

## **The Paradox of Presence:**

# **Autoethnographic study of life and death via social media**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The following work is an autoethnographic study on emotional engagement and sense of presence mediated by Internet in cases of extreme situations. This story is the one of death. In April, my stepfather had died of lung cancer. The Covid-19 lockdown has caught him and my mother in Berlin, where my stepfather has been undergoing his treatment which unfortunately turned out to be unsuccessful. Based in Lisbon, I was not able to be physically next to my parents during these hard times. However, I tried to do my best giving support via messages and videocalls. It coincided that on the night of my stepfather's death, when my mother was next to him in the hospital room, I was also there, "next" to them both, but via videocall.

### **KEYWORDS**

Autoethnography, Mediated presence, Distant suffering, Death witnessing, Internet

I.

**PRESENCE**

**Video by Anastasiya Maksymchuk**

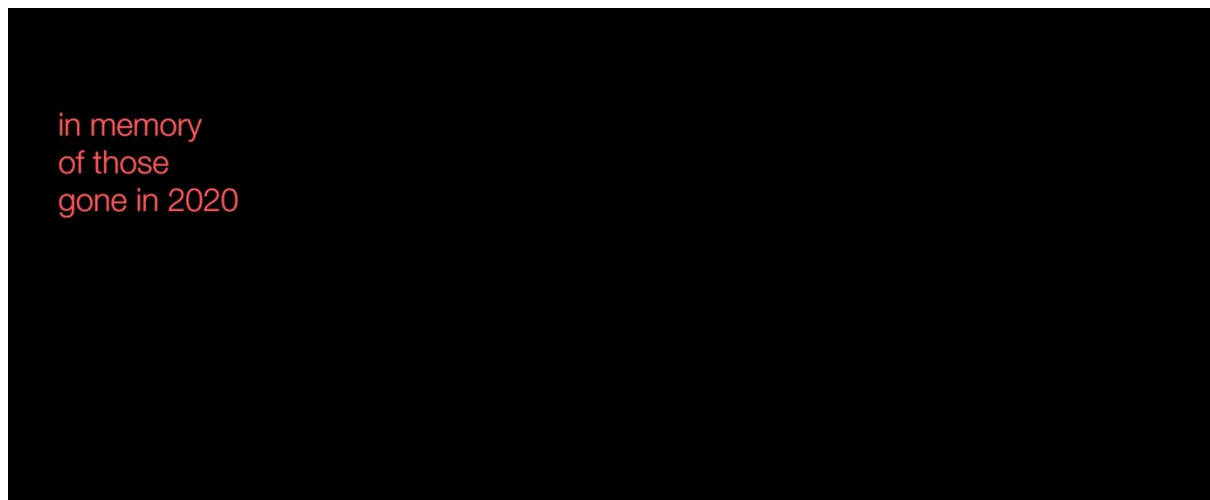
Writing, directing & editing by Anastasiya Maksymchuk

