Sundance Interview: CITY OF GHOSTS Director Matthew Heineman

The CARTEL LAND director discusses his latest documentary.

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In 2015 director Matthew Heineman debuted one of the most harrowing and impactful documentaries in many years, delving deep into the drug war with ***Cartel Land***. Heineman’s gift is in articulating the complexity of a situation while maintaining coherence, bringing viewers along as he explores territory hidden from view. His tenacity would merit him a top award at Sundance, an Oscar nomination and plenty of attention on both sides of the border.

His latest work, ***City of Ghosts***, showcases journalists who have risked even more to bring the story of their home city of Raqqa, Syria to the world’s attention. Heineman documents the work of the brave individuals of RBSS – “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” – a group of guerilla journalists whose mission is to belie ISIS propaganda and bring the truth of their occupation to a global audience.

We spoke to Heineman after his film’s Sundance premiere.

**What brought you the story?**

I was travelling around with ***Cartel Land***, doing the awards dance, and ISIS was sort of becoming front page news. I started reading obsessively about what was happening, at first just intellectually, and then started to wonder, "Can I make a film about this?” Then I read this piece in the ***New Yorker*** by David Remnick about this RBSS group (http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/telling-the-truth-about-isis-and-raqqa). I knew that this was my story, my angle. So I talked to the guys and then a week later they agreed to start filming.

**Can you talk about specifically how that collaboration worked and the initial footage?**

I always knew that I wanted the spine of the film to be this exodus of them leaving from Syria to Turkey, then Turkey to Europe. I always knew that I wanted to constantly cut back and see life under ISIS. Some of the footage in the film is footage that they've disseminated previously on social media or to other news outlets, [while other] footage is never before seen.

**Did they basically give you a hard drive with all of their stuff and say, "Here, go cut something"?**

Some of it we downloaded off the internet, and some of it they gave to us, and some was given to us as recently as a couple of weeks ago from inside Raqqa.

**So that's very contemporary footage.**

There's footage in the movie that was recorded in Raqqa a month ago.

**Amazing.**

That was really emotional to get that footage and to think that someone risked their life to get it. I feel very conflicted about the smuggling of footage out of Raqqa to get into our film. RBSS actually had to destroy a lot of the footage when they were fleeing so that's why it was difficult to gather all of the [originals] because they [couldn’t] have hard drives, you know? They [couldn’t] have it all backed up on Dropbox.

**There are beautiful shots of the river at sunset, and many shots of Raqqa pre-invasion - Where does that stuff get sourced from?**

Some of that was actually shot by a friend of RBSS who has two brothers, one of whom is missing but most likely killed. [The other] brother had the footage and he's in exile. We reached out to him and asked him for “establishers”, the setting of the tone of the city pre-ISIS.

**So even those seemingly innocuous images of real-life are also by those who are risking their lives to take it.**

Everything had a story behind it. Every frame, every source. To some degree the film is a celebration of journalism and the importance of journalism. The importance of first-hand accounts, especially as journalism, is under attack. I think this is an homage, to some degree, to the importance of truth seeking and truth telling.

**With *Cartel Land* part of the story of it was putting yourself and your crew, willingly, into danger. But nonetheless, there's always an escape route. You knew where the limit was. With these guys in Raqqa, their limits keep changing.**

It was an absolutely terrifying, life changing experience that will stay with me forever. As we've talked about, [during ***Cartel Land***] I had no experience beforehand of being in shoot-outs and meth labs, these absolutely terrifying, hair-raising situations. Yet at the end of the day I had a blue [American] passport. I was allowed to get on a plane and allowed to come back to New York.

For RBSS, that's not the case. They live with daily fear. Even being in Germany, even being far away from the enemy, they're still being threatened. Members of their team were killed outside of Syria. So it's just a whole different thing.

The film intellectually began as a story of this war of ideas, this war of propaganda, this war of information. But it became much more than that. It became an immigrant story; a story of finding one's own identity away from their home. It became a story of man coming to terms with trauma and the cumulative effects of trauma. It became a story of rising nationalism that we see in Germany and all across the world today. So for me, allowing the film to sort of open up and broaden beyond just the surface sort of storyline, that was key. For me that's what I love about filmmaking.

**There are so many harrowing images. I was horrified by the smashing of the satellite dishes - just what that represents. It's like the burning of the library. To remove culture, to remove communication is in some ways even worse than shooting somebody because you are literally silencing them while wiping them from history.**

What's so amazing and heroic about what these guys have done is *because* Raqqa was cut off from the world. If it wasn't RBSS [and others like them] we would have no information about what's happening on the ground inside there. The satellites being smashed were symbolically and literally the sort of final step of stifling any information from leaving. Obviously RBSS have paid the price for attempting to do that.

**Could you talk about capturing that tender moment of the spokesperson shaking at the end, and how you felt while you were watching it happen?**

PTSD is a complicated thing that manifests itself in many different ways. Obviously these guys have been through so much and they're also very strong and they're also very young. For me, I really wanted to not make caricatures out of these guys. I wanted to understand them emotionally, understand them viscerally. So it's all about trust building and trying to get at who they are and what they're feeling.

That final scene was an extraordinarily difficult thing to film. He was getting kind of emotional and he said, "Can you give me a second?" or "Hold on a second". He went over to the kitchen and started crying and that led to that whole scene. It was basically an hour and a half long take which I never cut. As a human being, it was really hard because I cared about him and I wanted to give him a hug and talk to him. But my job is to be a filmmaker and to capture these moments. So it was really, really hard.

