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NYFF 2015: An Interview with Abbas Fahdel, Director of *Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)*

by Aaron Cutler No Comments

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Homeland (Iraq Year Zero) screens at 5:30pm on Monday, October 5, with the documentary spotlight of the *53rd New York Film Festival*.

The greatest film that I saw at this year's edition of *Olhar de Cinema* screened on the Brazilian festival's first and last days. *Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)* needed full days to itself, and not simply because of its running time. As has happened to me when watching Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985)—another lengthy, interview-and-landscape-based film of great power—I felt so thoroughly immersed in the stories being told by people as they lived moment-to-moment that I could feel my sensations of time and place change.

Abbas Fahdel's documentary record of his middle-class Iraqi friends and family members during the periods shortly before and after the 2003 American military invasion of their country initially created a safe and comforting space for me to dwell in. Over time, it then gradually led me to perceive that space being undone and ruptured by violence. The film ended with seeming suddenness, and I left the theater shaken. I stayed with a sensation of helplessness over how I, as an American, had consented to the destruction I'd just seen. The world looked different now.

Homeland (Iraq Year Zero) has since gone on to screen at a number of other international festivals. Its North American premiere will take place at the New York Film Festival; the



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middle-aged Fahdel—who, despite spending much of his adult life in France, has shot all four of his completed feature-length films in his birth country—will attend the screening.

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His personal film is divided into two parts, each of which runs close to three hours. “Before the Fall” begins in Baghdad in February of 2002, and its domestic discussions (sometimes held in front of a television while news reports play) run with a growing awareness of the invasion to come. “After the Battle” picks up in the now-devastated city in April of 2003, with civilian Iraqis alternately demonstrating, regretting, and decrying how their lives have changed. Many of the same characters appear in both parts and are introduced with simple title cards stating their name and their relation to Fahdel—for instance, “my brother.”

The filmmaking is simple and unobtrusive, with Fahdel himself holding the camera as he informally engages people to describe their routines or else is led by them on outdoor tours. These guides present a radio station and a film studio blown to pieces by bombings, along with marketplaces, homes, and human bodies (both living and dead) that have been marked by the perpetrators of an officially concluded wave of attacks. American soldiers register as infrequently glimpsed threats, and no kinds of reparations seem to be forthcoming. Among the people most actively noting this lack to us is Fahdel’s alert, charismatic young nephew Haider, whose death at the hands of unknown gunmen is related in a title card long before its moment comes and resonates throughout the rest of the film.

I watched *Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)* with a sense that its story has not yet ended. The love that Fahdel holds for his kinfolk and agony he feels over their fates persist more than a decade later. I contacted him shortly after *Olhar de Cinema*’s conclusion, resulting in a short interview that I have chosen to publish as a monologue.



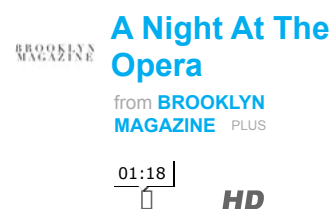
Abbas Fahdel:

“I have lived in Paris since I was eighteen years old, but when I return to Iraq, I feel in my element, as one Iraqi among many. I made my first film there, *Back in Babylon*, in 2002, and then went back to the country once again when threats of a new war became clear. I was driven by a kind of unspoken superstition. Filming, for me, is an act of life, and by filming my loved ones on the eve of a new war, I maintained the hope of preserving them from harm. I left Iraq four days before the war’s outbreak and then returned a few weeks later to film the country’s new reality—one rocked by chaos and violence, with my family plunged into mourning.

“*Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)* is a choral saga that features my friends and family members as its protagonists. The choices of which people to focus on were made by me during filming. My young nephew Haider immediately emerged because of his liveliness, intelligence, and responsiveness, as well as because of his attachment to me and willingness to do everything with me, wherever I went. When he was killed, I felt unable to continue, to the point of not being able to look at the rushes I had shot for over a decade before eventually returning to find a film in them.

“My brother Ibrahim is a kind of onscreen stand-in for me. As a double, he overcomes the lack

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of my own image. He is the guide, or in terms recalling Tarkovsky, the “stalker” who brings us into the story’s prohibited location. The ‘Zone’ in *Homeland* is made up out of the neighborhoods devastated by war.

“Mahdat—my brother-in-law and Haider’s father—also seemed to me to be an interesting character in several ways. He is a father concerned about his children’s safety, and he therefore accompanies them, along with us, as a driver to their schools, universities, and workplaces. We can see much of modern Iraq this way. I myself felt endangered several times while I was filming, but I also felt that it was my duty to continue.

“Something particular to my family members is that they are very representative of the Iraqi middle class—educated and tolerant descendants of Shiite and Sunni alike. The Iraqi middle class was harmed by the war and American occupation more so than any other class was. The chaos and violent climate favored thieves, criminals, and war profiteers at its members’ expense. While others stole from their environment, they struggled to survive.

“The invasion of Iraq caused an upheaval in the lives of ordinary Iraqis that could be seen as creating a clear ‘before’ and a clear ‘after.’ My decision thus arose to divide the film into two parts. This decision also had to do with the film’s unusual length. I understood, even while we were shooting, that my filmed record would result in a long work, one spanning a large period of time over the course of several hours. The film is not just the result of months’ worth of filming and editing, but also several years’ worth of incubation during which I carried Iraq in my mind and in my heart.

“I accepted the fact of *Homeland*’s long duration from the beginning. Each film must have its own time to breathe. Some works need only five minutes to express themselves, while others—such as Wang Bing’s *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002) or *Homeland*—need many more.

“The few producers that I contacted helped me realize, though, that neither traditional cinema nor television outlets would be willing to finance a film too long to screen or broadcast in a conventional way. I therefore decided to produce the film myself. It would be detrimental to the art of cinema to require filmmakers to match established formats. I do not intend to be subject to them, even if freedom requires making my movies without any industry’s support.

“It was vital to me to make a work that could serve both as a projection of a human reality and as a personal expression. The Americans who invaded Iraq in 2003 were unaware of the country’s rich past and civilization. If they had looked, then they could have discovered another reality while scanning the ground for supposed weapons of mass destruction. They could have found the oldest cities in the world and the first texts of humanity scattered amidst the bomb craters.


“Iraq is also the country of my childhood and adolescence—my lost homeland. Its name reminds me of dear faces and of familiar places, as well as of a spirit living beneath its sky that makes it an eternal source of inspiration.”

Abbas Fahdel, *Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)*, Iraq, NYFF 2015

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