Music: “La Tabki” by Toni Geitani

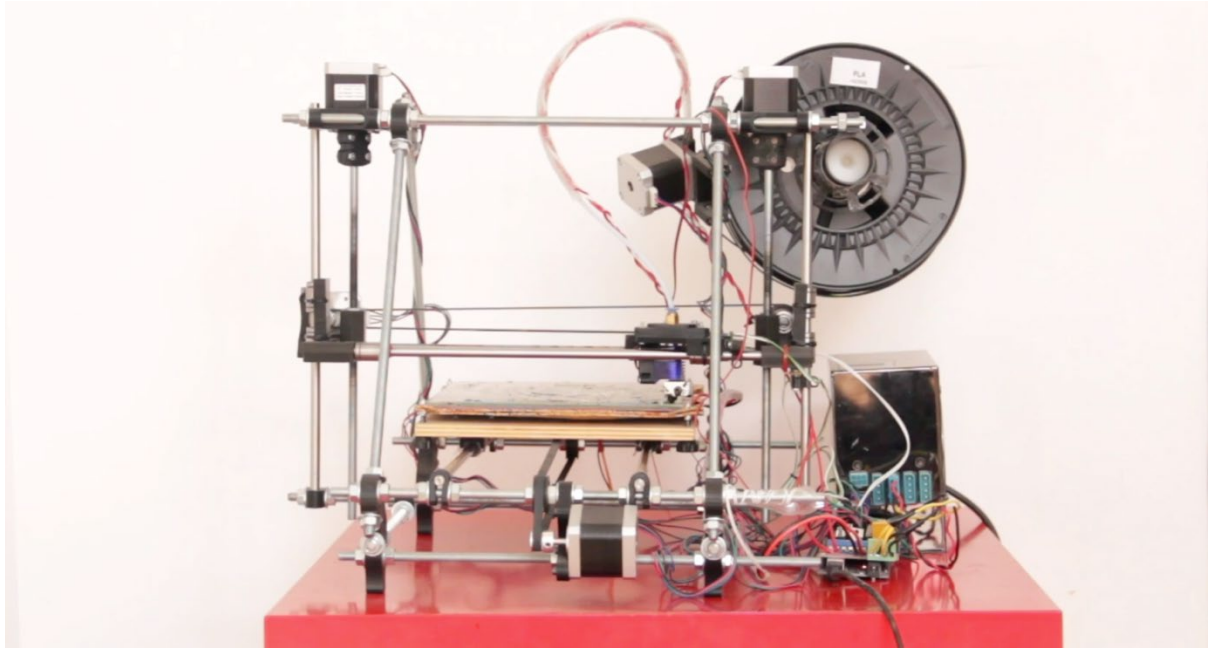
3-D printing machine & design by Antonio Alves de Campos

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**Click image to watch:**



URL: <https://vimeo.com/530961164/9e9bdc715c>



II.

### Interview with Anastasiya Maksymchuk

Interviewer: Sasha Brovchenko

11.06.2020 via Zoom (Lisbon-Kyiv)

Translation from Russian

[The Internet connection was a bit unstable, some delays occurred.]

**S. *Ok. So, actually, I was going to start from another point but since we have these delays... Did you have any delays during those calls with the hospital? And how would it affect the communication?***

A. Wow. I haven't even thought about it. Delays... I think there were. I think there was a delay while I was talking to him for the last time.

[In fact, as I read it now, I'm not sure if there was one, but apparently, I subconsciously wanted to start from that point.]

That was the day when my mother told me: "I guess these are the last days we have with him". Because that's what she was told by the doctors. She said "God, the situation is completely disastrous", she was in the hallway. And in that hallway, because it was not in front of him, she would have her emotional crashes. She would cry, call me all in tears...

**S. *Would it be via videocalls?***

A. Yes. My mom prefers videocalls. It is even sometimes a bit inconvenient because there might be a weak connection, however the video is always there. And after an hour and a half she calls again... and suddenly her voice is super carefree and even happy! As if suddenly everything was ok!

**S. *Because she was in his room?***

A. Yes, because she was next to him. And we would all smile like idiots, as if everything was ok, I told him he looked good. And he made a joke: “Yeah, and I’m not even wearing my make-up”. And that’s how it was. But he actually was hardly able to stand up already. I think the content of that talk wasn’t that important. The fact we had it was.

**S. *I wonder how did this happened so that you were present via videocall during the moment... Was it a coincidence?***

A. Yes, yes, sure, it was a coincidence. During the last days... Actually, during the last two weeks even... I talked to my mother every day, which was not the case since long time ago. I was trying... to find a way to support. At first my strategy was to just listen. It seemed useless to give hope when it was already clear there is none. And it felt like lies. Sometimes I would lie. And the very night before he died, we had a talk about how they two have actually met. It lasted for at least an hour, I had a glass of whisky, she was drinking her Amaretto. As she was telling their story, I have caught myself on the thought that maybe I shouldn’t have made her recall those things, maybe that would add to her pain afterwards. But I didn’t want to interrupt her because I saw it has made her switch off the present moment, she was happy again for that hour, and it was important. The moment she finished her story, misery has instantly come back to her face.

