

At the end of the First World War, British forces occupied Baghdad and tried to convince the Iraqis that their presence would provide protection from future Ottoman attack and help them attain Iraqi independence.¹ The promotion of a new, token Sunni-Arab nationalism on the part of the British (replacing a Sunni-Ottoman one) was problematic in a country forged by colonial interests and internally divided along sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and linguistic lines.² The Middle East was also affected by the victory of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, with its call for anti-imperialist, international revolution. Moved by anti-British resentment, both Sunni and Shi'i Arabs put aside their differences and fought for emancipation from British colonialism in the Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920. Entire villages were leveled and thousands of Iraqis (and British) were killed. British forces brought in reinforcements from India, and, in 1921, proceeded to enthrone the Hashemite prince Faisal ibn Hussein, son of the Sharif of Mecca and friend of T.E. Lawrence, as King of Iraq. For the next three decades, until a military coup in 1958, British presence, while palpable, was hidden behind the robes of a succession of Iraqi monarchs.

On the morning of July 14, 1958, the Italian-made bronze equestrian statue of King Faisal I was toppled by the Iraqi people who believed they were “excising the bad memories of the British Mandate and monarchical rule.”³ On the thirty-first anniversary of that event in 1989, President Saddam Hussein had a replica of the monument to Faisal re-erected in central Baghdad. If Faisal had symbolized a puppet king set up by the British, the very monarchy that the Ba'ath president had helped bring down in his youth, why did Saddam Hussein go to the trouble of replicating the monument? Was it to prove that this past history of colonial rule no longer posed a threat to Ba'ath rule? Or was the replacement of this monument somehow playing a more symbolic role in the construction of an Iraqi nationalist/Ba'ath ideology?

During a crisis of political legitimation, or when an economy threatens to collapse, there is often an attempt to consolidate identity, or to construct an “imaginary community,” around icons of the past.⁴ Monuments become props upon which an authority, or a people, can project an ideology. References to the past give a sense of enduring continuity with the present, a sense of a history shared, inspiring hope for the future. Concepts such as nation are produced through the projection of positive events of the past onto cultural

symbols as a kind of screen memory (in this way, traumatic or historically oppressive events are repressed). Monuments aim to encapsulate a constructed collective memory.

British influence notwithstanding, Faisal was the first Iraqi leader to emerge from Baghdad since the waning of the Abbasid caliphate a thousand years earlier. He served as a symbol of renewed continuity with a glorious past, however tenuous that continuity might have been in reality. Resurrecting the monument to Faisal was perhaps a way of reviving the spirit of kingship that had been dormant in Central Iraq since the invasion of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, and the occupation by Ottomans for four centuries until the First World War.⁵ While not a monarch himself, it is my belief that Saddam Hussein reproduced the monument in order to align himself ideologically with the Hashemite legacy. While not technically a king, his aristocratic lifestyle and the proliferation of monuments dedicated to himself certainly makes one think that he was attempting to position himself as a monarch, and even appeared to be grooming his sons to succeed him.

Prosperity for Iraq in the 1970s, especially after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and ensuing oil embargo, meant the expansion and modernization of Baghdad. The Ba'ath regime's major goal after 1968 was to socialize the economy. By the late 1980s, the party had nationalized agriculture, commerce, industry, and oil. Mushrooming revenues were distributed across the populace in the form of educational, medical, and labour programs, the development of roads, electricity, fresh water supplies, new city planning, and ambitious architectural projects. In the end, however, this accumulation of wealth, in conjunction with Western demonization of Iran in 1979 and the Ba'ath party's emphasis on "military training" for youth (essential for defending the republic from the hostile forces of Zionism, imperialism, and anti-Arab sentiment from Iran), paved the way for the entrenchment of military might and dictatorship in Baghdad. Starting in the early 1980s, Saddam Hussein had many monuments erected in anticipation of Iraqi military victory (before any victory was in sight). The modernistic architectural feats of the 1970s made way for a series of uncanny monuments dominating the artificially defined public spaces of the 1980s.

