

The Unfilmed: Repositories of Divinity from the Edges of America

Yehuda Sharim

The times we live are times of dismay, anxiety, devastation, countless tragedies, hopelessness and anger. Our hearts are broken daily. All around us, beyond and within the US, democratic apparatuses struggle to imagine freedom, throwing up nationalists, bigots and fascists. How can we survive such mounting waves of suffering and loss? Where do we store and archive our wounds, anxieties and uncaged dreams? And where can we locate the living archives for renewal and new times?

I am interested in echoing a set of moments and sentiments that cannot be captured through our social cameras, what I refer to as the *unfilmed*, as reminders that keep teaching us how to chase spectacles of different magnitudes and falsification. It is amid the devastation and culminating strife; I suggest that throughout my work, we are asked to listen to the voices from the ruins. While writing about recorded and unrecorded scenes from *Songs that Never End* (2019) and *Letters2Maybe* (2021), and my ongoing collaboration with the Dayan family, I explore how the unfilmed offers a steep source of regeneration and transformation, carrying with it more than a product, a film. Our work is always more than a set of products. I am fascinated with reimagining film's dogmatic perception as an isolated archive of images/sound. We cannot create without the unrecorded (ideas or experiences). The emphasis on reclaiming unrecorded voices forces us to reimagine archives as OPEN and broken terrains that are always in flux, incomplete and wild. It is in retaining our personal and collective repositories where we share our manuals of survival, allowing us to see ourselves, offering us space for reckoning, ultimately acting as repositories of our divinity, and investing hope in our attempt to see a kinder and a just future during these disquieting times.

I want these words to speak, not as a report or transcript, but as part of an encounter. To reimagine the particular scaffolding of archives, I wrote this piece as a play. *The Unfilmed*, therefore, presents a set of actions and experiments. Constructed of four separate acts, this piece reflects my five-year work with the Dayan family.

CURTAIN – Untampered Choreographies and Untamed Archives

The Unfilmed is a kind of an invitation to hold multiple cameras but to record only with the heart. For me, a recording does not start with the pressing of buttons. I record confessions such as ‘I think that it is important that I take care of my mother’, as he kept whispering to me, but ‘the difficult thing is when I need to take my mother to the restroom and pull her pants down’. I record songs that are sung without a crowd; ‘I know why you added music to the film/In all films, all our stories are based on words/We talk, and we talk, but no one is listening/In this country no one listens to people like us/ Only music/Only music is left/Only/Music/No words, no.’

I want to begin with the untampered, unboxed and untamed elements that set in motion constellations of what is beyond and within words, the unfilmed. With our societies depending on and highlighting all that is filmed, and then constructing archives in order and celebrate these records, ‘the unfilmed’ speaks to hours and days of filming (with the heart, hunger of the soul, or the camera) that cannot be boxed into a product, a film, an image, or even these words here.



When thinking about the unfilmed, I am suggesting muteness but more a gesture that is not recorded. The unfilmed is always part of an act, an effort to locate beauty. The striving for harmony, particularly at times of strife – and we are always, so it seems, in a time of crisis – is a revolutionary act. The unfilmed is subversive because it insists on existence beyond capitalist structures. It is part of rebellious gestures that insist on kindness while maintaining critical perspectives and harnessing a consciousness of our shared fragility, brokenness and frailty. It is revolutionary because it is an act that creates a space that resists compressing and insists on innovation and liberation.

To conceive *the unfilmed* in correlation with *the subversive*, one must leave the centre. The unfilmed is located not among those who profit from structures of oppression and abuse but, rather, among the peripheries of our society and imagination. In between the ordinary, the unassuming and the quotidian, one can discern what the 1960s African American playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, named as ‘elements of profundity’.¹ Hansberry located such elements among working-class African American families in Chicago, and her scripted work allows the quotidian to be seen and questioned. Even when it manifests itself as absence or stillness, the unfilmed is construed out of such tacit fibres of profundity and divinity – that is, the divine elements seeded in each of us.

