

Episode 2.22 Cameras & Kalashnikovs with Alba Sotorra

June 15, 2018

Hannah (Host):: [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. Thank you to everyone who has been sending me your beautiful and magical cat pictures. I've seriously been awash with cute kitties for the past week. Clear evidence that I am living my best possible life. I was in the woods helping out with a friend's wedding last weekend and I subjected my pals to a lot of cat pictures. I don't think they minded. Anyway, this episode is going to be significantly less adorable, but still really awesome. So let's go meet Alba. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host):: Alba Sotorra has produced feature documentaries and fiction films from cinema and television since 2005. She graduated from cinema school in Madrid and has an MA in Cultural Studies. She participated in Sources 2 in 2010, the Berlinale Talent Campus in 2011, Doc Incubator in 2014, the IDFA Academy in 2015 and the Eve Producer's Workshop in 2017, and she is also the director of Commander Arian, a documentary film about the YPJ, the women protection units that the Kurdish Women's Resistance formed after the war in Syria broke. The documentary focuses on the story of 30 year old commander Arian, who is leading an all-female battalion to help liberate the city of Kobani from ISIS. We spoke during Toronto's Hot Docs Festival, but the film is now touring and maybe coming to a theater near you. You can check out albasotorra.com to find out. [Music: "Risk It All" by Helly Luv]

Hannah (Host):: Hi, my name is Hannah. Thanks so much for taking the time to, to chat with me today. I have some questions. I'm going to ask you a bit about the film and I'm going to ask you a bit about yourself and if you, you know, if there's anything that you say and then you're like "no, delete that." Always feel free to do so.

New Speaker: Okay.

Hannah (Host):: So I was wondering if you could start off by just telling us— I watched Commander Arian last night.

Alba: Uh huh.

Hannah (Host):: But I was wondering if for listeners who probably will not have seen it yet, if you could tell us--

Alba: No spoilers, no spoilers. No?

Hannah (Host):: No spoilers, but if you could tell us a bit about what the film is about.

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Alba: Yes, so the film portrays the life of commander Arian who is a member of the YPG [sic] and the woman protection units that this, this is army of woman who are fighting in Syria against the Islamic State. And they were formed when the war in Syria started in order to protect women from ISIS, but also with a bigger goal of fighting for a democratic and feminist Syria. So the film follows her on a mission, but also, the films follows her while recovering from a, a really— how do you say it in English? A severe, that it was caused by five shots.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah.

Alba: Yep. So it's a film that through the life and experience of Arian we get to understand why these women are fighting for, and also how important is for them that even the struggle is, is, is a very tough struggle and they are sacrificing a lot. They, they, they cannot surrender because there is not many other choices for them but freedom.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah. And that comes through so clearly right from the beginning because of how the film is framed, because we open with Ariane injured, and so we have sort of this, this sense right from the beginning of, of the sort of severity of the task that she's taken on and that these other women have taken on, and of what the possible consequences are.

Alba: Exactly.

Hannah (Host):: So I'm going to come back to sort of talking more about the specifics of the documentary. But I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you came to make it. So how you came across the subject matter in the first place.

Alba: Yes. I had been somehow connected with the Kurdish woman movement since a long time ago. I did the previous film when I was ten years ago, twelve years ago about, which one of the protagonist was a Kurdish activist, so they were in my focus. And when, when the word in Syria started and I saw them becoming organized and, and, and starting to control a territory in which they were implementing these feminist ideals and this communal and democratic ideals, I thought it, I thought it was amazing that all this dream that they had been fighting for decades, it was somehow in the middle of the girls of the world finding a space to become true. And so I, I mean, I'm a filmmaker. I'm a woman. I couldn't not go. I felt it was necessary to somehow participate on that.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah.

Alba: And, and, and help, and help because there is, there was for a while they were lot the news but they were portrayed, from my point of view, in a, in a superficial way. So I wanted to go there and spend time with them and be able to do something a bit deeper and a bit more personal about the fight of, of this.

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Hannah (Host):: Yeah. So can you talk a little bit about what the actual process of making the documentary was like? How much time you spent with them and about how much time you were sort of in the field with them?

Alba: Yeah, I started in 2015. My first trip to Syria was in February of 2015 and that was when Kobani, the city of Kobani— the CTO, because in the film, the mission of my protagonist is to break the siege of Kobani. But before Kobani was besieged, it was heavily at that by ISIS.

Hannah (Host):: Mmhmm.