In the heart of Baghdad one finds a giant ceremonial ground with entrances dominated by a monument to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)—the twin *Victory Arches*.⁶ Originally designed by Saddam Hussein,⁷ self-proclaimed artist-dictator, each arch is made up of two giant forearms/fists, emerging at a 45-degree angle from the earth, each gripping an enlarged replica of the sword of Qadisiyya; the two swords cross to form an arch 40 meters above the ground. The bronze forearms of the monument were modeled from the arms of the Ba'ath President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein. The swords



Victory Arches, Baghdad

and flag of the monument were made from the melted-down weapons of Iraqi “martyrs” who fought in the Iran-Iraq War. Some 2,500 helmets, riddled with bullets, cascade down from the base of each forearm. These once belonged to Iranian soldiers. The enemy is symbolized using a brute materiality, marking defeat (the helmets having the aspect of skulls), while the “martyrs” are elevated and sublimated, the swords being symbols of Iraqi independence and power. The sword is supposed to represent that of Sa’ad ibn-abi-Waqas, commander of the Muslim army in the Battle of Qadisiyyah, and companion of the prophet Muhammad. At Qadisiyyah in 637 AD, the Arabs famously overthrew the Persians on Mesopotamian soil, resulting in the Islamicization of Persia and the resurrection of Mesopotamian civilization under Islamic rule. This battle has gone down in Iraqi history as a god-given sign of Arab superiority over the Persians.

On the Iraqi 10,000 dinar note, one finds the image of Saddam Hussein in the foreground with the *Monument to the Unknown Soldier* (1982) in behind. The latter is made up of a giant tilted *dira’a* (a traditional Iraqi shield) and a replica of the minaret of Samarra, one of the most ancient and famous in Islamic architecture, and originating from ancient Mesopotamian culture. The *Monument to the Unknown Soldier* resembles a scene out of science fiction. Placed on a giant circular elevated platform (as if echoing the original circular foundations of ancient Baghdad), the *dira’a* looks like a cross between a giant waffle iron and a flying saucer, an emblem of the future, while the ziggurat plants the imagination squarely in the past.

Benedict Anderson notes that: “No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times.”⁸ The empty tomb represents the ideal everyman, willing to sacrifice himself for the glory of the nation. The placement of Saddam Hussein in front of this monument on the dinar note seems to be saying something about the Unknown Soldier—he is now one with the Almighty Saddam. While secular (there is no mention of Muhammad), one may catch a whiff of a demiurgic force at hand. All are subordinate to the symbol of the cult leader.⁹

The *Victory Arches* and the *Monument to the Unknown Soldier* reflect the predominance of a pop, kitsch, and a vernacular aesthetic found in Saddam Hussein’s architectural and monumental projects. In 1983, Robert Venturi and other world-renowned architects were invited to participate in one of the largest architectural competitions ever sponsored in a Third World country: “The [state] mosque was intended to symbolize the religious, state and national beliefs of the people of Iraq, and the President emphasized that the final design should represent ‘a leap forward in the art of architecture’.”¹⁰ Saddam’s monuments are pure tastelessness, displaying a total lack of irony because of his need to use popular culture for political purposes,¹¹ a tactic antithetical to that of Warhol, Oldenburg, or Venturi. Statues of the Goddess Ishtar, Sheherezade, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, as well as the medieval poet Abu Nuwas, are a few other instances of Islamic kitsch that adorn many Baghdad squares.