Here, nothing can be owned or hidden permanently. Instead, all is alive, especially our losses or fears, secret visions, scars and ancestral trauma; everything remains. Israel will always be Palestine. And California will remain Mexico. My mother and father are the most celebrated actors I have ever met, even though they have never participated in any film. And the future is never what lies ahead but an enactment that lies within, from denials to historical legacies of racism and abuse.

ACT 1 – The Unfilmed ²

The phone call started with a sin.

‘Yehuda, I have sinned.’

It was Abbas.

A short pause, and then, ‘I have made a mistake. I am ashamed, ashamed of myself.’

I hear Abbas breathing heavily.

‘I had a rider with UBER, and I drove to locate that person.

When I arrived, it was this young man, and he told me that he had to drive to his family, but he didn’t have money.

I paused and watched the man.

I didn’t know what to do.

¹ The theatrical and autobiographical work of Lorraine Hansberry reminds viewers and readers of new ways of seeing what is perceived as known or ordinary, including normalised racism and domesticated violence and abuse; see Lorraine Hansberry’s *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, Vintage Books, 1969, p 151

² I would like to share with you moments not captured or recorded; I will move back and forth between *Seeds of All Things* (2018), *Songs that Never End* (2019), *Red Line Lullaby* (2020) and *Letters2Maybe* (2021), as well as my chronicles that have continued during and far beyond the so-called ‘filming’ period, as a way to shed light on the relationship between memory and cinema, fragmentation and displacement, structural violence and resilience

And then I told him that I could not drive him, but I kept thinking about this person.

I drove away; other riders came by, but in my mind, I kept thinking whether I had made a mistake. Did I make a mistake? Why would I ignore someone in need? The person needed help. The person needed help – why did I leave him like that? Should I return? Is he ok?

But I kept doing my thing, driving; then I wanted to call, I needed to talk, but you didn't answer, so I went home and spoke with Samira.

In Iran, I would help people who needed help.

In Iran, I would help this person. I would drive him – but here, how did I forget? Forget who I am?

Why did I ignore someone who needed help?

I have sinned. In my culture, if someone needs help, it is my responsibility to help them. I have sinned. I made a mistake. I made a mistake.

What has happened to me?

I disappointed myself.'

ACT 2 – Hell is Here

Should you take the camera with you or not? You are on your way to show the family the film you made with them over the last four years, but something makes you pause. Should you film this encounter? Should you film them watching themselves? Will that be film material? Is it dramatic enough? What is 'dramatic enough'? You decide to leave the camera behind. After three years of filming and deep friendship, you just go, paying a visit, like always. After all, you are in town for only a few more days, working on the film's sound mixing.

You would like to imagine that the films you have made with the family benefited them somehow, but did it? What is the benefit of filming hardship? Trauma? Loss? Wounds seen and unseen? Moreover, who is to benefit from it? Does use relate to art or perhaps translate better when talking about PR material, NGOs, greedy politicians and blind policymakers?

Abbas, *babai* (father), is the first to run to greet you. He tells you that he wants to meet with you every day until your flight back to California. He wants you to make plans. Samira, his wife, joins both of you on the couch. 'Since you left, we are all alone', was her first sentence, 'we are alone here, in this city, in this Houston. We have no one.' She declares that she feels better, somewhat. Samira moves her fingers faster and faster, showing you that now, finally, she is agile, capable of controlling her own body. Later, Abbas describes how she fell yesterday in the



narrow kitchen and began urinating blood in front of the four-year-old twins (while Abbas is at work, instructing Hana and Ali to take the twins away and start cleaning all the blood from the kitchen floor). Then you will realise only when we meet that she is ‘somewhat’ better.

‘We have new friends’, she informs you with great enthusiasm. They leave for another room. When Samira returns, she holds a book – *The Book of Mormon* – and reveals that ‘the new friends’ even gave the family some great gifts. When Abbas joins you, he describes how they met their two new friends: ‘Yes, we know that they want us to talk about Mormon, but we don’t care; we just need to practise our English, and we have no one here to talk with and improve our English.’ He laughs. You explain what missionaries are and that friendship in this country can sometimes be tricky, at times motivated by different ambitions and hidden (or explicit) interests. ‘But Yehuda, who can we meet here? We need to speak with people – do you understand? We have no one here. We miss people, talking with people.’

