

Marie-Therese Mäder

Film review

IRAQI ODYSSEY (Samir, IQ/CH/DE/AE 2015)

The 3-D documentary *Iraqi Odyssey* (IQ/CH/DE/AE, 2015) by the Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker Samir Jamal Aldin tells the director's family story in light of several migration biographies and includes in its narrative the director's own immigration and adaptation to Switzerland (he arrived in Switzerland with his Iraqi family in 1963). From a personal perspective, Samir (the director's official name) tells the story of his grandfather and his struggle against British colonialism, how his aunt and uncles emigrated from Iraq to Europe, Australia, and New Zealand in the 1960s and 1970s, and finally how his family experienced Saddam Hussein's dictatorship within Iraqi territory and from abroad. Samir interviews some family members, namely his aunt Samira in Auckland (New Zealand), his uncle Sabbah in London (United Kingdom), cousin Jamal Al Tahir in Moscow (Russia), cousin Tanya Uldin in Lausanne (Switzerland), and, as the youngest member of the family, his half-sister Souhair Jamal Aldin in Baghdad (Iraq). The interviews are embedded in a rich selection of footage and material such as photographs and films from Samir's relatives' personal archives as well as press sources used to picture their stories. Some sequences, including Samir's own migration experience, are told by the director's voice-over.

The press kit clearly states the "mission" of documentary:

As a filmmaker I eventually came to the realization that my own family history stands for a whole generation and a project: the project of modernity. It captures a universal story involving my grandfather and his children – my aunts and uncles – and their children who have been scattered across the globe due to political circumstances. They are members of a well-educated middle class who, as patriots, rose up against British colonialism in their country, Iraq. Like thousands of others of their generation they fought for a secular society. They saw no contradiction between their Arabic roots, technological advances and the democratization of society. I wanted to memorialize this generation, for their efforts have been largely forgotten or discredited due to religious fanatics.¹

Secularization is thus central to the film's argument, and in this review of the documentary I will therefore focus on the depiction of religion. The film criticizes the process of radicalization and instrumentalization of religion in Iraq from

¹ Press Kit 2015, 5.

the late 1970s. The narrative considers religion on two levels: one focuses on Iraqi history in general and serves as the context for Jamal Aldin family history, which represents the second level. Religion is introduced for the first time, after almost half an hour, with the intertitle “Sectarianism”. Souhair, the filmmaker’s half-sister, tells that between 2003 and 2007, after the downfall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Shiite and Sunni splinter groups were fighting each other, and the government was unable to take control of the situation. Later in the film, after two hours, radicalized Islam is discussed in the context of Saddam Hussein’s takeover. The intertitle “Religion” with a mosque in the background announces the topic.

In the next sequence the voice-over explains how Saddam Hussein exploited religion: “During his war against Iran, Saddam started to build more and more mosques. Before that the dictator showed no interest in religion, but now he discovered it for his own political purposes. And he started to cut women’s rights and to spy on his people”² (figs. 1 and 2).

In the interview that follows, Samira, the director’s aunt, recounts how the dictatorship succeeded and how it influenced her life. Photographs depicting terror, torture, and military parades are inserted. At the end of the film, Samira em-

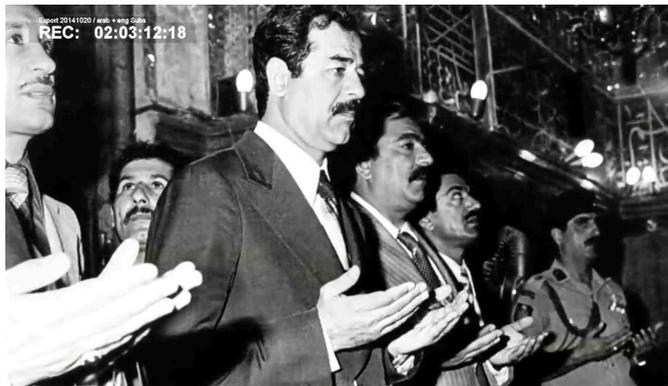


Fig. 1: IRAQI ODYSSEY
(Samir, IQ/CH/DE/
AE, 2015), 2:03:12.

phasizes that she will never go back to Iraq: “Now from what I see and hear, I would never go back. The situation is unbelievable. We’ve gone back 500 years! You were there: Religious fanatics! All the women in Abayas and underneath a headscarf, too! And the arms covered to here... I don’t know how the women can bear the heat. [laughs] I don’t know how they do it” (fig. 3).

