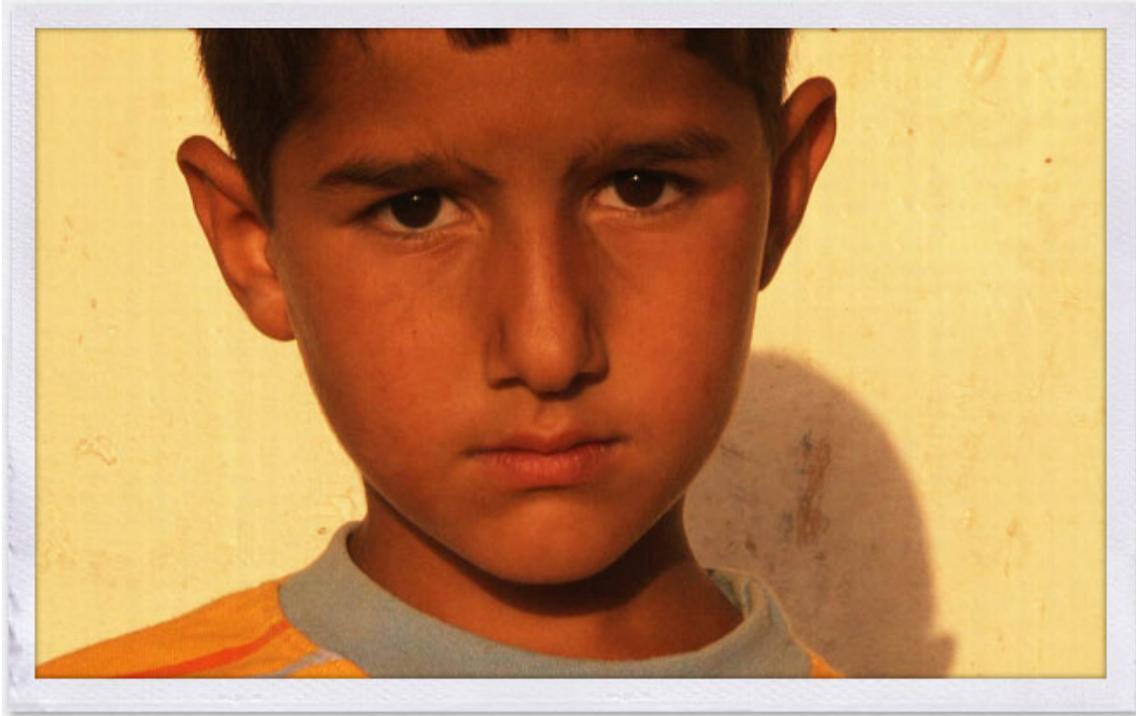


Sunday Herald Article

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Last year, I went to Iraq. The TV channel More 4 gave me and a producer I was working with, Gill Parry, a bit of dosh to go there to film for a while to capture some of the life of the people of the North, the Kurds.

As soon as I got there it felt familiar. The people were very friendly, like Scots, but it wasn't that. They sing songs, often sad songs about emigration, just like the Northern Ireland in which I grew up, but it wasn't that. Days passed. We travelled along roads flanked with pomegranate trees, past villages with houses painted pink and pistachio, and glimpsed distant dams. We had a laugh with our security guards. The heat shimmer softened everything. I couldn't put my camera down.

Through all this, the feeling of familiarity was on the tip of my tongue, so to speak. Then it clicked: It was the ambivalent "war-iness" of the place that I had experienced before. In Belfast when I was a kid, we weren't in the troubles like a fish is in water: wholly, immersively. Though my grannies came from the Falls Rd and Shankill Rd respectively, and the war was on the nightly news, my generation weren't war kids the whole of the time. War job-shared with ordinary life.

I thought of this in 1994, when I was asked to take the Edinburgh International Film Festival to Sarajevo, in defiance of the siege (the longest ever on a European capital in

modern times) and in solidarity with those who were determined to keep some aspects of normal life – a café, a cinema – going. Sarajevo was a war-y as war can get. 10,000 people died or went missing. I travelled in an armoured personnel carrier. And yet there were times when the war slipped people's minds. When the lights went down in the cinema, walking along pitch-black streets making jokes with pals, sharing 3 oatcakes for dinner, war lost its purchase on them.

