

## Homage to Tarkovsky

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‘The Child Tempered by War: Julian Stallabrass on the work of photographer Ayman al-Amiri’,  
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In the opening to Tarkovsky’s film, *Ivan’s Childhood*, set during the German invasion of the Soviet Union, a very beautiful boy runs through idyllic, sunlit, lightly wooded countryside. It must be a hot day, since he is wearing only shorts. Finding his mother, he dips his head into a bucket of water she was carrying, only to awaken sharply to the sounds of war in a dark windmill. The building is set in a bleak land wrecked by war, the sky is sullied by black smoke. Ayman Al-Amiri offers a ‘Homage to Tarkovsky’ in his photographic series which shows men outside Baghdad walking in pilgrimage to the city of Karbala during Ashura. This is the Shi’a commemoration of the death of Husayn ibn Ali, and is a time for mourning and reflection. Al-Amiri has taken colour photographs of the actual ceremonies in Kerbala at night, in which the mourners cut their scalps and bleed onto their white robes, in scenes that have attracted many a photojournalist. The ‘Homage to Tarkovsky’ is quite different, shot in monochrome, and showing distant figures

in a landscape cut across with railway lines, ground up by tyre tracks, and rendered in bands of greys and blacks. It is a landscape that offers little comfort to its inhabitants, with the suggestion that its grime, poverty, mud and scrubland stretches out forever. Black flags, erected by the neighbourhoods for the pilgrimage to Kerbala, punctuate the scene.

It is not easy taking photographs in Iraq. Photographers are often seen as suspect: are they scouting for an armed group, are they with the security services, or working for the widely despised Western media? The very act of raising a camera to the eye can be perilous, and we should expect in such pictures a wary circumspection.



There is a sense in which these photographs show nothing more than the environment of religious observance. Yet the gathering of many thousands of people for Ashura was one of the first and most evident signs of Shi'a taking their freedoms after the fall of the Sunni-dominated dictatorship, and Al-Amiri's landscapes, hint at the apocalyptic destruction of the land in warfare. In the light of current circumstances, the black flags can hardly fail to evoke sectarian conflict. It has been generations since Iraqi children could enjoy the peaceful expansion into nature offered in Ivan's dream. It was shattered first in the war against Iran, then in the Gulf War, then in prolonged economic strangulation and bombing campaigns, then in invasion and occupation, and now in dire sectarian strife.

In Zuhair Al-Jezairy's book about returning to Iraq after the end of the Saddam Hussein regime, *The Devil You Don't Know*, he recalls trying on a military jacket in a street market:

I was just checking the length of the sleeves on my hand when someone walking by that I didn't know, tapped me on the hand: 'Aren't you tired of that colour? We all spent our youth in it.' And he went off again without even waiting for a reply.

A boy who ducks blurrily into the foreground of one photograph may remind us of Ivan, the child tempered by war, fast and wary, alert to every fold in the land that offers concealment. That intent, detailed observation is also Al-Amiri's, and his photographs share the widespread Iraqi shock at the despoliation of the nation's beauty by invasion, occupation and war, from the destruction of trees to the raising of blast walls. If the land has become reminiscent of Tarkovsky's rendition of war in *Ivan's Childhood* or *Stalker*, then one can only hope that a hard and steady look at its desolation may be a step towards a desire for peace and restoration.