets to experience VR at home. Regarding film festivals, at least to me, it is a bit freezing now. Hopefully more big festivals will decide to show VR in their lineups. We have venues like Sundance, Tribeca, or Venice, of course. But there are still big-name festivals like Berlin, which are not interested in showing it. I see progress, but there is also a big questioning regarding financing. Many countries, including the Czech Republic, lack a well-established program for funding VR. Most of them concentrate on traditional films, rather than modern technologists working with VR. Especially state-funded programs. So yes, there is room for more progress, but in general the medium is already established. Many people know what 'virtual reality' is, even without having experienced it by themselves much.

What do you hope viewers will take away with them from experiencing DARKENING?

It would be nice to bring some relief for them. In any possible way. It can be about feeling less lonely, about understanding people a bit more who are dealing with depression. Even when the target audience of DARKENING is for younger teens, I believe it can be also helpful for other groups. For example, parents whose kid is behaving in a certain way, or that they have an idea of what can be going on in this kid's life. Those things should be on our agenda. But mostly – as I said in the beginning – I hope DARKENING can bring them some relief.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Frame Films (CZ)

Frame Films focuses on creative audiovisual projects with artistic elements. Producers Jitka Kotrlová, Zuzana Kučerová and Hana Blaha Šilarová have teamed up to work on the projects together and they work as a collective. The producers often work with the same authors on multiple projects. Besides VR film **Darkening** (Venice IFF 2022), they have produced documentaries such as **The Killing of a Journalist** (Hot Docs and Karlovy Vary 2022); **Wolves at the Borders** (Visions du Réel 2020); **Central Bus Station** (Sheffield Doc/Fest 2018); **Vote for Kibera** (Ji.hlava IDFF and FIPADOC 2018); **Empire Builders** (One World IHRDFF and Festival dei Popoli 2018); and **Never Happened** (a SK/CZ co-production, Warsaw IFF 2019), as well as feature fiction **Snowing!** (Days of European Film and Neisse FF 2019) and short animated film **Ant Hill** (Animafest Zagreb 2021). Three of the company's films were co-funded by successful crowdfunding campaigns.

The company currently has various projects in development and production, including Czech-Croatian co-production **The Investigator, Beyond Control** (formerly *Human Beeing*), funded by Creative Europe – MEDIA; and TV series **Darkness** and **Three Against the Gestapo**.

NowHere Media (DE)

NowHere Media is a multi-award winning studio in Berlin designing virtual and augmented reality experiences, powered by evocative storytelling. They work with film production companies, nonprofits, media organisations and brand partners to create impactful stories that inspire and engage global audiences.

Their work finds itself at the intersection of art, technology and social change. Founders Felix Gaedtke and Gayatri Parameswaran have backgrounds in journalism and believe in the power of stories to transform. They specialise in the fields of human rights, conflict, social justice and the climate crisis. From covering the war in Syria to chasing snow leopards in the Himalayas, they are trained for productions in hostile and challenging environments. They handle their productions with extreme care.

They value quality over quantity, and understand diversity in all its forms to be an asset. All their pieces are born out of co-creative and collaborative processes. For each project, they carefully curate teams to meet specific needs for immersive design -- photogrammetry, volumetric capture, animation, spatial sound, interactivity or multisensory installations.

BRAINZ IMMERSIVE (CZ)

BRAINZ IMMERSIVE is an award-winning creative studio providing complex AR & VR services based in Prague. They specialise in crafting premium VR & AR experiences that shape the entertainment of the future and help brands to step into the world of tomorrow. As a full-service studio, they design immersive products spanning from product configurators and virtual training platforms to gamified brand experiences and installations for independent artists. While always striving for expanding the limits of the possible, they combine their own advanced frameworks with techniques from the gaming and film industry. Pushed forward by the challenges of a changing world, they are channelling their efforts into developing pioneering platforms to enjoy music, motion picture and theatre. BRAINZ IMMERSIVE is a proud member of the BRAINZ STUDIOS group based in Prague.

PRODUCTION STATEMENT

When we started developing *Darkening*, we could not have imagined how timely the topic of depression would become, especially for the younger age groups. Our hope for this project is to have an impact, to talk more about not only depression, but mental health issues in general. We think it is very important that we normalise taking care of our minds. Very important for us was our cooperation with the National Mental Health Institute based in the Czech Republic. We were consulting from early development, into the script stage, to the last phases of production. The Institute also created a program for schools with us, that will go along with screening the film for teenagers.

After its world premiere at the Venice International Film Festival, the planned distribution will consist of not only further festival screenings, but we are also looking into cooperating with galleries on showcasing the film together with the installation for several months. We put emphasis on school screenings that are prepared as a 90-minute program consisting of watching the film, doing mental hygiene exercises followed by a discussion lead by a trained therapist.

Hana Blaha Šílarová, Frame Films, August 2022

CREDITS

Director	Ondřej Moravec
Screenplay	Alice Krajčířová, Ondřej Moravec
Producer	Hana Blaha Šilarová for Frame Films
Co-producers	Gayatri Parameswaran, Felix Gaedtke for NowHere Media Robin Pultera for BRAINZ Immersive
Visual Concept & Lead Art Director	Bára Anna Stejskalová
Art Directors	Moritz Mayerhofer, Long Phi Trieu
Head of Technology	Ondřej Pultera
Art Producer	Hynek Svatoš
Developers	Jozef Barančik, Felix Lange, Kryštof Šuk
UX Designers	Petr Slavík, Šimon Leška, Zdeněk Blaha
3D Designers	Sergey Arzhanik, Alena Bendová, Petr Kollarčík
Music	Billy Mello
Sound Designer	Tomáš Oramus
Project Managers	Violeta Ivanova, Julie Šislerová

Darkening was supported by the Czech Film Fund, Unity Charitable Fund, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg and Filmtalent Zlín. The project was presented at East Doc Interactive 2021, Arts Talent Market at Sheffield DocFest 2021 and at IDFA Forum 2021.