This is what I recognised in Iraq. The times when the war tide is out. When you're not drowning in it. Of course I was way up in the North of the country, near Erbil and Sulimania, where some of Saddam's worst gassings took place but which had seen just one suicide bomb during the current war, so the theatre of war (what a phrase) was a few hundred miles downstream in the Tigris Euphrates valley. This is one reason why war was not omnipresent. But the feeling of threat being there and not there at the same time was an old refrain that I began humming again. To try to capture this, in the wee film we made for Channel 4, my commentary said that I had visited not one but several lands: a bucolic one where kids play in virgilian streams, a koranic one where donkeys struggle past dust devils, a land beneath a waterfall (there are gorgeous ones in Bekhal, near the border with Turkey), etc. Rather fanciful, I know, but sometimes the fanciful can disarm, and boy did I want our little film to disarm.

More 4 liked the results and, together with Scottish Screen and a host of international funders, gave us the money to go back to Iraq, which we did in September. The second shoot would be for three weeks, the resulting film would be 76 minutes, which is a lot of minutes. Would my fanciful images of waterfalls and war/not-war observations stretch to that length? Surely not. If I wanted to keep people interested for that long, I had to dig deeper into what I meant, and I had to find a way to film it. Then, in the months before we left, I watched loads of news reports about Iraq, and read many stories, in the Scottish and international media. I saw the war a lot in this coverage, but where was the not-war? I saw women weeping, men picking through rubble, kids lying in hospital beds, and was moved by these and glad they were being reported. But the years of repetition of such images in the media have made them a shorthand for Iraq, iniquity and intractable geopolitics. The not-war is, usually, cut out of such news reports. Iraq becomes a montage of the bad bits, a pop promo of emotional dead certs, blasts and wailing. I don't know what to call this – CNNisation? Our daily Iraq attack? – but I know some kind of non-journalistic truth was being lost. My film had to be about that lost bit.

But how could I film such a penumbral thing? Way back in Belfast I'd noticed that when I sat in a movie house, in the dark, I felt light, happy and free. And in Sarajevo I noticed how alive people seemed in the wee cinema we made underground, with a video projector. From its Hollywood golden age, cinema has sold itself as escapism, a window that opens onto elsewhere. Why don't we try to bring a bit of such entertainment with us, and set up a wee, home made cinema in Kurdish Iraq? It could be like a circus tent. I could bring some of the sparkly fabric that Tilda Swinton and I used for *A Pilgrimage*, a

little film festival we did in the Highlands in August. Kids in particular might take to this. In the mid 90s I co-founded a little charity, Scottish Kids are Making Movies, and noticed how kids here responded as I did to movies as a boy – with raucous enthusiasm, like imaginative sponges, sucking everything in. Would this work in Kurdish Iraq too?

We didn't know. What I did know is that I wouldn't show under-imagined, clichéd films to the children. There's a plenitude of cinema for kids out there that is as curious, energetic and surreal as the kids themselves, films from Iran, Denmark, India, Japan, Czechoslovakia and America, films about trees that sing, the world suddenly being empty of adults, the poetry of everyday life. So I decide to show *The Boot* from Iran, *Palle Alone in the World* from Denmark, *The Red Balloon* from France, *ET* from America and *The Singing Ringing Tree* from Germany. Iraq, after all, is the land of 1001 Nights, of Sheherezade's stories of flying carpets and secret caves. I'd try to show films in which you can cycle your bike across the moon.

As I looked at my list of films, I could see what not-war means for me. It means those aspects of everyday life that are dreamlike. The times when you get caught up in play, when your mind is whirring with an idea, what Joseph Campbell called "the rapture of self loss". David Lynch once said to me, "inside we're ageless". War can't get a toe-hold on such agelessness. At our Pilgrimage film festival I watched *The Night of the Hunter*, Charles Laughton's haunting fairy tale about children, and *Au Hazard Balthazar*, Robert Bresson's beautiful film about a donkey's journey through life. Both films excited me. Might some of their magic rub off on what we did in Iraq?