The internalization of orientalist notions of embodying the Arab “Other”, naturalized in ancient symbols of “Mesopotamianness” or “Islamicness”, are blatantly obvious in these monuments. The Iraqi identity found its support in an archeology of images and ideas that painted up Middle Eastern history as little more than a memory of ancient civilization, an identity that was, for all intents and purposes, “eternal”. This identity was largely the construction of a nineteenth-century imaginary, when archeologists like Paul Emile Botta and Robert Koldewey discovered the remaining traces of the “lost” civilizations of Assyria and Babylon. While Mesopotamian and Assyrian artifacts were “occidentalized” in the nineteenth century, couched in a discourse of global “European” culture and in the idea of Mesopotamia being the cradle of Western civilization, these same artifacts were later re-orientalized after the First World War when British education programs were implemented as a means of unifying, and hence preventing social unrest within Iraqi society. Assembling a diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds under the banner of a unified “Iraqiness” was an attempt at promoting nationalism, a make-



Iraqi 10,000 dinar note

shift secular identity that replaced the idea of an Islamic leadership, and was cultivated in the name of a unified democratic Arab nation after centuries of foreign rule.

The *Victory Arches* monument and the Iraqi dinar note are both forms of “public art”: “from a representation of power you walk around to another that walks around with you.”¹² As a kind of monument, the image of the sovereign on money has particular significance in revealing its value as a legitimate form of public exchange distributed from above. In spending this money minted by the state, acquiescing to this symbolic form of exchange made legitimate by the sovereign’s portrait, the Iraqi people are symbolically made to look as if they were silently in agreement to being inextricably bound to power.¹³ But in the case of monuments “you walk around,” how are such representations meant to activate public space? Isn’t the spatial experience of the viewing public central to the subject of the monument? In being encouraged to spend time in these spaces is the public body itself thought to be taking part in the monument? In the case of the *Victory Arches*, the very fact that they are placed at the entrance to a ceremonial ground hints at the monument’s role in the construction of “collective emotional events”,¹⁴ such events as might be depicted in Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will*.¹⁵ The repetition of Saddam’s mammoth arms emerging from the ground would appear uncanny when encountered in the middle of a vast public space, and the audience itself, dwarfed before the ominous arms or beneath the giant *dira’a* of the *Monument to the Unknown Soldier*, might feel alienated, even reified to the status of “mass ornament”.¹⁶

The Iraqi people were encouraged to spend time at these sites through the placement of theatres, amusement parks, and museums within the vicinity of the monuments. In the case of the *Monument to the Unknown Soldier*, the

public could visit a museum that was built beneath the *dira'a* structure: there the sword of ibn-abi-Waqas, commander of the Muslim army at Qadisiyya, is displayed alongside the machine gun of Saddam Hussein. If “the world is itself a statue, sculpted by God”¹⁷ then, likewise, Baghdad and the Iraqi public at large was sculpted by Saddam Hussein. Forced into a position of flattery or complacency by such a tyrannical leader, Iraqis had no choice but to show respect for his monuments, especially in light of the U.N. sanctions that ended up rendering the people powerless, not the regime.¹⁸ Many would mimic adulation when visiting his monumental theme parks out of a genuine fear of being watched by the Mukhabarat (Security Services), or by Saddam himself.¹⁹ At the same time, the public might itself have felt targeted by the leitmotiv of so many of Saddam’s monuments: the swords and military shields looming ominously overhead speak of a violence that could only be interpreted as either threatening or protective. In light of Saddam’s track-record vis-à-vis human rights, the former interpretation might dominate the visitor’s mind.

On August 8, 1989, on the anniversary of Iraqi “victory” against the Iranian army, Saddam Hussein opened the *Victory Arches* monument. He rode under the arches on a white stallion. In doing this, Saddam equated himself with two historic figures: Husain the son of Ali (who was martyred on the plains of Kerbala in 680 AD while riding a white horse; ironically, he is a martyr praised by Shi’i Muslims), and Faisal I (Saddam Hussein wears the same ceremonial attire as the king wore during official state ceremonies). The doubling of the *Victory Arches* seems significant considering the parallels Saddam made between these leaders and himself. The arms are Saddam Hussein’s but they could just as well have been Faisal’s or Husain’s or ibn-abi-Waqas’. Another interpretation of the doubling of the arch relates to what Baudrillard wrote about the twin towers of the former World Trade Center: the doubling signals the disappearance of competition, and hence the complete dominance of the regime over social and economic life.²⁰ But there is also a more literal meaning behind the doubling, or even quadrupling—that of Saddam Hussein’s body, or at least of his forearm from which all four arms making up the monument were modeled—which could be interpreted as referring to the notion of “the king’s two bodies,”²¹ the doubling of the sovereign into mortal and immortal bodies.