But let me start talking about the exact night. She called me that night, and said that the medics have brought some bedsheets for a small couch in his hospital room. The doctors suspected it might happen during the night, and my mother was going crazy trying to decide if she should stay in the hospital room. I didn’t realize in the beginning what those bedsheets really meant.

In the room, there was a monitor with the indications of oxygen and pulse of his. On that day the general indications lowered comparing to the previous ones. He was asleep. And so we are talking about those bedsheets, and suddenly my mom notices that the oxygen level drops. She starts panicking: “It goes down! Nastya, what should I do? It goes down!” I tell her to call the medical staff, and she goes away to call them. Her iPad is facing the wall, and somewhere behind the screen there is his bed. So, I wasn’t seeing him, but I saw my mother as she came back, she was going in and out of the shot. I could hear two nurses in the room with my mom. Some sounds of rushing and dialogues in German between the medics I was not able to understand. Mom was walking back and forth, restless, panicking. So, I told her to go to him and hold his hand. She did, and I could only see the wall again. I heard her talking to him and asking him to keep breathing.

At some point the nurse appeared in the frame and told me in English: “I cannot feel the pulse”. He said it as if he was expecting me to tell him what to do next. I asked if that meant we have lost him, and then he said yes. I had a feeling that for some reason he didn’t want to utter it first. As if he needed some kind of a permission from me to acknowledge it. At once the second nurse came up to the screen and asked me to translate to my mom that he had died calmly and painlessly in his sleep, that he hadn’t been suffering and it was a soft transition. My mom came up to me and I told her we have lost him. “Yes, mom, this has happened. We will go through this together”.

[I had to act as a distant mediator, or even a guide in a way, and it is strange and even embarrassing to notice some similarities of this position with the one of computer gaming. I could notice that my guidance was needed and accepted. I was constantly saying something to my mom during those several minutes while she was holding his hand, and my most repeated phrase was “I am with you”.]

After we all acknowledged what had happened, the organizational and bureaucratic part began.

**S. *When did this start?***

A. It started right away. And that was a weird moment, because suddenly they began to refer to my stepfather not by his name but as “the body”. It happened too fast. The human has left from there, and now it was the body. I really didn’t want my mother to switch to all that organizational hurry and lose the moment of saying goodbye. So, we asked the nurses to leave us for five minutes and talked to him a bit. We did that small ritual. I told her about the theory that a dead person could hear everything for a half an hour after they die.

[This theory is taken from the narratives of religion, not science, but that didn’t matter at that moment. We needed that ritual.]

I consider that my last talk to him. “Let’s tell him we are thankful to him. I am in particular”. She said she regretted I had not said that while he was alive. Well, but I simply couldn’t.

[It felt like a familiar experience to send words into emptiness. In fact, this is what we do when we send voice messages or speak on camera. You don’t have the recipient in front of you but you believe he’s going to hear you somehow.]

I tried to make our experience a little bit more conscious. To have a closure, if not spiritual then at least emotional. I kept being on the phone with my mother up until she came back home and went to sleep. Some kind of rationality was guiding me. Maybe that was thanks to the distance, distance is always safe. It protects you from too strong impressions, too heavy emotions, too scary images, it filters and compresses them. Watching a live stream is still different from being on war.

## Biography

Anastasiya is a PhD candidate in Media Art at the Lusófona University, Lisbon, and an internationally acclaimed TV and Film Director. Her field of research is hybrid films and artistic reenactment as a cinematic method. Her documentary *Dogs Don't Bite Good People* (2020) and her MA graduation film *Charcoal* (2020) will be premiered in 2021.

W: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm7676464/>