

Real Life. Directed by **Milena Perdikari**. 2020. 10 minutes. Colour.

Real Life is a portrait of a student spending her quarantine alone in Greece. Starting off with images of a bedroom and kitchen, the film sets the main backdrop: a home. The first scene introduces the main character: a young, dark-haired woman wearing a facemask — the first clue that the film is set during the corona pandemic. We then follow an encounter with her neighbour and learn that our main character is forced into quarantine by herself, as her family is stuck on a Greek island. This highlights not only the compulsory physical distance — accentuated by the facemask and gloves, it also shows that, in this film, the viewer might never leave the home.

Real Life is firstly a film about loneliness and how quarantine impacts our social relations. It is a visual portrait that lacks any physical intimacy or affection, in which all communication is either from a distance or online. Our main character seems to follow demotivating online classes, communicates with family and friends through her smartphone, and only gets a glimpse of other people's lives by peeking from her balcony into theirs. This is symbolized in a cliché image that we usually associate with bonding: a medium shot of our main protagonist eating dinner alone. The alienation is further emphasized in the observation that the food (usually a source of comfort) also does not seem to taste good. Between these relatively depressing scenes, our protagonist slightly lights up when escaping into another reality. We follow how she builds a strikingly identical avatar in the life simulation game 'The Sims 3'. Through this virtual reality,

we learn more about our protagonist's main dreams: biking around freely, having family dinners, and playing in the ocean with an elderly avatar we assume to be her dad. We also learn that our protagonist and avatar have a shared ambition: becoming a film director. After receiving positive feedback from her teacher on what we assume to be the script of the film covered in this review, the portrait is unfortunately rushed to an ending: in faster edited and higher saturated images, we see our protagonist on her roof terrace seeming more hopeful about the future.

Real Life could be described as an autoethnography. Firstly, one asks, how do we even make films in a pandemic when we are forced to stay in our homes? Secondly, the uniformity of the quarantine experience would lead one to expect *Real Life* to be about the director herself. In a pandemic, there is perhaps no 'Other'. Around the world, our days and experiences have probably never been so similar. With the repetitive movements of getting up, pouring coffee, sitting behind your desk with occasional breaks of pouring another liquid, all days seem more or less the same. Our perception of 'home' has changed, not simply because most of us are working from within our personal spaces, but also because what was private has now become visible to our colleagues as our Zoom backdrops. We can travel to other places only virtually and escape to self-created digital utopias, such as in *Real Life*.

Real Life sheds light upon the impact of the pandemic on ethnographic research, because our homes have become our main sites of research, including the digital field. The legitimacy of online ethnography as virtual ethnography or cyber ethnography has been based predominantly on the

increasing emergence of social groups and online forms of expression, yet it was long been received with criticism. At the start of the pandemic, however, countless researchers (and filmmakers) were forced to return from the field and alter or even cancel their projects. Additionally, a short Google search confirms that in the past year our online communication, use of social media and gaming has skyrocketed. With no clear end in sight, even those who are still sceptical of such digital ethnographic practices are forced to embrace them. The pandemic has changed ‘the field’ in ethnographic research for good. Lastly, I checked with the director and the film is indeed a self-portrait.

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Songs that never end. Directed by **Yehuda Sharim**. 2019. Produced by Sharim Studios. 114 minutes. Colour.

Poet and filmmaker Yehuda Sharim’s *Songs that never end* is an intimate, lyrical, melancholic meditation on home and belonging at a time of displacement and dispossession. The film is set in Houston, Texas and revolves around the experiences and everyday life of the Dayan family, who had — due to political unrest and persecution — fled from Iran first to Iraq and then to Turkey before arriving to the US. Told mainly through the filmmaker’s conversations with Ali — the Dayan’s charming, forthright 14-year-old son — and Hana — their affectionate, precocious nine-year-old daughter, *Songs that never end* is an unflinching yet deeply humane portrait

of a family struggling to find meaning in their new life as they come to terms with the devastation of their past.

The isolation of urban life is brilliantly captured through Sharim’s cinematography. The camera rarely zooms out of the confines of the family’s small suburban apartment, focusing instead on individual moments — the mother Samira listlessly staring into space, the father Abbas aimlessly watching TV with his twin toddlers beside him, Ali scrolling through his phone, and Hana sitting alone eating leftover rice. The sense of claustrophobia is heightened by the incessant crying of the twins and Samira’s pleas for assistance from Ali and Hana. Even the rare forays into the outside world do little to mitigate the sense of displacement. Ali and Hana are always alone when they run through the isolated neighbourhood at night and no neighbours drop by to visit or play. Hana declares, as she hums to herself and cleans a cupboard full of shoes, ‘I don’t know what to do; sometimes I do nothing [...] I like working’. Ali dreams of moving to another planet. The Dayan family trips to a theme park and the city only serve to illustrate how, despite the promises of freedom and unlimited consumption in the US, time and money are precious commodities for immigrant families struggling to survive. The film later reveals that Samira has lupus, is suffering from mental health issues, and can barely cope with managing the household and taking care of the twins. Abbas, we learn, had been a successful manager at an oil company in Iran, but, in the US, he has to work long night shifts and is too exhausted to spend time with his wife and children when he comes home. Through a focus on the domestic and the mundane, *Songs that never end* poses critical questions about the