From ancient times up until the Renaissance, it was believed that kings were earthly manifestations of gods. The corporeal metaphor of the body politic was fundamental to pre-modern conceptions of power, a political theologism. Ernst Kantorowicz’s revival of the notion of “the king’s two bodies” emerges from a late-medieval juristic concept and constitutional figure of

speech. The status of the king is described succinctly in a report written by Crown jurists just prior to the Elizabethan era:

For the King has in him two Bodies, viz., a Body natural, and a Body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the public weal, and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to, and for this Cause, what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body.²²

During the medieval period, Imperial Christianity took its cues from Rome, basing the representation of the king on two archetypes: Christ and Augustus Caesar, a celestial and an earthly body. According to Giorgio Agamben, Christian political theology had its roots in pagan precedent, especially with regards to the treatment of the image of the sovereign's body or its manifestation as a sculptural colossus within a funereal ceremonial rite following the sovereign's death.²³ The Roman colossus served as double for the emperor and was treated as an image of his survival. What was suppressed in the Roman emperor's status in Christian political theology was his deification amongst pagan gods *post mortem* (whereas with Christianity, the living king already embodied the divine). In many respects, Imperial Christianity was a sacralized reflection of Imperial Rome, originating from the repression of local beliefs within early Christian communities.

Before the division of Church and State, the king was believed to be an earthly manifestation of God, thus possessing an immortal body and a mortal body. One major precedent for this was the body of Christ, divided into the individual and the collective body of the Host. By the eleventh century, the Christian Imperium was split into the realms of the pope and of the king or emperor. While claims to divinity by both popes and kings hastened the path toward secularism in Western thought, a residue of divinity remained within the idea. The sacred aspect of the sovereign was to return periodically throughout history under this dual form of mortal and immortal, personal and collective, private and corporate body. The sovereign's legitimacy was upheld through a belief in the enduring continuity of the "divine body" migrating after death from one monarch to the next: hence the pronouncement "The King is dead, long live the King." By the eighteenth century the notion of "the king's two bodies" was practically non-existent in everyday and

legal language, and in visual art. The rise of liberalism, the French Revolution, the decapitation of King Louis XVI, and the replacement of organic representations of society/state with mechanistic ones, signaled the dominance of a modern, bourgeois democratic society.

In more recent times, the idea and aesthetic of the king's two bodies resurfaced within totalitarian state structures. The revival of pre-modern, symbolic forms was instrumental to the construction of purist notions of national identity: "If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future."²⁴ Benedict Anderson notes that nationalism has more in common "with 'kinship' and 'religion', than with 'liberalism' or 'fascism'."²⁵ Because enlightenment and revolution destroyed the "legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm,"²⁶ the sovereign nation-state came to replace monarchical organization as necessary for territorial and ontological security and freedom. Or as Hardt and Negri define it: "The modern concept of nation thus inherited the patrimonial body of the monarchic state and reinvented it in a new form: a cultural, integrating identity, founded on a biological continuity of blood relations, a spatial continuity of territory."²⁷ At the end of the medieval period, humanist values began to invade absolutist ones, and transcendental sovereignty was only to return periodically under a different aspect, adapting to new ethical and productive standards in the wake of revolutionary change: "The power of the proletariat imposes limits on capital and not only determines the crisis but dictates the terms and nature of transformation. The proletariat actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future."²⁸ The masses had originally challenged the threat of the autocratic body's return. But the eventual reappearance of the sovereign's two bodies was made possible by the internalization and then external projection of the demands of proletarian desire. The very appearance of "liberation" kept the immanent power of the people at bay.²⁹