Alba: So I entered right after this heavy attack had taken place, so I arrived to a completely destroyed city and then that was in February of 2015 and I kept filming until the end of 2017, beginning of 2018. Filming and editing.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah.

Alba: So I made several trips there. In the beginning I spent, I was spent time in the front line and that was the most like the tough, the toughest part, because being at the front line is, is something. I mean, I had, I had no idea what was until I lived it.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah.

Alba: And then after Arian got wounded, I spent time with her in this shelter, in a shelter house. And that was also, that was also tough because she was suffering a lot in the beginning by physical pain, and at night he was just waking up at night and crying. And I was, I was taking care of her. I was helping her with brushing her hair, washing her, giving her pills when she was crying, massaging her arms when she was just screaming of pain.

Hannah (Host):: Wow.

Alba: And then when she will fall asleep then it will be me that then was crying because it was really tough to see her like this.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah, I mean it's tough to watch and I can hardly imagine how tough it would have been to live through and with somebody who you had become close to.

Alba: Yeah, yeah.

Hannah (Host):: That, I mean what you're describing right now strikes me as a little bit different from sort of how we think about war journalism and war documentary, and the sort of role of the documentarian as, as objective and neutral and sort of, you know, needing to stay emotionally distant from what's happening. Like that seems like a different relationship.

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- Alba: Yeah, for me it's not. I mean, for me, the making documentaries is part of my life. And I live, I live what I do through my— not only through my eyes and not through my head, it's even through my stomach.
- Hannah (Host):: mmhmm.
- Alba: Like I feel, I feel what is that out me and, and with, with what they feel, what I'm trying to share with other people is my feeling is what they experienced in many levels, but also in an emotional level. And I, I mean I, I can, I could not not be part of something like this. I am inside. I was dressed with the uniform there in the front line. I was completely melting with the team, and it was funny because I had my camera and my batteries now, and it's like and they had the Kalashnikov and the, and the, and the yeah. And we were completely together in this thing, and they understood because in the beginning when they was filming, the young girls were talking to me and then I explained them, "listen, when I'm filming is like when you are pointing. It's, I'm focused." So, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah." So, and we felt, we felt a team and when we were together in the mission and Kobani was freed from the siege we celebrated. For me it was a celebration as, as, as, I mean I felt it like them. I felt that victory, I felt that, that, that moment, and yeah. And also I felt, I felt the pain when Arian was, was wounded.
- Hannah (Host):: I mean, that must have been. I mean that must have been surprising. No kidding. That's the understatement of the year. But the way that the sort of original story seems to have unfolded, which was about the liberation of Kobani and then, and then to have the sort of story change under your feet like that.
- Alba: Yeah that's documentary. No, it's that you, you, you, life at the end the stories are a life outside of you and they, they, they take the ways they want to take, that destiny makes them take. And then I think, I think our role is documentaries and as somebody who are living also these stories is to let yourself be driven through these path of life,
- Hannah (Host):: Just sort of let it unfold the way that it does. Can we talk a little bit about what it is like being a woman documentary filmmaker? Which I imagine, knowing about filmmaking in general, is still pretty dominated by male filmmakers.
- Alba: Yeah, we still— I, I live in the Spanish, in Spain, the Spanish state, you call it. And it's only, I think it's 18% of women directors, there's a huge amount of men. And what, for what I've seen, I've lived in Barcelona and I lived in Berlin. Which I also got in touch with the quota movement woman, which are claiming for a quota. So that also the ratio, because the ratio in Germany— when I went to Germany I thought that coming from the south of Europe, Germany will be much more advanced than this and no way.
- Hannah (Host):: [Laughs]

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Alba: I mean they have the same problems that we have. And yeah, it's, it's tough because you talk with your male colleagues and the reason why they think we are less is because they think we don't push forward so much, because we don't struggle so much, because we don't take ourselves seriously. And I think it's very, it's very unfair, and it's very necessary to change this mentality. Because what, what I experienced with me and my female friends that are filmmakers is that it's really hard for us to conceal, I mean the family life, or the life in general, with doing film, which is something that takes you all your time and all your energy. So the friends that decided to be mothers, they, they, they really struggled. They had to struggle a lot with, with their career and they had to stop making films for a long time and they really, really struggled. In my case, in the choice of having kids or not, for me it's like, "oof," I don't, I know if I have kids and the way things work in, in, in what I live, it's, it's a choice. It's either this or this. I think this is super tough.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah.

Alba: Because for male, for the male--

Hannah (Host):: They don't have to choose.