**Were you personally photographing everything again?**

The majority of the verité, non-Raqqa, stuff I filmed.

**In both Germany and in Turkey?**

It's key to be able to be small, to not have a large crew. It was often just me in the room with them.

**No sound guy? Just you and a lav microphone?**

...and a shotgun mic. Sometimes I'd plant a mic into a bag of nuts or something. For me that's the only way to really get authentic real moments is being small, being nimble. And obviously I had had the relationship with them too. So to some degree I became part of the fabric of daily life.

**Were there any specific scares that sort of didn't need to make the film but that you became concerned about while on production?**

For me or for them?

**Both.**

I prefer not to talk about me, just because it pales in comparison to them. They are threatened all the time. This new iteration of terror with ISIS, these sick videos and the slick propaganda videos that are disseminated across the world, does two things: instills fear and attracts followers. It is a deeply disturbing and fascinating phenomenon. But for many Americans and for many people who consume it or read about it or watch it or whatever they do, it's still very distant. It's this other world in which these other things happen, you know?

One of the things that I really wanted to do was humanize the people who are living this, the people that are affected by this. The son who is watching his father get killed, his father get assassinated by ISIS in a slick propaganda video.

**The surreal sophistication of ISIS has always been even their execution videos feel like video games or feel like movies.**

Right. That's a way to dehumanize what's happening.

**They use the sophistication of Western technology in order to provide their ideology while most of the West thinks of them as primitive.**

Right.

**I heard a gasp during your film when they saw that ISIS was setting up a crane shot for an execution. The collision between the modern and the medieval is chilling.**

ISIS has a whole studio. They have edit bays, they have all the best modern technology in terms of capturing these images. There's literally stuff that they do that I wouldn't even know how to do.

**That means that even if you take over Mosul, if you take over a Raqqa, the ideology could prevail. And the only way against that is people like this who actually show the truth behind their lies.**

Exactly. That's why Aziz says at the end of the film "We're not fighting ISIS per se, we're fighting the ideology of ISIS and that ideology will remain regardless of what happens to the Islamic state". For me, that scene with the children indoctrinated [is haunting], regardless of whether the coalition gets rid of ISIS in Raqqa or Mosul. There's still a generation of children who have been indoctrinated with this ideology and they're going to grow up to be teenagers and men and women. So how do you fight that?

**How did your own views on the conflict change as soon as you got close to them? Are you now more personally connected?**

I think if it didn't affect me more on a personal level I'd be inhuman or deranged. The last two films have had massive impacts on me personally and emotionally.

Syria is this other thing for a lot of people, and it was for me. It's this place that had a lot of problems and a lot of innocent civilians are being killed. But through the experience of getting to know these guys and this group, it's something that I read about every single day, I think about every single day, and I care deeply about.

I think one interesting thing is the whole Aleppo news cycle as of a month ago. So many people came up to me and were like, "Oh my God! Can you believe what happened in Aleppo?" I [responded], "Oh my God! Can you believe what's been happening *every single day for the last five years*!" Why do people suddenly care about this?

It's great that people care but it also would have been great if people had cared about it every single day for the last four years, and I think that's the sad thing about this conflict. It's a proxy war between Russia, Turkey, US, Iran. It's a civil war between Assad and these Rebel groups. It’s an extraordinarily complex issue and a problem with no silver bullet [solution].

**We're in a country where I'm not entirely sure a large percentage would know what the term Alawite means.**

Exactly. But I think the sad reality of the complex nature of the conflict is that the only real losers, as always in this situation, are the poor citizens of Syria who just want a peaceful government.

**Are there plans to find a way to show this film in Syria?**

I would absolutely love to figure out a way to do that.

**Have you shown the film to members of the Syrian community? What's the response been?**

It's been very moving. Orwa Nyrabia who help make ***Return to Homs*** was at our premiere. He stood up and just talked about how touched he was by the film and by how moved he was by the guys. That means a ton to me. I don't want to just make the film for a Sundance audience or an American audience. Making it authentic and something Syrians can be proud of was really important to me.

**You are obviously driven to tell stories that are undertold but you're also willing to put yourself in the position of the audience, of learning as you go along. Talk about how that has changed over the last couple of films and how you expect it to change moving forward. Are you going to continue to have the compunction, as it were, to sort of throw yourself in the deep end and make sure it works? Do you still have that drive?**

I definitely still have that drive. One of the beauties of documentary film is to place viewers viscerally and emotionally into a world that they'll never get to go to, to meet characters that they'll never get to meet, and go on journeys they wouldn't otherwise get to go on. Hopefully by doing so they feel, they think, they debate, they argue and are moved. I want to keep making films like that. I don't know what they are right now but I want to continue making films that at least move me, and then hopefully move others as well.

**You’re not at the stage of, "Oh, for my next project I'd really love to sit out at an edit bay and look at archival footage."**

I want to keep making films like ***City of Ghosts***. I don’t want to continue making myself the subject of my films. I don't find myself interesting. But I want to use my camera and the film as a vehicle to allow viewers to go on the journey that I went on.

That's something I talk about all the time in the edit room with my amazing team Matt Hamachek and Pax Wassermann, who cut the film with me. I always talk about what it felt like when filming and if we can come close to achieving that in the edit, then we're succeeding. Every scene and every single moment is trying to revive that feeling that I had while being there, while experiencing it.



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