While Kantorowicz traces the notion of the king's two bodies to the Medieval Western tradition (and Agamben to a Roman one), the doubling of the king's body, or of his function at least, can also be traced back to the Middle East. According to Aziz al-Azmeh, "[a] caliph represents God in the implementation of His will . . . and is also the caliph of Adam, continuing his primal and archetypal establishment of order which is also the foundation of a human order fulfilling the divine purpose of creation."³⁰ Both a divine and a mundane genealogy coexist within the person of the caliph. Al-Azmeh also outlines the conceptual and symbolic commonality between Near Eastern cultures (e.g. Arab, Persian, Byzantine) and Hellenistic

Romanity. In ancient historical texts and artifacts one detects “a Graeco-Roman classicization in the Middle East in the centuries immediately preceding the Muslim conquests, and of the Orientalism of later Greek and Roman kingship.”³¹ Furthermore, “mythological-ritual and discursive enunciations of Graeco-Middle Eastern kingship were to be woven together, under conditions of imperial centralization, in the cult of Roman emperors and its further . . . elaboration in the Byzantine notion of the Basileus constitution of Muslim kingship.”³² The wars between Achaemenid Persians and Greeks, as with those between Sassanian Persians and Byzantines centuries later, laid the groundwork for what approximates an ecumenical political theology in the form of the king’s two bodies. This communication between territories reflects a pre-modern dynamic between peoples, one that predates conceptions of fixed nationality and race:

For in fundamental ways “serious” monarchy lies transverse to all modern conceptions of political life. Kingship organizes everything around a high centre. Its legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations, who, after all, are subjects, not citizens. In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory. But in the older imagining, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another.³³

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries when the power struggle between the Christian papacy and kingship was at its height, the Islamic caliphate was also showing signs of wear and tear. The distinction between “the spiritual and the temporal” functions became problematic. In Baghdad the caliphate had been subject to more and more criticism by the ulama in Mecca, who advised the caliph on temporal/practical political matters. Also during this time, the absolute authority of the caliph of Baghdad was being weakened by competing caliphates in Cordoba and Cairo. This splitting up of power within the Islamic Empire, although different in nature from that of Christianity, was as devastating to the hegemony of religious/political sovereignty as was the splitting up of authority between Church and State in the West occurring around the same time. The caliphate in Baghdad in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries started taking on a comparable status to that of the pope, existing without any real political or military power. The decline of the caliphate was soon followed by the devastation caused by Buyid, Seljuk, and Mongol invasions, and then four centuries of Ottoman rule.

The Abbasid civilization centred in Baghdad between the eighth and tenth centuries was considered the golden age of Islamic Empire, an Enlightenment period for the Near East. The Mu'tazila was a prominent sect of thinkers who developed the discipline of kalam (philosophical/rational theology) during the Abbasid caliphate. Influenced by Greek philosophical and scientific thought, the Mu'tazila brought reason, logic, and the study of nature to religion; they even professed that human will came before divine predestination.³⁴ The spirit of enquiry brought to Islam under the Abbasid caliphate, and its embracing of other traditions (Greek, Persian, Judaic, Byzantine), might have contributed to the decline of the Abbasid Arab Empire centred in Baghdad in that this theological rationalist movement (the official state ideology) was strongly opposed by the orthodox Islam of the Umayyads. The Abbasid caliphate was challenged by Sunnism, which placed the authority of the ulama (Muslim scholars and jurists) above that of the king in terms of inheriting "the mantle of prophecy."³⁵ This conflict resulted in the Abbasid caliphate's decline, and soon Christian and Ottoman colonial expansion came to supplant Arab-Islam on the world scene. It is important to be reminded that this high point in Islamic history occurred in ninth and tenth century Baghdad because this era of Abbasid civilization played a significant role in the construction of Saddam Hussein's persona—as sovereign carrying on the interrupted work of the medieval caliphs of Baghdad. In focusing on Mesopotamian and medieval Islamic culture, the Ba'ath regime aimed "to provide Saddam Husayn . . . with historical legitimacy by portraying him as the culmination to a continuous succession of great Iraqi rulers from remote antiquity to the present."³⁶

