

Joshka Wessels, *Documenting Syria: Filmmaking, Video Activism and Revolution*, I.B. Tauris. 2019, pp. 336. ISBN: 9781788311731.

Documenting Syria is a timely and essential work addressing the roles of audio-visual media in the field of peace and conflict and contributes to the limited body of scholarly work on Syrian cinema, specifically Syrian documentary filmmaking. In this work, Wessels argues that from the perspective of the history and development of Syrian documentary cinema, the 2011 uprising was a predictable and long-coming reaction to life under the Assad regime. She develops this argument by guiding readers through pre-revolutionary documentarians' expressions of indirect resistance and dissent within their films and then by following the thread into the revolution, where newer filmmakers, building on the work of their predecessors, created more directly dissenting audio-visual work. Wessels is well-positioned to speak on these areas of research. She is currently a senior lecturer in communication for development at Malmö University in Sweden and a professional documentary filmmaker with experience in the MENA region. Her work has been broadcast on Al-Jazeera English and the BBC.

Documenting Syria is structured into two parts: the first two-thirds of the book outlines the history of documentary cinema in Syria before the revolution, and the final third analyses citizen journalism-style documentary activities during the war. Though the body of pre-revolutionary Syrian documentaries is limited, Wessels identifies a group of filmmakers who were active during this period. This group of filmmakers is further sub-divided into three groups: the 'masters', who studied filmmaking in Moscow and worked with the support of the Syrian National Film Organization (NFO); younger professionals who either studied filmmaking abroad or were self-taught and collaborated with the previous generation and NFO but also worked with the Arab Institute of Film (AIF); and finally, a loose network of young filmmakers and social activists connected through the Doc Box Film Festival.

The historical context of the first half serves dual purposes: on the one hand, this history provides the context necessary to support the argument around the change in audio-visual output upon the start of the revolution in the second section; however, in its own right, this section comprehensively commits the history of Syrian documentary cinema to the page for the first time, providing future scholars, filmmakers and film lovers an invaluable resource for prospective study and preservation.

The second section builds on the foundation constructed in the first, developing an argument around the shift in the approach to political messaging in documentary and citizen journalism outputs and the functions within the context of the broader revolution. Here, Wessels argues that revolutionary-era Syrian documentaries shifted from the intentional and planned constructions of dissent in the pre-revolutionary era to reactive and emotive moments shared globally as a more direct act of dissent against authoritarianism. Citing Koettle's description of the Syrian conflict as 'the first YouTube War' (2014), Wessels analyses how video, by taking advantage of a more immediate and far-reaching means of distribution, acted as a 'powerful vehicle for emotional expression and moral outrage' (p.176) for Syria's existing and emerging documentarians. The section also considers how these documentarians addressed issues of self-representation when international media converged to tell the story of the war from a Western perspective rather than the view of Syrians directly impacted by the violence.

Documenting Syria benefits from Wessels' access to key players within Syrian cinema, as well as her passion for the people, region and topic. This passion and access allowed Wessels to watch and describe in detail many Syrian documentary films difficult to view and at risk of having been lost to time. As a result, she dedicates a sizable portion of *Documenting Syria's* first section to accounts of these film plots, as well as the political and historical context when they were created, resulting in the history of Syrian documentary cinema described above. This historical account, leading to the analysis of more modern audio-visual documentary artifacts, builds on the foundation laid by Viola Shafik (2000), Lina Khatib (2006), Salti (2006), Gugler (2011), Dickinson (2016) and others, contributing what Wessels notes is 'the first comprehensive monograph about the history of Syrian documentary film and video activism' (p. 9).

Documenting Syria makes several key contributions to knowledge. As suggested above, owing to the minimal scholarly literature on Syrian cinema, the addition of an entire book focused exclusively on this topic is a significant contribution. Furthermore, what academic work does exist, primarily addresses narrative films, so work explicitly focused on Syrian documentaries is substantial. *Documenting Syria* also provides a comprehensive history of the evolution of Syrian documentary filmmaking, and the inclusion of many chronicled films greatly increases access to works very difficult to view. Finally, Wessels' argument clearly situates the revolutionary nature of Syrian cinema amongst comparable Arab cinemas. It also adds to the growing body of work on the role of video activism in conflict and peace studies.

Readers may note that the writing style within the first section is a bit descriptive for academics. This style is practical for capturing the content of documentary films however, making it an appropriate choice for this essential aspect of the work's contribution to knowledge. It also would have been helpful to highlight the transition from predominantly artistic documentary styles in pre-revolutionary films to primarily citizen journalism-style artifacts once the revolution began. However, as Wessels' argument focuses on the functional shift from indirect to direct forms of dissent, a discussion around stylistic changes is not imperative and thus does not detract from the overall argument. Lastly, minor translation errors are scattered throughout the text, but nothing too serious for the publisher's copy editor to address. *Documenting Syria* contributes successfully to the fields of both Arab cinema and the role of audio-visual media in peace and conflict; the critical text undoubtedly warrants future editions.

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