Alba: --the do. They have kids and they keep doing their films and traveling around and because, because there is always somebody to take care of them. Of them and of the kids.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah. It struck me as I was watching that there was this, there was something also being said in the film about a sort of feminist documentary making practice. You know, the women of the YPG [sic] are themselves, you know, have, have made a decision. Have made a decision to say, "you know, we're going to dedicate ourselves to this cause," which is a political cause and also explicitly a feminist cause. And we see these scenes of them sort of sitting and having conversations about what they understand womanhood to be, and about the possibilities that they want to have in their lives, and about their right to make the decision not to, you know, get married and have children, but to dedicate themselves to something else. Something that is risky but that they think is important. And what struck me as I was watching is that there is a parallel between what the women have done and what you're doing as a filmmaker. That you have also made this decision that is about sort of dedicating yourself to something, you know, in this case, telling a story. But that itself comes with, with forms of, I mean, difficult decisions.

Alba: Yes, of course. And I think that somehow is what connected us deeply and what, what makes us, like when when we met each other, I felt fully accepted there and that they respect that and embraced my mission in the same way I, I embrace the mission. And we, there is, there is an issue here about the solidarity between woman, and that when you really feel this sisterhood, and this friendship. Not this, this comm-- I cannot say it in English.

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- Hannah (Host):: I think it's camaraderie.
- Alba: Camaraderie. Yeah. Yeah, I think, I think we are, yeah, connected in the, in the fight, in the struggle. No, it's a common struggle. But in that sense, all woman connected in the struggle, rither they decide to make a family or not, or...Because also committing yourself to, to, to take care, it's also a strong commitment, no? And always, always, always you try to make changes in, in any, in any aspect of life it's super important.
- Hannah (Host):: I really I love the way you put that, "committing yourself to take care," because that is also something that comes through very strongly in the film, is that, you know, we're not talking about a version of military life that is devoid of emotion, right? We're talking about a community of women who have committed to take care of each other as well, and that really comes through in the sort of the conversations that we see them having.
- Alba: Exactly. It's not about men following orders and with this vertical organization of power and decision making, but it's completely the opposite. It's about a woman living together, learning together, struggling together, and in a moment that, due to the world it happens that they have to have a Kalashnikov on hand. So they have to fight, and they have to protect each other, and protect the other people. But the arms struggle it's only a little, a little part of the struggle because what they are fighting for is taking place in many other aspects. For instance, they, they're, the biggest front they are facing it's not ISIS. Like, ISIS were somehow easy to defeat, but the big front they have is in society.
- Hannah (Host):: Yeah.
- Alba: Because what the is really fighting for is to change the mentality of men, and by taking up arms and showing that they can fight and then they can get rid of ISIS, they, wow. They somehow got legitimate to speak out. But now what they are doing at this moment that ISIS is already defeated, is to, through other means, like through education, through political representation, through a assemblies, through many ways they are trying to change the mentality in society.
- Hannah (Host):: Yeah.
- Alba: They are trying to change the patriarchal mentality, and it's amazing. It's amazing the work they are doing. It's amazing.
- Hannah (Host):: Can you talk a little bit more about what that work looks like today?
- Alba: Exactly. Yeah. They have, they have implemented a political system that is feminist and it's called a democratic confederalism. And the basis of this is it's a feminist system because gender is putting the center of the agenda.
- Hannah (Host):: Yeah.

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- Alba: So other, other revolutions had had the, this idea of the radical left or Marxism, or, but they would not care about gender.
- Hannah (Host):: No, it's almost always an afterthought. Yeah.
- Alba: Yeah. But for them it's not. Like they say, "first woman and men should be equal. Otherwise there is not revolution." We cannot do anything fair and, and, and we can not make a change if we don't solve this first. And to solve this they, they organize themselves politically in a, b— how do you call— b-leadership? So in that region they have a president woman and a president man. All the political roles are, are duplicated.
- Hannah (Host):: Oh wow.
- Alba: It's amazing. I mean, imagine that happens in our land.
- Hannah (Host):: I can hardly conceive of it. Yeah.
- Alba: It's just unbelievable. In every city they have a mayor woman and a mayor man.
- Hannah (Host):: Wow.
- Alba: Even in, like all, absolutely all the ministers are two. And they have a quota, and the quota is 50/50. I mean it's like this, it's not like a bit, no jokes on that. And then they also implemented, they really believe in democracy, but not in our kind of that you go and vote once every four years. They believe in real democracy, radical democracy, they also call it. And so they, they take decisions through assemblies. So they, they organize the assemblies in neighborhoods and then this, these things in villages and cities. And there are some that are mixed, but there are many of these assemblies that are only for woman, because traditionally a woman that will not able to speak out. So they think that if they are mixed with men, they wouldn't be, they wouldn't dare to speak out. So for now they have the chance to talk about the problems and what they need and to take decisions on things that are relevant to them from their neighborhood or the city. And this is happening now and it's amazing. It's happening there. Although that chaos of the war and although the, the, the, the economic blockades they are suffering from Turkey and from Iraq.
- Hannah (Host):: Yeah. It's incredible for a lot of reasons, including I think a certain version of, of liberalism in North America thinks about women in the Middle East as constantly in need of salvation, as sort of victims of a patriarchal system who need an intervention to come and save them. And it's so powerfully clear that these are not.
- Alba: That they can save themselves. Yeah.
- Hannah (Host):: Yeah, yeah.