Once Iraq gained independence, it sought a collective identity that was, on the one hand, somehow continuous with a past historical subject, and, on the other, in opposition to the European and American capitalist/imperialist systems. Looking toward the distant past was one way of bolstering a weakened identity. Looking at "non-Western" models of production and social organization (non-capitalist/collectivist) was another. Cold War politics effectively put Third and Second World nations in a position where they had to choose between two symbolic forms of power, each wielding what were essentially capitalist forms of production under the guise of different ideological state structures. Because independent Iraq turned to state socialism, modeled in large part on the Soviet Union, and inspired by anti-colonialist international meetings like the 1955 Bandung Conference, it would be useful at this point to analyze how the concept of the "king's two bodies" manifested itself under Stalin's regime.

The formalism of the utopian avant garde, and its alignment of art with politics, was replaced by a return to content and figuration (Socialist Realism)

in the guise of the “New Man,” who internalized technology and symbolized a new kind of collectivist power. The “New Man” was the measurement of all things, replacing God. Be that as it may, Socialist Realism could not have materialized without the influence of the avant garde:

The moment the avant-garde artist’s position is occupied by the party leadership and the real figure of ‘the new individual, the rebuilder of the Earth’, the avant-garde myth becomes a subject for art, and the figure of the avant-garde demiurge breaks down into the Divine Creator and his demoniacal double—Stalin and Trotskii, ‘the positive hero’ and ‘the wrecker’.³⁷

The status of the divine creator did not die, but was simply transferred onto the person of the avant-garde artist, and later, with Socialist Realism, onto the artist-dictator.

Incorporating elements of a Byzantine and folkloric past within the context of the Soviet state’s “posthistorical existence”, Stalin projected himself as the epitome of the new superman or demiurge. The image of the “New Man” in art, and a return to realism, started in earnest with the death of Lenin in 1924. The loss of Lenin was felt like the loss of a god. The image of Lenin had to be preserved for posterity in order to keep the demiurge alive. In displaying Lenin as a cult figure, Stalin was setting himself up as the heir to Lenin (hence, the continuity of power within the body of Stalin). The fact that Lenin was embalmed so as to appear immortal, incapable of decomposition, is compatible with this myth of the immortal body of the king. The image of Lenin’s dead body assured that his spirit had been passed on to a new heir—Stalin. In having himself painted next to Lenin, Stalin became a cult leader with two bodies. He borrowed the image of the religious leader from peasant icons as well as the superman from Futurism, combining the ideology of religion and folklore with that of technological progress and formalist aesthetics.

According to Stalinist aesthetics, socialist realist content was not retrograde compared to avant-garde formalism because all was new in a posthistorical world: “novelty is automatically guaranteed by the total novelty of super-historical content and significance.”³⁸ Ironically, it was with the fall of Communism at the end of the 1980s that one once again heard talk of a posthistorical moment. As we now know, the “Communist threat” to the Western world was replaced by a new menace. Unable to bring his people out of the economic and symbolic slump after an eight-year war with Iran, Saddam reacted to national crisis by invading Kuwait, shattering the dream of a post-Cold War/New World Order. The Middle East returned as this anarchic, monolithic force that threatened the West.

Stalin was one of the few people Saddam Hussein looked up to. He saw his role as coterminous with that of the former Soviet leader. Like Saddam, Stalin came from a poor, working-class background, survived famine and war, and accusations that he was killing his own people to remain in power. Saddam also appointed himself official artist-dictator in a way similar to Stalin and Hitler. According to fellow participants of the 1968 coup against then-President Abd al-Rahman Arif's regime, Saddam Hussein was remembered to have repeated the same refrain at party meetings: "When we take over the government I'll turn this country into a Stalinist state."³⁹ The most notable aspect of Saddam's uses of Stalinism however was in his socialist realist aesthetics: paintings, mosaics, and posters depicted Saddam Hussein as a benevolent, smiling leader, sharing the fruits of the land with the Iraqi people.

