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Citation:

FENWICK, James (2020). Documenting syria: Film-making, video activism and revolution. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 40 (4), 916-918. [Article]

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Documenting Syria: Film-making, Video Activism and Revolution

JOSHKA WESSELS, 2019

London, I. B. Tauris

pp. xiv + 321, illus., £24.99 (paperback)

The images of bloodshed and war-torn cities in Syria – indeed, footage of entire cities that have been annihilated by fighting and aerial bombardment – have graced our news screens for nearly a decade since the 2011 uprisings, part of the Arab Spring that led to a seemingly never-ending and complicated civil war in the country. The scale of the destruction and the diaspora it has brought about are still, after all this time, incomprehensible, arguably leaving many Western audiences questioning, what even remains in the ravaged landscape of Syria? One may even think that no cultures of production exist anymore, that a country so devastated by war could have anything even amounting to a film industry. The nomination of *For Sama*, the story of Waad al-Kateab's life in Aleppo during the battle that engulfed the city, for Best Documentary at the 2019 Academy Awards, indicated however that Syria was clearly a site, however dangerous, for highly personal and vital accounts of the war that was raging.

Joshka Wessels' *Documenting Syria: Film-Making, Video Activism and Revolution* is a welcome account of the documentary cultures of Syria, tracing the rich cinematic documentary heritage of the country from its 'golden era' in the 1970s through to the digital video activism of the 2010s. Her book is one of the first comprehensive surveys of Syrian documentary across a fifty-year period. Utilising a combination of archival research, textual interpretation and visual analysis, ethnography, and interviews, Wessels makes the case for a culture of filmmaking in Syria that bridges the old and new generations, the 'masters' and the 'digital activists' as she terms them, with a long-standing tradition of resistance and criticism

of the country's authoritarian regimes (p. 5). And what emerges is a counter history of a nation, one that is far from being a voiceless people, but a country with a diverse, innovative and urgent network of filmmakers and citizen journalists documenting and recording narratives of their own, and of other Syrians, lives.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, 'Documentary film-making in Syria', charts the developments of documentary culture in the country prior to 2011. Wessels divides this period into three generations of filmmakers: the 'masters' of the 1970s, largely supported by the Syrian National Film Organization (NFO) and typically trained in Moscow film schools; the 'new' generation of professional filmmakers inspired by the masters, but typically trained in Western film schools; and the 'digital video' filmmakers, a group of social activists that use digital technology such as mobile phones and social media platforms to tell their stories of the Syrian revolution. Along the way, Wessels peppers her historical survey with recollections of her own personal encounters with some of these filmmakers, the most dramatic of which is her account of the second and third generation of documentary filmmakers, many of whom have lost their lives in their efforts to record the realities of living in a war zone. She concludes part one with a chapter on the life and work of Bassel Shehadeh, a young filmmaker that was killed in Homs in 2012 while training other Syrians in video production. The chapter serves as a bridge between the traditions of Syrian documentary, of its roots in resistance, to the later post-2011 digital video activist networks that emerged in response to the war (p. 143).

The second part, 'Eyewitnesses of a revolution', is a dramatic, detailed and breath-taking account of the courage and sacrifice made by the Syrian digital video activists in their bid to produce documentaries. As Wessels argues, these activists – ordinary Syrian citizens – 'had taken up their mobile phones and their digital camera as weapons to document events from protests, funerals and eventually daily bombardment – they were the eyewitnesses of the

Syrian Revolution’ (p. 167). Across four chapters, Wessels argues the centrality of social media and video sharing websites, in particular YouTube, as vital distribution platforms. In doing so, what emerges is a culture of documentary, and a mediated war, that Wessels likens to the Vietnam War. If the latter was the first television war, then the Syrian civil war was the first ‘YouTube War’ (p. 181). But in her investigation into the hours of footage and thousands of videos uploaded to YouTube, Wessels concludes there are greater motivations in the production of this material, and that ‘YouTube is like a stage to project an “I” and “we” in a Self-Other relationship to deposit digitized memories and experiences and a potential for media-based self-referentiality and performance to voice political opinion’ (p. 195). There was hope that the international community would take notice of the footage and the violence it depicted, but after many years ‘their videos did not lead to solidarity or support democratization and there was no rush to aid and protect the Syrian people [...] instead the overload of information generated fatigue and apathy with western audiences’ (p. 206).

Wessels provides an incredible account of digital and social media as a vital phenomenological tool in the lives of Syrians. The camera became a weapon, both to counter the hegemonic representation of Syria by Western media, but also as a means to document war crimes in the expectation that the footage would be used as evidence ‘for future justice’ (p. 231). But as Wessels concludes, the Syrian experience has undermined the Western utopian discourse of the importance of digital and social media in democracy, with the justice the Syrian people are looking for still waiting to be served.

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