

For Sama

(Waad Al-Kateab, Edward Watts 2019)

Component 2 Section B: Documentary film

Core study areas:

- **Film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts**

Specialist study areas:

- **Digital debates**
- **Filmmakers' theories**

Rationale for study: *For Sama* is the most nominated documentary at the BAFTAS. It is also critically acclaimed for what many see as the purpose of a documentary, which is giving a window to the world, in this case, capturing the true horrors of the war in Syria. The film is Al-Kateab's personal experience of living in war-torn Aleppo, and a letter to her baby daughter Sama, explaining some of the choices her parents made. It is also an account of the war in Syria in real time, which at times is so violent and distressing that it is difficult to watch. There is a clear message here: we must do everything we can to achieve peace in the world for the sake of future generations – for innocent babies like Sama. This makes the film even more of an emotional experience for the spectator as Sama smiles and babbles through the horrific events.

STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings

“The Opening” 00.00.14 – 00.04.52

“Bodies in The River” 00.10.31 – 00.14.04

“Death of A Boy” 00.25.45 – 00.29.23

“Hospital Bombed” 00.49.53 – 00.54.21

“Ending/ Sama, Will You remember Aleppo?” 1.27.01 – end

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- Drone shots establish the location and even though the film is non-linear, the dates on the screen allow us to see the way the city is destroyed within a few months.
- Close-ups and big close-ups allow us to see some beautiful images of love, but also raw grief which at times can feel intrusive.
- Tightly framed shots of scenes in the hospital and the wedding emphasises the positive aspects of humans pulling together in adversity and the camaraderie.

Mise-en-scène

- There is much to indicate war: crumbling buildings, explosions, blood, and dead bodies. The film does not shy away from graphic images that are utterly devastating, such as a mass grave. However, the natural beauty of Aleppo is also shown: the sunset, the snow, and some flowers.

Editing

- Long takes allow the action to unfold and create a sense of authenticity.
- Fades to black mark the ends of sections.
- The non-linear structure depicts the personal nature of storytelling and memory, but also represents the random nature of the

bombardments, as they don't know what is coming next.

Sound

- The sound is mostly diegetic, and the volume of the explosions is often striking, especially when the visuals show us that the bombardment is far away.
- Non-diegetic sombre strings often precede the bombardments and remind the viewer that we are watching a constructed narrative, as well as preparing us for the tragedy and loss of life which usually follows.

Performance

- Even though the camera is often close to its subjects, the people are so wrapped up in the terrible events that they seem unaware of it. The raw grief of a boy whose brother has died is a clear example of this.
- Occasionally we see Al-Kateab with her camera as she films herself in the mirror (once strikingly in the wing mirror of a car) and we are reminded that she is part of the story but is also constructing a story – she portrays herself as brave, but also foolish. Her humanity lifts the story to a universal level.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- This is a film of good VS evil. The voice-over identifies the Assad regime, backed by the Russians, as the aggressors and the cause of the suffering, and Al-Kateab identifies herself as part of the uprising by using the pronoun 'we'.
- The people of Syria are represented as resourceful and brave in often simple ways, e.g. using a makeshift operating table, the huge efforts to revive a new-born baby and a woman whose only source of food is infested.

Aesthetics

- The iconography of war and destruction is everywhere. The poverty and make-shift hospital and housing are both upsetting and guilt-inducing for the spectator when compared with our way of life, as we are forced to confront

what the people of Syria have lost.

- The green, white, and black striped flag and banners of the Syrian Arab Republic make this a political struggle, where we see the unity of so many people against the oppressive regime. We also see the clothing of the women change (including Al-Kateab) as the regime enforces the traditional Islamic dress code for women.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social

- It is important that the events in Syria are witnessed globally and that within the context of patriarchal oppression, they are documented by a female filmmaker.

Cultural

- The strong connection between journalism and documentary is explored here, Al-Kateab is a journalist who continues to investigate whatever the situation. She carries on filming, often close-up, even when events are harrowing.

Political

- The opposition to the Russian backed Assad regime is clear, but beyond the particular and complex situation in Syria, the film is a bold anti-war statement. In Al-Kateab's selection of footage to use, the emphasis is on the suffering and killing of children.

Institutional

- Al-Kateab was sending footage to Channel 4 for their series *Inside Aleppo*, so when she smuggled over 500 hours of footage on 12 hard drives out of Syria, Channel 4 expedited UK visas for her and her family. Working with Watts (known for his documentary work for UK television: ITN and Channel 4), they spent two years editing the footage and decided to put Sama at the centre. They used less than 10% of the footage.
- The film had independent production and distribution.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Starting points

Digital debates

- The initial use of a mobile phone, then a digital camera and borrowed drones, allow Al-Kateab the freedom to film events as they are happening. Through this digital technology we experience the danger, the tension, and the terrible losses, thus providing a vicarious experience. However, Al-Kateab also frames the documentary as a constructed narrative through the titles and the voice-over addressing Sama. By making it non-linear she reminds us that she is telling her daughter a story and is ultimately justifying her decisions to herself.



Image by Allstar Picture Library Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Filmmakers' Theories

- In terms of the respectful approach of Longinotto, who aims to give a voice to those who don't have one, particularly women, it would be interesting to consider how Al-Kateab as a filmmaker and a character in the story gives herself a voice and how she represents those around her.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

"The Opening" 00.00.14 – 00.04.52

- Over a photo of Al-Kateab in MCU we hear slow mournful strings that have a haunting Eastern sound. This asynchronous sound immediately creates a sense of anxiety and foreboding for the smiling, beautiful, young woman in the photo.

- Her voice as a voice-over starts, establishing the personal style of the documentary in opposition to the authoritarian 'voice of God' use of the V/O, as she says, 'this is me, Waad, ten years ago before I left to study at Aleppo university'. Through this, we are made aware of Waad as a character and the directorial choices of Al-Kateab as a filmmaker.
- With the line from the V/O 'until I had a daughter', there is a cut to black as the V/O says 'you' and then a big C/U of Sama (this is a moving image now). We hear her babbling and see her smiling; she fills the frame, and this transports us into the happiness that she brings to her parents.
- Suddenly the filming becomes erratic, but despite whatever is happening Al-Kateab keeps filming, preparing us for the difficult things the film will show us – she is not going to spare us by turning the camera off. This juxtaposes a sense of danger with an innocent baby, and this is the essence of the film and its central message.
- We become aware that we are seeing POV shots as we hear explosions and smoke fills the corridor; the tension that will build for the rest of the film with little respite is established. This gives a real sense of immediacy – events are unfolding in real time and people are coughing as the camera moves through the smoke.
- This also establishes the long takes which give us time to see the action unfold. We see blurry images that don't make sense, but we know that despite the horrific nature of the events, we will see them.
- We also hear laughing and joking and realise the film is also a celebration of the human spirit and the strength of the Syrian people.
- The camera returns to Sama as the V/O begins to address her again; 'but what a life I've brought you into...', preparing both us and Sama for the horror to come. We also start to realise that the function of the film for Al-Kateab is a very personal one; to process her guilt about bringing a child into such a world, a feeling which is both very personal and universal.