Abbas describes the nights that the family spent in the nearby Walmart, just walking, meandering in the busy air-conditioned aisles. Usually, such a Walmart trip starts after 8 pm. He is exhausted after work, and the kids spend the entirety of the long summer days indoors. On rare occasions, Ali and Hana will go for a short swim around the pool in the complex, but as for the twins, they are forced to remain indoors, usually in the living room, facing the TV. The only thing to do at night is Walmart. The world is Walmart. Long walks could last over hours around the crowded aisles, but it’s not the goods we are here for. It’s the chance to meet other immigrants from the nearby area, some of whom are just like Abbas and Samira, craving a public meeting place. Sometimes you don’t do anything. But you just walk, passing by other humans and shelves crowded with goods you cannot afford. ‘This is our favorite place’, Abbas concludes with laughter.

You join the family for dinner in a nearby Persian restaurant. You wanted to believe that matters would get better after the filming, but they didn't. Abbas's new job means that he supports his family with only \$3,000 a month. Samira's depression worsened and is now further limiting her movement, and she had to stop cooking because she finds it difficult to stand up straight. Fourteen-year-old Ali and nine-year-old Hana are now raising the four-year-old twins, Helia and Ilya. The meat skewers make it to our table around 10:30 pm.

Ali wants to sit next to you. He tells you that something strange happened over the last year: he cannot control his eating. 'I just cannot stop it, Mr. Yehuda.' He tells you that he can eat for hours. He then describes how his history teacher described how all Iranians are terrorists and how he got upset (what will later lead him to ask his father if he can change his name from Ali to George or John).



'Hell', Ali explains to you, 'is here.' 'When God will meet and ask me if I want to go to Hell or Heaven, he will say that you have already been in Hell because hell is here, hell is now; hell is this city.' He eats more of the meat, and you do the same. Abbas wants you to try the lamb. 'Try this? You are my family; you are my brother, try this lamb, it is delicious.'

ACT 3 – A Script is Needed

The need to see, fully expose, reveal, a trend in vulgar times, is not only a sign of prowess but also a way to use force in disciplining the heart's gaze – forcing the eye and mind to meet with realities. Instead, a reminder that meaning or meaning-making is not merely a product of bareness, but what remains out of sight, beyond facts. Facts never tell the story in its entirety. Brutality manifests itself here in forcing narrowness: this event; no, this event; no, this moment.

Guns and cameras expose distrust, justifying the hunger to reveal, reveal further, or at least to give one the illusion that life here makes some sense.

The illusion here is that film will reveal, penetrate characters and realities, inform ‘us’ about ‘them’ (where ‘them’ often stands for people of colour; immigrant, underserved communities). That interest in emotional piercing, to capture, hold the truth, is not related to the camera but to our human tendency to rely on colonial delusions in the face of the turbulent nature of life. Could we let go? Could the camera contribute to a sense of liberation? Could we imagine different ways of seeing one another?



Abbas asks me to write a script. ‘If I may’, he advises me, ‘in our next film, we need a script, and we will do it in our words.’ We continue talking about our next film. ‘Maybe I need to study film. You know, I always loved films. We always watch films.’ Then, Abbas asks me whether he should take his family to San Antonio tomorrow. ‘We need to leave the house (after more than two months of stay-at-home due to the spreading pandemic), we need to walk, to see. What do you say about San Antonio?’

We think further about a script. We recall when we met, just a day after the 2016 Presidential election in the USA while I was filming in Hope clinic in Houston, Texas, and what has developed since that encounter. ‘You see, if I were five minutes late, or arriving an hour later to our appointment....’ A script?

In the screening room, Hanna and the projector watch the audience as they face the big screen. The dark space captures our attention. Hanna pays attention to how the audience follows her image, her words, actions, silences. We hear their laughter as she moves her hand

up, revealing a grin. 'It is like meeting God', she whispers, 'it is like leaving the world, meeting God, and you watch your life, everything! Everything.'



ACT 4 – Are You Angry with Me?

