



THE CAMERA IS OURS

For Sama

Introduced by director Waad al-Kateab

One of the things that almost all films get wrong about war is not only that most of the time nothing happens but that something resembling ordinary life can coexist with conflict.

The opening sequence of *For Sama* shows Waad al-Kateab, the journalist and activist who captured the images from which this compelling film has been made, singing to Sama, her very young daughter, swaddled in blankets and gurgling happily. Then there is an explosion. It is not far away, but is muffled by the buildings around the bedroom she shares with Hamza, her husband, in the hospital he runs in Aleppo, the northern Syrian city. Al-Kateab carries on singing, like any mother to her child, before passing Sama to a friend to take to the basement. Then there is another blast, and then another, much closer. The corridors fill with dust; in the basement the lights flicker. Al-Kateab asks with rising panic, 'Where is Sama? Where is my girl?' This is war, but viewed very differently. It is conflict woven through the lives of civilians, not the inverse, as is usual with most portrayals.

The Syrian Civil War is still being fought, if at a lesser intensity than during the five years covered in *For Sama*. It is a conflict in which images have played an extraordinary powerful role. One reason for this is the new technology that has put a camera in everybody's hand – along with the means to broadcast any content that they or others create. Al-Kateab appears to have shot much of the footage on a small camera, occasionally using a drone to capture astonishing and beautiful images of Aleppo from above. But her husband, Dr Hamza, is shown being interviewed at the hospital by an international news channel, on his phone via Skype, during the brutal siege of the city by the forces of president Bashar al-Assad and his allies during the latter half of 2016. Here there is a multiplicity of viewpoints – that of the journalist watching the interviewee being watched by other journalists, themselves watched by viewers across the world.

Terrorism and insurgency have long been deeply influenced by developments in media technology. Much of the violence of Jewish militants in the mid-1940s in what was to become Israel was designed to impact on a very distant audience in the UK, the colonial power, relayed via the new photojournalism. Through the next decade, fighters in Algeria pursued a similar strategy, relying on the radio to relay news of their bombings and ambushes to metropolitan France. These attacks were made against targets which would attract media attention, rather than those that had immediate military significance. Famous attacks of the 1970s, like that on the Munich Olympics in 1972, were constructed to exploit the new capabilities of live television broadcasts. Al-Qaeda was influenced by the advent of satellite TV, and chose to pursue difficult, risky, spectacular attacks against high-profile targets largely because success would guarantee media coverage.

The big change came with digital technology, which Islamic extremists in Iraq exploited with savage efficiency. By the time of the Syrian war smart phones were ubiquitous, adding new dimensions to the power of media to reach vast audiences. The regime in Damascus and the different opposition forces all

used video clips disseminated on the internet to frame the conflict in different ways and to reinforce their arguments within Syria and the region, as well as to international audiences. The conventional military protagonists – the Russians who bomb al-Kateab's hospital among other civilian targets – use clips to disguise what amount to war crimes. The unconventional military actors, such as militia fighters linked to Iran or Lebanon's Hezbollah, used them for recruiting. Western or other TV networks, unable to access the frontlines themselves once the war became too dangerous for international journalists, systematically used material shot locally by ordinary civilians. Some put the material emerging from Syria and Iraq to less edifying purposes. Aficionados edited and posted compilations of combat footage – and killings. But protestors and activists found they could film on mobile phones, and then get crucial images out of the country that provided the only evidence of atrocities, circumventing tight censorship and monitoring by state security agencies. Al-Kateab's work was used by Channel 4.

In this saturated environment *For Sama* stands out. It is obviously a carefully made documentary, lasting a little over 90 minutes and obeying most of the standard formal rules of the genre. It is also deeply personal and very intimate. Most of what has emerged from the Syrian conflict has sought to appear objective. *For Sama* does not. It takes the form of a long explanation to the daughter of the al-Kateabs, born in Aleppo, of the reasons behind her parents' decision to stay in the city despite the obvious dangers to themselves and her. This is a child who grows up with air raids, in a city where ten-year-olds play in water-filled shell craters on neighbourhood streets and where toddlers talk of cluster bombs.

