

My Lost Country: The fate of Iraqi culture and society

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My Lost Country is a moving and poetically evocative film directed by Ishtar Yasin Gutiérrez. A piece of autobiography and a tribute to the filmmaker's theater director father, the work is intended, above all, as "an act of resistance" against the imperialist devastation of Iraqi culture and society.

Ishtar Yasin was born in Moscow in 1968 into a left-wing artistic family. Her father, Mohsen Sadoon Yasin (1932-2014), spent most of his life in exile from Iraq. The family was in Chile at the time of the September 1973 military coup and took refuge in Costa Rica. Ishtar Yasin later attended the VGIK film school in Moscow, during the *perestroika* period. In the 1990s, she worked as a playwright, director and actress in Costa Rica.

The WSWS reviewed Yasin's 2008 film *The Road* (El Camino). We suggested that it was "a haunting film about life, life for children especially, in Central America, carried off—at its best—with a certain poetic touch." Out of the tragic social situation in Nicaragua and Central America, "the filmmaker has fashioned something neither sensationalized nor sentimental. It is an intelligent and artistically graceful work."

Yasin has written, produced and directed three feature films and numerous documentaries, in which she addresses, in her own words, "issues such as economic migration, sexual abuse and exploitation, the oppression of the capitalist system, domestic violence, exile and resistance."

My Lost Country opens with the filmmaker at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, in 2022, in the "Theater Arts Department," where her father studied and worked decades before. Miraculously, the building has survived. Classrooms and a theater are empty, however. A sense of loss is pervasive. There are images from the 1960s, when the place was busy and full of students. We hear this:

In the first days
In the very first days
In the first nights
In the first years
In the very first years

The film proceeds as "a collage of wide textural range," so

described by the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, the world's largest such festival, where *My Lost Country* was recognized in 2022 for its "Outstanding Artistic Contribution." Family photographs, videos, theater posters, newspaper clippings, recited poems and letters build a picture of Yasin's father, his life and struggles and her intense relationship with him.

More than that, the filmmaker generates a series of complex images—tops spinning, charcoal drawings come to life, Sumerian goddesses in masks—in an effort to convey the experience of exile and separation, and the consequences of bloody neo-colonial war.

One of the strongest elements in the film is its effort to bring to life Iraq's vibrant cultural conditions in the 1950s and 1960s. A production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, at the Institute of Fine Arts. (Later, in exile, Yasin's father will direct Ionesco's *Exit the King* and Büchner's *Woyzeck*, as well as plays by Gorky and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, among many other works.)

We see the enthusiastic faces of young actors and actresses, dedicated to art and, one imagines, the cultural development of the country.

The filmmaker shifts from these early, optimistic pictures to footage of her father as an older man, in London, in 2014. He gazes out the window at a conventional city scene. "I have this problem," he explains. "For a long time I hear different songs, and I can't stop listening to them ..." Folk songs, old songs, from Iraq.

In another sequence, shot in a theater in Santiago in 2008, Ishtar Yasin asks her father whether he will ever return to Iraq. "It's been 40 years," he replies. "I can't go back. Not before, during Saddam Hussein. Not now, during the current invasion ... the American invasion. What did they [the Americans] leave? A destroyed country."

The war and its aftermath, he says, forced "more than two million people in Baghdad to move from one side of the city to the other because there are Shiites and Sunnis. Tell me, who loves the United States?" Mohsen Yasin asks. "Tell me a country or nation that really loves the United States."

"I'm neither Sunni nor Shiite," he explains. "My country, I think I lost it. My lost country."

We see extraordinary film footage of Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s, including images of British archaeological excavations in Nineveh. From there, the director turns to her father touring the British Museum, which displays Iraqi artifacts.

There is the wedding of Ishtar Yasin's parents—"the bride from Chile, the groom from Iraq." Images of the filmmaker as a little girl, telling a story. After the CIA-military coup in Chile, father and daughter live apart as the parents separate.