Four years have passed since the family moved to the US, and it has just got worse. 'If we were somewhat unstable four years ago, now we are more afraid. Insecure. Uncertain. Doubtful.' Abbas talks about his pain, being at home all day, unable to provide for his family, witnessing personal and social deterioration. Last month, he worked as a mechanic, truck driver, accountant, and dispatcher with Amazon.

Now, he will take anything.

Any job will do.

A refugee friend tells Abbas about another job: truck driver. The other day he drove across the US–Mexico border. He spent sixteen hours in the truck. For the entire trip, the truck owner received \$400, and Abbas's share was \$100. He earns less than \$7 per hour. You ask him to stop this work.

'It is better than staying at home. The children get afraid when they see me unemployed.' 'Any job is better than nothing', he keeps telling me. We talk about him earning \$6 per hour, and I ask him to stop; it isn't worth your time and energy. Then I pause; I remain silent.

I get frustrated. We speak less and less.

We don't talk for a few days. Then more days of silence follow. A week later, when we talk, Abbas asks me if I am angry at him.

A voice message: 'Yehuda, are you angry with me? I have no option, nothing, the children are worried seeing me all day at home; we don't go out, we don't buy food, the twins didn't

leave the house for two months now... What can I do, Yehuda? I have no job, not enough even for food or clothing for the children, please don't be angry with me!'

We laugh or cry or something. Something. We are making noises of 'something'. Perhaps it is called despair. I have no right or legitimacy to be angry when despair governs one's life.

A month passed; Abbas was the first person that I talked with about the fact that my two parents had lost their job. After decades of working in the same position – my father at the fields and my mother at a local newspaper – suddenly it is about to stop ('about' because my mother just received a notice that her work will end over the coming months, which gives her some more time to prepare for this significant shift in her life).

Talking with Abbas: 'I have been thinking all day about your father; how he lost his job. After all these years in the fields, to suddenly stop; it is hard, very hard.'

'I have been thinking maybe you can go and visit them: but that is impossible. I thought maybe they could come and visit you: but this cannot work. They cannot fly now.'

'I was thinking that it is painful because your father is like my father, and your mother is like my mother. And it is painful. And I think about it all day.

'Today was ok. Twelve hours and I made \$120 (paying \$20 for gas).'



CODA – Unfilming the Future

The news of our lives, similarly to the news of our time, haunts us to the point of exhaustion.

Nothing is left to the imagination.

Events already took place without you.

Helplessness emerges. Helplessness and as a result lack of focus dominates.

Magic is reduced to tricks by random politicians and charlatans.

All that is unknown is sacrificed in this colourful imitation of life; painkillers and anti-depressants are sold during the commercial breaks. You are encouraged to believe that pain can be killed and thus should not be seen or faced.

Many of us often find ourselves thinking of things that stir up feelings of fear and sorrow. We have all experienced some suffering in our past, and we often recall our past suffering. We revisit the past, reviewing it and watching the films of the past. But if we revisit these memories without mindfulness or awareness, every time we watch those images we suffer again.³

When confronted with the unknown, we're forced to improvise. And this is a good thing: the obligation to find, and to find quickly, a new equilibrium for the shot we're creating. So even then, I don't believe in thinking too much. Overthinking reduces everything to the mere execution of a plan. Things need to happen impulsively.⁴

I thought everything was over and I had lost my
lover
I thought my life was permanently out of order
because my world lay on the wrong side of some
arbitrary border⁵

Films are associated with ads and PR material in a morally drowning country due to the suffocating ties between capital–politics–entertainment. Distrust engulfs every aspect of this hyper-capitalist society. To live with such deep levels of doubt is to live in isolation and always with a heightened sense of despair (explaining such high rates of suicidal tendencies and addictions in the USA).

When cinema can cross borders, the starting point could also be the ending point. The location is unclear. The viewers are invited to the family's table; dinner is about to be served; no time is given for intellectual explanations.