There is little too that al-Kateab does not film: the moment when a pregnancy test is positive, her prayers for a safe deliverance, her husband struggling to hold back tears after the death of a friend and colleague in a new attack. If packages for news bulletins obey their own formal frameworks, designed to give them the appearance of clear and distanced truth-telling, *For Sama* deliberately and defiantly provides a very different perspective. This is lived experience, a video diary, not a report. It is also the view of a civilian, a woman and a mother. This is true in a very literal sense: we see Russian or Syrian regime aircraft flying through the clear blue sky over the city and releasing deadly barrels packed with explosives on to the neighbourhoods below. Our viewpoint is that of the victim, not the perpetrator. This is the exact opposite of the clinically dehumanised 'through the sights' footage released by military press departments, much viewed as well on YouTube and elsewhere.

As with most conflicts, the portrayal of that in Syria has been largely controlled by and focused on men, whether as reporters, medics, clerics, politicians, officials, farmers or fighters. The attention paid to the female Kurdish troops or to outstanding reporters such as Marie Colvin are the exceptions that prove the rule. *For Sama* is not about men – although Hamza al-Kateab is inevitably central, and most of the medics who run the hospital are male. One key character is a female friend and colleague who is confronted with the most difficult choice of all: go into exile, abandoning the city, the hospital and her comrades, neighbours and friends, or stay, with her young family, and risk an appalling fate. She stays, as long as she can, as an act of resistance as much as anything else. 'To try to live a normal life in this place is to stand against the regime,' says Waad al-Kateab.

There is much that is deeply harrowing. It is the children, inevitably, who suffer most. Covered in dust from explosions, still bleeding from being buried by another bomb dropped from a regime or Russian helicopter or jet, they watch, sobbing, stunned, as doctors work to save a badly injured brother, nephew, friend or father. There is blood on the floor of the clinic, red pools running into one another. 'Wake up, wake up,' one cries to a dead boy. Another howls for his father. There is delicacy too. An eight-year-old dies beneath the frantic hands of the doctors. We do not see this. We see his small body under a makeshift shroud, fine features below its gauze. You do not sleep well after viewing such images. This does not leave you indifferent. Which is, of course, the aim of this extraordinary film. The al-Kateabs take extraordinary risks in their lives, and in the documenting of their lives, to bear witness in the most raw and real sense. They are away from the hospital when it is bombed, and largely destroyed, so we see the seconds before impact on security camera footage. An old lady hobbles down a corridor. Teenagers wait, bored and worried. Medics move carefully and deliberately around a room. More than 50 people died in this attack. These images are evidence of war crimes, committed systematically and with total impunity.

The last third of the film shows the final weeks of the siege. The regime forces are streets away. Food is short. It is freezing cold and the bombing is continual. Dr Hamza tells his wife to make sure Sama is looked after by someone else if the regime's troops arrive because she will have more chance of survival if she is not identified as the child of the chief of the hospital and his journalist wife. She cannot do this, and thankfully does not have to, as a truce is arranged which allows the family a fragile and dangerous escape route – this is at the end of 2016. They take it, but at what cost? 'Saying goodbye is worse than death,' Waad says, and she knows about both. The tragedy is that the violence is continuing, as regime forces backed by their allies move in on a final enclave of Idlib, bombing, maiming and killing once again. The world knows, but has averted its eyes. This will be remembered as a great and shameful failure in decades to come. That we have films like *For Sama* is small consolation.

Jason Burke, *Sight & Sound*, October 2019

Children of the Ruins

For Sama movingly chimes with Jill Craigie's film about the ill effects on children in the aftermath of WWII.