One of the most poignant sections of *My Lost Country* includes selections from letters between the two during these years. Her father writes, "Be brave ... you are always with me." On another occasion, "Ishtar, think of everything that is happening in the world. Do not be indifferent to the tragedy of others. You have to be a clean, healthy person. A humanist."

There is a remarkable video taken in the student residence in Moscow in 1986. The young film student, Ishtar, tells her questioner, gesturing toward the small room, "We can't just live like this. We need a different world. We have to look for something else ... I believe that cinema should be like music."

The first war of the US-led imperialist coalition against Iraq in 1991 is perhaps too painful to show in complete images. We see the bombing of Baghdad in fragments, the video images broken up. The music is eerie, disturbing. The "Trees cry blood," we hear someone recite.

Now, her father enters his "last days." An old man in a small room, crowded with papers, books, art work, photos. He discusses directing a stage version of Argentine writer Julio Cortázar's well-known 1946 short story, "House Taken Over," about a brother and sister whose family house is "taken over" by unexplained entities. The story was interpreted as an anti-Peronist work. Mohsen Yasin is older and slower. In this final period of his life, father and daughter sit on the ground in front of a tapestry that simply reads "Babylon."

We return to Baghdad, to the Theater Arts Department, to the same empty chairs, rooms. In the ruins of what is apparently Mosul, the filmmaker listens to gorgeous music played by a lutist and a violinist. She plants a tree with a little girl. The goddess Inanna walks through the rubble (the Sumerians worshipped her as Inanna, the Assyrians and Babylonians as "Ishtar.")

Before, we heard Ishtar Yasin say at one point, "With my Uncle Salman, we watched the sunset on the Tigris River." Now, whether it's the Tigris or not one doesn't know, but the film's final image is that of shining water at dusk, a bridge over a river with people crossing it, to the almost painfully exquisite music of Bach.

My Lost Country is poetic and moving. It communicates something important about one of the great crimes of modern times, the decades of US aggression against the Iraqi people. On the basis of out and out lies, which they knew to be lies, 20 years ago this week, the Bush administration and the American war machine unleashed barbaric violence against the country of 26 million people. More than one million Iraqis are estimated to

have died as a direct or indirect result of the US invasion and occupation. The WSWS has referred to the onslaught against Iraq as "sociocide," the deliberate destruction of the infrastructure of modern civilization.

As the WSWS argued in 2007, "Iraq, once among the most advanced countries of the region, has been reduced, in terms of basic economic and social indices, to the level of the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa. What is involved is the systematic destruction of an entire society through the unleashing of violence and criminality on a scale not seen since Hitler's armies ravaged Europe in the Second World War."

My Lost Country is not a historian's or a sociologist's reaction to the events. It is a sensitive artist's and a daughter's response.

In her director's statement, Ishtar Yasin explains that the film's "images are intertwined like fragments of life, the film is built like a poem, like music. ... The film is the invocation of the history, the culture, mythology of Iraq. It is the reconstruction and transmission of a spiritual memory." She argues that the Iraqi people "need to rise from the ashes, build a free Iraq, where everyone have the same rights, where everyone is just Iraqi, without corruption, repression, and foreign occupation."

Poetry is important in art, but it is not everything. Sober, painstaking social and historical analysis is also vital. *My Lost Country's* indictment of American imperialism's crimes in Iraq is indelible, unanswerable.

But historical and political questions remain, and the concrete roles of parties, movements and leaderships and their programs and perspectives. The presence of the 1973 coup in Chile in the film raises the question of "popular frontism" and the betrayal of the Chilean working class by Stalinism and social democracy under Allende, which left workers and left-wing intellectuals vulnerable to the military torturers and fascists. In general, there is the issue of the counterrevolutionary role of the Communist Parties in Chile, in Iraq, in Costa Rica and, for that matter, the Soviet Union, with all the resulting disastrous consequences for masses of people.

We hope to interview the filmmaker and ask her many questions about Iraqi culture and society, about her life and work. The appearance of a left-wing film about the situation in Iraq, past and present, is an event of genuine importance.



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