After this statement, Samir’s aunt is shown walking down a street in Auckland, New Zealand, wearing a pink sweatshirt, before the interview resumes: “Now in

2 The English translation of the Arabic original follows the subtitles.



Fig. 2: IRAQI ODYSSEY (Samir, IQ/CH/DE/AE, 2015), 02:03:18.



Fig. 3: IRAQI ODYSSEY (Samir, IQ/CH/DE/AE, 2015), 02:30:15.

the Arab world, Islamic parties come to power. And the people welcome them. And you say you want democracy? Go ahead! Enjoy your meal!"

Thematically situated between the two poles of secularization and the radicalization of Islam, the story of Samir's grandfather Jamal Aldin tells how he broke with the religious tradition of his family. The sequence is introduced with the intertitle "Family Legend". The grandfather used to be a religious scholar and belonged to the Achbāriya, a controversial Shiite group. One day on his daily commute by ferry, he threw his turban, the sign of his religious identity, into the river, as he had realized that more and more men were wearing turbans because religious scholars were offered free transport. His descendants offer different interpretations of the grandfather's story. They agree that their father and grandfather broke with family tradition in order to renounce religious privilege. Uncle Sabbah underlines that his father strictly forbade his children from wearing either a turban or a military uniform, in order that they not be subjected to either slavery or ideology.

On the one hand, the film depicts religion as the legitimization of power, violence, and oppression. On the other hand, the example of the family Jamal Aldin offers a secularization narrative that starts with the grandfather, a Shiite religious scholar, turning away from his religious activity. His decision influences the next generation, who favor politics and education over religion. After Saddam Hussein comes to power most of the family members leave Iraq and live as secularized and highly educated Iraqi migrants in Auckland, London, Moscow, and Zurich.

IRAQI ODYSSEY (2015) is not only a documentary but also a broader media project that provides a platform for the performance of collective memory of the Iraqi diaspora. For this purpose the film production established an interactive Web project that enables Iraqi migration to be mediatized through an online timeline.³ Visitors to the site are invited to upload their own Iraqi histories to the timeline covered by the documentary, where they join clips, unused archival material, and footage from the film provided by the production company. In a video message on the Web page, Samir encourages participation: “Share your family histories with us, your photographs and your film footage, and with your own mosaic piece join us in creating a fuller picture of this country. Join the conversation, discover and share the stories of other contributors. Be part of an Iraqi story – written by individuals for individuals.”⁴

Over 160 minutes the documentary tells impressively how not so long ago Iraq was a secularized Muslim society, a part of the country’s history often ignored by western mass media eager to associate Islamic faith with terrorism. But IRAQI ODYSSEY (2015) is not only a documentary but also an audio-visual source of history. It seeks to participate in the documentation of Iraqi history by Iraqi people themselves who live in diaspora around the globe. The film and the homepage are useful examples of how audio-visual media and the Internet can provide platforms for the collective memory of a group, in this instance for one in which Samir’s personal family story occupies a prominent place. His occasionally sentimental undertone tells of better times, when religion was not a protagonist in public life and Iraqi society was cultivated, educated, and modern. The film voices an impressively differentiated critic of fundamentalism in favor of Islamic secularization.

Due to its length the film has been shown mainly at film festivals. The DVD (Impulse Home Entertainment, 2016) was released in May 2016 as a shortened version (98 minutes), the director’s cut. The film offers a fruitful case study for contemplation, in the classroom and in other venues that foster in-depth dis-

3 Homepage 2016.

4 Timeline 2016.

cussion, of the interface of religion and politics, the mediated history of religion, and narratives of secularization.

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