FOR SAMA

Directed by: Waad al-Kateab, Edward Watts
©: Channel Four Television Corporation
A Channel 4 News & ITN Productions feature documentary
For: Channel 4, PBS Frontline
Executive Producers for Channel 4 News: Ben de Pea, Nevine Mabro, Siobhan Sinnerton
Executive Producer for ITN Production: George Waldrum
Executive Producers for Frontline: Raney Aronson-Rath, Dan Edge
Produced by: Waad al-Kateab
Assistant Producer: Mowaffaq Safadi
Production Manager: Jenny Smith
Head of Production: Elaine Morris
Post-production Co-ordinators: Tim Auld, Elizabeth Maj
Post-production Manager: Sam Hardy
Channel 4 News Team: Teresa Smith, Federico Escher, Kamal Kaddourah
Filmed by: Waad al-Kateab
Edited by/Film Editors: Chloe Lambourne, Simon McMahon

On-line Editor: Nicholas Bays
Colourists: Enge Gray, Nicholas Bays
Music by: Nainita Desai
Violinist: Alaa Arshaad
Guitarists: Malcolm Laws, Hugo Fuguet
Oudist: Mehmet Polat
Dubbing Mixer: Jeremy Spencer

UK 2019
100 mins

CHILDREN OF THE RUINS

Director: Jill Craigie
Production Company: Crown Film Unit
Sponsors: Central Office of Information, Foreign Office
UK 1948
11 mins

SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

Skate Kitchen

Tue 1 Mar 20:40; Sun 13 Mar 20:45

Divines

Wed 2 Mar 20:50; Tue 15 Mar 20:50

Jinn

Sat 5 Mar 17:45; Tue 8 Mar 21:00

37 Seconds (37 sekanzu)

Sat 5 Mar 20:30; Sat 12 Mar 20:45

Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)

Sun 6 Mar 18:45; Mon 14 Mar 20:50

Marie Antoinette

Tue 8 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital Editor and author of *Sofia Coppola: Forever Young*); Sun 13 Mar 18:00

Somersault

Fri 11 Mar 20:50; Mon 14 Mar 18:10

IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN

In the Eyes of the Law (Nach dem Gesetz)

Tue 1 Mar 20:50; Mon 7 Mar 18:15

Hamlet

Wed 2 Mar 18:15; Sat 5 Mar 17:00 (+ Intro by Prof Judith Buchanan)

Earth Spirit (Erdegeist)

Sat 5 Mar 12:10 (+ intro by Season Curator Pamela Hutchinson); Wed 9 Mar 20:50

The Decline (AKA Downfall) (Der Absturz)

Sat 5 Mar 14:30 (+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson); Tue 15 Mar 18:20

The Joyless Street (Die freudlose Gasse)

Sun 6 Mar 17:40 (+ intro by BFI Inclusion Team Coordinator, Miranda Gower-Qian); Wed 16 Mar 18:00

Impossible Love (Unmögliche Liebe)

Wed 9 Mar 18:20; Tue 15 Mar 20:45

THE CAMERA IS OURS:

BRITAIN'S WOMEN DOCUMENTARY MAKERS

From Beside the Seaside to the English Inn: Restoration Programme 1 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Thu 3 Mar 18:15

For Sama + intro by director Waad Al-Kateab + Children of the Ruins

Thu 3 Mar 20:30

The Camera Is Ours: Study Day + Independent Miss Craigie + Q&A with director Lizzie Thynne and producer Hollie Price

Sat 5 Mar 12:00-17:00

From the Sea to the Land Beyond

Sat 5 Mar 18:15

Seniors Free Archive Matinee: White Riot + discussion

Mon 7 Mar 14:00

Cow

Tue 8 Mar 20:40

The Hermit of Treig + Q&A with director Lizzie MacKenzie

Fri 11 Mar 18:10

From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration Programme 2 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Mon 14 Mar 18:15

Hostile + director Sonita Gale in conversation with journalist Jon Snow

Tue 15 Mar 18:00

NEW RELEASES

La Mif (The Fam)

Continues from Fri 25 Feb

Rebel Dread

From Fri 4 Mar

Ali & Ava

From Fri 11 Mar; Tue 15 March 14:00 Seniors' matinee + discussion

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