I am interested in a cinema that allows complexity and contradictions to co-exist:

Without a place and with a place
to rest – living darkly with no ray
of light – I burn my self away.⁶

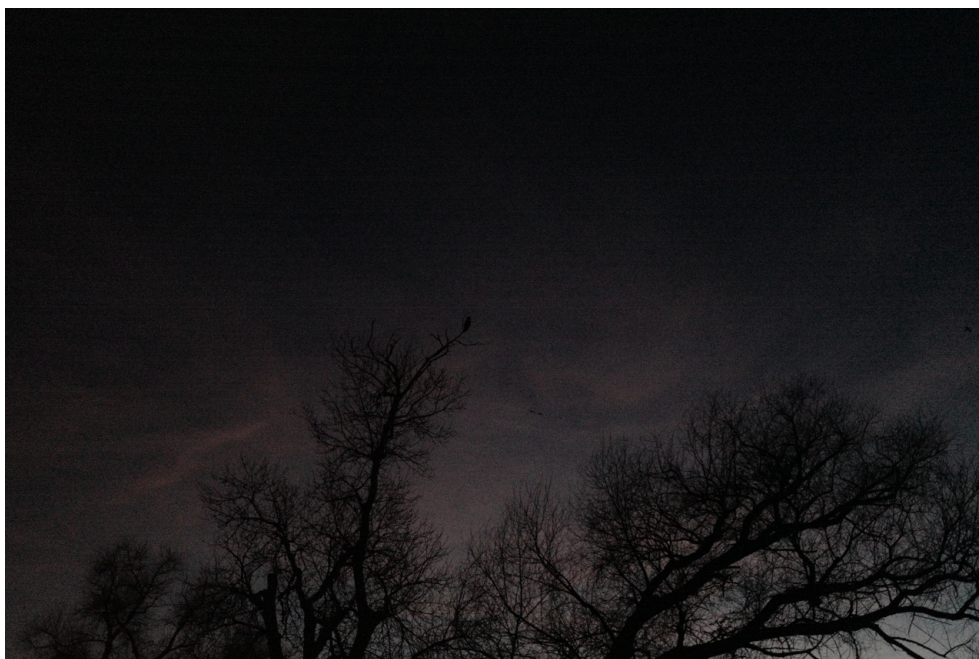
³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Fear: Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*, HarperOne, San Francisco, 2012, p 15

⁴ Robert Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews, 1943–1983*, Anna Moschovakis, trans, and Mylène Bresson, ed, New York Review Books, New York, 2016, p 148

⁵ June Jordan, *I was Looking at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky*, 1996, p 16 (Ensemble/Consuelo)

⁶ St John of the Cross, 'Without a Place and with a Place', in *The Poems of St John of the Cross*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 2010 [1968], pp 82–83

Filming cannot start with the camera in hand.



Abbas left his home around 8 pm for his nighttime UBER shift. He will UBER for as many hours as possible, sometimes for more than twelve hours. We will talk often, or when he will not have a rider. Then, one night, he began having pain in his chest. He was thinking about quitting his UBER. Then what? How will you pay rent? He started taking pills to help him with his high blood pressure. He wanted the pain to stop. The doctor asked him to lose weight. The pain in his chest ensued. I began sending him photos of my time with the birds. We talked about birds, a prominent trope in Persian poetry and art, a reminder of our freedom and abilities to oppress each other and cage our souls. Minutes after his last night with UBER, he bought dinner for the homeless person outside Walmart (\$82 after ten hours of work). ‘I told Samira the other night that God cannot forget people like us. We need to remember that. God still loves us.’

All images are still images taken from the author’s filming of the Dayan family in Houston, Texas, between 2016–2022. They are part of three films: *Seeds of All Things* (2018), *Songs that Never End* (2020) and *Letters2Maybe* (2021). For more information, see www.sharimstudio.com

Yehuda Sharim is a writer, filmmaker, poet and photographer. His work reflects on the relationship between the quotidian and the poetic to explore new potentialities of the imagination. *Oscillating between fiction, improvisation and real-life events*, Sharim’s work offers an intimate portrayal of those who refuse to surrender amidst daily devastation and culminating strife, cultivating a vision for equality and renewed solidarity in a divisive world. Sharim is currently a faculty member at the Global Arts, Media and Writing Program at the University of California, Merced. For more information about his work, see www.sharimstudio.com