And somewhere in the last year or two, I'd had a second idea: I'd like to bring little digital cameras with us, give them to the kids, and ask them to film whatever they like. Their own films, I hoped, would not be pop promos of Kurdish Iraq.

We arrive. 40 degree heat. The waterfalls are just as beautiful as last year. The bucolic and koranic places are as before. We find deadly scorpions in our rooms, which freaks us out, and the Iraqi secret police stop our filming twice. The kids are just as enthusiastic and photogenic. But I think I have a better idea of how to film them now. Look at the photo of the boy on this page. We meet him when we are buying peach juice from a stall. The sun is low. I ask him if I can film him. He says yes. He stares right into the lens, for over a minute. Such presence. Such a solid look. Nothing about him flickers. We nickname him Marlon Brando. Given the casualty rates in this village, at least four of his family – his uncles, grandparents or nieces and nephews – are likely to have been murdered by Saddam. Beside him, a boy is combing a dove with a pink comb. Later, I'm joking with a bunch of kids, then notice that one boy has a pigeon in one hand, a gun in the other. He says he'd like to make a film about love. My mind goes *click*. All I have to do is keep my eyes open, notice such things, the sort of thing that doesn't fit the war story exactly, and film it. Within a few days, we have images I'd never have imagined: things that remind me of Marlon Brando, of Magritte. A group of girls tells us

three times about a cow that farts. One of them, Mushta, keeps licking her blonde doll's hair. Robert Louis Stevenson dreamt of a "thousand coloured pictures to the eye". We are gathering more pictures than I've ever seen of Iraq.

A hundred kids turn up for our wee film screenings – most of the youngsters in Goptapa, the village where we are based. They scream and dance when they watch the films. They've never seen a movie on the big screen before. As we play ET, jackals scream down the valley and the mosque plays the call to prayer. Unforgettable nights.

There's a scramble for our little cameras. We brought three and wish we'd brought 30. We can't charge them quickly enough. We can't wait to see what the kids filmed. We watch the footage on the very first one that comes back. A woman is talking passionately to camera, then she cries. On the second one is the same thing. 21 years ago, on 3rd May 1988, Goptapa was gassed by Saddam. About 100 people out of a population of 700 died. In the village's graveyard, whole families are buried in rows. The women speak as if this was yesterday. Their kids and grandkids dodge in and out of shot, joking and smiling. War and not-war in the same image, the some moment, the same room.

One boy, Mohamed Namiq, who lost most of his family on his mother's side, wrote us a story from the point of view of a fish who lives in a "magical palace". Another boy, who we called Little Mohamad, filmed a little boy playing at an irrigation channel. As he watched the boy play, he said "he's giving his dreams to the mud". I came here to film the not-war, the play, the dream life of the kids and, more importantly, to have them film such things themselves. But as the weeks go by, as we get to know the place and see the footage, I realise that this was naïve. I couldn't separate the not-war from the war. I couldn't go back to Scotland and edit a film just about the joys of these kids. Their joy-sorrow is a hyphenate. The tragic past of their village is not buried, it's there on the surface, in the air, in the sunshine.

Back in Edinburgh, I sit in the edit suite and look at the Marlon Brando boy. His face is inscrutable, beautiful, ready for something. Yet in other footage we glimpse him goofing in the mosque. Little Mohamed is making cock-a-doodle-do noises one minute then, when I ask him what love is, he says "Love is freedom" with almost cocky certainty. Have we made a disarming film? I dunno. Editing's knackered so I fall asleep on the sofa most nights but one night, before I do, I read a few paragraphs from the American philosopher Richard Rorty, who says that revolutions "redescribe the world" – he's talking about the way the Jacobins came up with new words for so many things at the time of the French Revolution. I realise that few countries in the world need redescribing more than Iraq. All countries do to some extent. Scotland needs to mean more things to casual observers than golf, whisky, tartan and landscapes (though the last three of these are great). How much moreso Iraq? And who should do the redescribing? Future filmmakers like Little Mohamed, that's who. It's him who should capture the war-iness and not-war-iness of the place, him who should give us new images of it – its poetry, its

rapture, its metaphysics, its politics - and tell us new stories that, like Sheherezade's, will keep us awake at night.

— Mark Cousins