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- Alba: I really recommend people to search about this. It's like, if, if anyone googling woman revolution in Rojava. Rojava is how it's called, this region in the north of Syria. So, woman revolution in Rojava or YPJ, tons of information online and it's really worth the deepening into it because it's, it's amazing
- Hannah (Host):: And that, that does sort of come through in the film— So I was doing some reading about it and about this, the sort of the political system has at the heart of it this thing called jineology.
- Alba: Yes!
- Hannah (Host):: Which is the sort of the science of women.
- Alba: Exactly.
- Hannah (Host):: Which is also part of what women learn when they joined the YPJ.
- Alba: YPJ.
- Hannah (Host):: I'm really struggling to say that. Which is, which is fascinating when we think about a sort of explicitly feminist military intervention, you know, that both you join this army and participate in this fight, but part of it is also having these conversations about what it means to be a woman.
- Alba: Exactly. It's all about empowering. Empowering woman in every level. And what jineology is aiming to, and what it's creating, is a science that is not dominated by the traditional science that has been made in the centers of power where only men could access. Like, I always think when I, we think in Cambridge or now there's Oxford, and this really important institutions where knowledge is created, women were not allowed there in the eighties. It's amazing. It's like sometimes like, "Hey, remember the people whose thinking there was thinking-" and, and, and, and, and now nowadays of course sciences is our new religion. I mean, I do believe in science and I never questioned that myself before. And if something is scientific, I believe it, that's it. No? But the science is made by, by men and all of them are, most of them are white. So what jineology is doing to is to bring back the knowledge to woman that it was taken out from them since the witch hunting. And woman were killed for they knowledge before because that was something that had to be kept on the hand of men only. So they are bringing this back and it's a science that is being created and discussed everyday. It's not something that is fixed is just something open.
- Hannah (Host):: Yeah. And the power of that, of the sort of the conversation between women as a site of knowledge creation comes through in the film and all of those scenes where we see Arian sitting with the other women and just talking.
- Alba: Yeah.

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Hannah (Host):: And that's that so much that's as central to the work they're doing as fighting.

Alba: And it's amazing because this is happening in the front line in those places. Daesh, ISIS was five miles away, meaning that at any moment a mortar could fall, or I mean an attack will come. But instead of waiting there, because it's in a war zone, it's a lot about waiting. They were using all these moments of waiting to create a context where they could read and discuss about feminism, about politics, about also about feelings, because that was something that important that they could change feelings and say if they were feeling well or not. I mean that was a very sophisticated way to allow the confidencia to help women live together, because in this kind of very tense situations, living together can be tough, and you can have, you can, emotionally you can get disturbed with the others. And by this everyday that they had a meeting specifically to talk about issues between themselves--

Hannah (Host):: Wow.

Alba: --so could solve.

Hannah (Host):: Yeah. So there's space for feeling there too.

Alba: Yeah.

Hannah (Host):: Alright. That was so wonderful. Thank you so much for your time.

Alba: Thank you so much for giving me the chance to talk about these things, which I feel are very important and I really invite everybody to search more about this.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, absolutely. I'll, I'll give them some links to start reading up. [Music: "Risk it All" by Helly Luv]

Hannah (Host): If you'd like to know more about Alba's work, check out albasotorra.com. You can always find show notes and all the episodes of Secret Feminist Agenda on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor, and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Also, you can rate and review the show on iTunes or other platforms where rating and reviewing is an option. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. Alba's theme song was "Risk it All" by Helly Luv and definitely check out the show notes for more details on that song. Secret Feminist Agenda is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh first nations, where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been Secret Feminist Agenda. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]