



FILM SYMPOSIUM

## Reflections on *Unwritten Letters* and the neorealism of contingency

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Comment on *Unwritten Letters*. 2020. Max Bloching and Abd Alrahman Dukmak, directors. Distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute.

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*Unwritten Letters* (in Arabic “*Rasa’il lam tuktab*”), directed by Max Bloching and Abd Alrahman Dukmak, is an autobiographical movie that has Dukmak as a protagonist, a young Syrian refugee man now living in Europe. Indeed, the movie develops as a meta-story because it speaks of him desiring to produce an autobiographical movie. Grasping the actual biography of Dukmak is challenging, as the film moves from the present times to an imagined and a happened past at the same time.

Dukmak, while in Lebanon, used to live with legal uncertainty. He managed to travel and relocate to northeastern Italy, in the Veneto region through the Italian humanitarian corridors supported and financed by the Valdese Church. After resettlement, Dukmak focused on his intention to make a movie with Max Bloching, the co-director.

Contingency plays a fundamental role in the movie: Dukmak’s life looks at the present moment like it happened by chance, but it could have developed in several other ways. The contingency of life, including the sheer contingency of human rights and safety in today’s world, is what I personally understand as the most powerful message of the movie. Dukmak left Lebanon through the humanitarian corridors, about which he found out by word of mouth, through an acquaintance.

Through unwritten but narrated letters to his friend Zein, we imagine the other lives that Dukmak could have found himself in. Instead of resettlement in Padua, Italy,

Dukmak imagines a different story: one of a peaceful and democratic Syria (where the conflict started in 2011 as a result of popular uprising across the country), already having had two different presidencies after today’s President Bashar al-Asad’s imagined departure.

Scenes and scripts develop slowly, triggering, in turn, a sense of waiting in the public, along with the enduring uncertainty and the contingency of the real life which, among the many unwritten scripts to Zein, took Dukmak to Europe.

A different life that he imagines writing about is his journey to Europe with no visa, with no legal certainties and with safety concerns. This is a story of local accomplishment, where, in Italy, he has married an Italian woman and become the father of two children. A sense of waiting pervades each of these imagined or truly happened stories. If waiting has largely been used as an analytical perspective to delve into highly complex and changing processes of bordering and belonging (Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021), Dukmak’s words show us how waiting simply does not end when migration is accomplished. In the same way, “protracted precarity” is not confined to the experience of “irregular” migrants (De Genova 2021: 193), but it rather pervades human mobility in all its forms and constraints, while dooming the everyday bearers of this form of precarity to the absence of rights and of existential certainties.



The different possible lives make us empathize with Dukmak's conflicting desires: one of local integration in the Italian context, and others about a different end of the story for the Syrian revolution. Indeed, a spritz competition—a typical Veneto wine-based cocktail—becomes a possible way to integrate in this Italian region, and illustrates the avenues that his socialization could take. Silvano, an old neighbor who befriends Dukmak since his early days in Italy, plays the largest role in Dukmak's socialization. We live Dukmak's friendships and relationships through his chats in the local park, while Silvano walks his dog around, and through the porticoes of the city (*portici* in Italian architecture), where Dukmak hangs out with other Arabic-speaking friends.

The political struggles of the past become struggles with himself, possible redemption between him and himself, and the several lives he could have lived. The profound political delusions of the past undergird his desire to look beyond Syria and beyond the revolution, which started in March 2011 and to which the Syrian government responded with extremely violent repression, engendering a large-scale conflict. His retrospective pessimism about the revolution, and the number of friends and acquaintances who were killed during Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's repression, prevent him from continuing the struggle he began when he joined the street protests in Qodsaiya Square (in the Damascus countryside). Yet although his pessimism seems to be the end of this story, we can still perceive in his words and tone a sense of waiting: as he says himself, he is not sure what the wait is about (*bas 'an jad ma ba'ref shu hue* in Arabic).

The enduring sense of waiting we can perceive when he speaks of the revolution contradicts his statements, such as “religious and political slogans I don't even believe in anymore” and “there is no time for the past.” The fight, however, is still between him and himself, to overcome the image of a Syria which, in his memories, only emerges as “war-ravaged,” bereft of any hope. Do happiness and peacefulness with oneself come all of a sudden? Which among the many lives lived and imagined guarantees the end of the wait? It is in this spirit that Dukmak attempts the socialization of his suffering by often asking his Italian neighbors: “Are you happy in your life?”

Another unwritten letter to Zein imagines his return to Damascus, where he “can make a change.” This story, instead, suggests a complex optimism. It clarifies to us

the sense of waiting we were left with after empathizing with Dukmak's pessimism about Syria's political future: “I will fight and defeat the ugly people. Not because justice exists in life, but because I'm stronger than them.” Yet, such optimism does not speak to the material present, but develops through an (only imagined) hopefulness, which, therefore, acknowledges the atrocity he needs to live with and the bitter memory of the killed and the people who have left, who are those who made him stop fighting. These thoughts of his powerfully counter the well-known aesthetics of social and political mobilizations, which are often romanticized and homogenized in scholarly literature through repertoires of resilience and steadfastness.

The physical and built environment plays a substantial role in telling us Dukmak's feelings and in contextualizing his words. Every time we are introduced to a new scene, it is the space which first appears to us: an urban bus stop or a quiet rural locality, populated by a river and countryside sounds. The way the space manifests itself in every scene lets us know where Dukmak is, while his feelings and thoughts are made “visible” through the space of his relationship with others as well as with the material space that surrounds him.

I appreciated the movie's neorealism, in which we follow Dukmak's everyday life in Veneto's urban and rural settings, with no need for detailed and introductory narrations. However, from a personal perspective, there is too much which is left untold and underexplained in the movie, leaving the audience with several questions. For instance, considering the relevance of the meta-story of making a film in the film itself, how did the achievement of realizing this movie affect Dukmak's enduring sense of uncertainty and the contingency of leading one life among several (potential) others? And has such an enduring uncertainty managed to fully sweep away the hopeful agency of the past, which manifested itself throughout the protests in Syria? Or has that hopeful agency, betrayed by the dramatic future of the revolution, managed to leave Dukmak—as well as many others—with new legacies, such as the power to narrate?

It is through the continuum of these spaces and his conflicting thoughts that Dukmak struggles to find a final home. “I have pictures that I want to hang on a wall, but I have not found this wall. I lived in Beirut six years, and I haven't hung this picture for all that time.” In the meantime, finding that wall can no longer depend on contingency rights.



## References

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