This veneration of Stalin had its roots in Iraqi politics during the time of Abd al-Karim Qasim, who ruled Iraq after the Iraqi Revolution of 1958. The cultural influence of Russia stems from Qasim's turn to the Communists for protection, since the Communists were Iraq's only deeply rooted political party. Qasim was the hero of the Iraqi Revolution and embodied the quintessential Iraqi: his father was Sunni, his mother Kurdish, and he was the grandson of a Shi'i. He represented "the lower-middle-class Iraqis without family name or fortune who, during the 1930s, found social mobility in the new national army."⁴⁰

As in many postcolonial nations, Iraq and other Arab nations turned to socialism because of the similar experience of exploitation that Marx detected in both the proletariat and colonized. The new independent nation under Qasim purged itself of all traces of British influence—martial, governmental, legal, and cultural. A socialist realist aesthetics worked to construct the type of cultural national identity that persisted up until Saddam's fall:

Trading on the social and economic inequalities in Iraqi society, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) had established by the late 1950s a massive presence on the streets of most Iraqi cities. Pictures of Marx, Lenin, Nikita Khrushchev, and Mao Tse-tung competed for space on the walls and fences of every city and town with those of Nasser . . . In one cafe after another, intellectuals wearing bushy moustaches that imitated Stalin met to discuss 'the actualization of utopia, the embodiment of liberty, democracy, progress, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination'.⁴¹

The adoption of a Soviet-style system, the dictatorship of one party in the name of the exploited masses, only really became central to Iraqi society

with the construction of Ba'ath official doctrine in 1963. From this point on, liberal democracy was identified with Western imperialism and capitalist exploitation. Once Saddam Hussein took over leadership from Bakr in 1968, he took his cues from Stalin, after the example of Qasim.

Germane to modern Iraqi art, architecture, and monuments, is a return to figuration, a figuration that was banned from most Islamic art. The first signs of an ancient pre-Islamic aesthetic came out of Baghdad's "modern art movement" under the Iraqi monarchy (1921-1958).⁴² Initially there was an interest in an Iraq-centred pan-Arabism and an educational programme founded in 1922 drew heavily on the writings of Sati' al-Husri who preached an egalitarian pan-Arabism and a hostility toward Persian influence on Arab culture. In 1941, "following the failure of the Rashid 'Ali al-Kaylani pro-Nazi revolt, the British took control over Iraq's education and, at the expense of aggressive pan-Arabism, much more emphasis was put in the curriculum on ancient Mesopotamian history."⁴³ Saddam Hussein and his generation were the first to receive a nationalist education where images of Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar were presented as ancient, national heroes. This became the foundation of the notion of an eternal monolithic identity located in the distant past but considered coterminous with contemporary Iraqi identity. An Orientalist view of Iraq erased all traces of a recent and shameful colonial history, serving to quell Arab resentment toward Ottoman and European influence, as well as Shi'i Arab and Kurd resentment vis-à-vis Sunni dominance. With the eradication of colonial presence after 1958, artists, many of them Marxist, attempted to revive Mesopotamian culture and history. The quest for Iraqi roots within ancient Mesopotamia became connected to the need for symbols of secular Iraqi patriotism that would replace those of a predominantly Islamic cast. The secular turn was necessary to the vision of an egalitarian pan-Arabism, especially in a nation where Shi'is outnumbered Sunnis.

The Iraq-centred cultural doxa was problematic in light of its Orientalist origins in European colonialism: "Orientalists were interpreters of East to West, but increasingly they also become interpreters of the East to itself, as Middle Easterners studying in Europe absorbed European methodology and the philosophies in which it was embedded. The Orient's contemporary tendency to glorify its past and to denigrate its current condition reflects, in part, the work of the Orientalists."⁴⁴ An essential Iraqiness was formulated so as to appease internecine conflicts rooted in religious sectarianism (Shi'i versus Sunni Muslims) and in differences in language and culture (primarily the Kurds). Iraq's Ba'ath party officials also ended up shunning pan-Arab nationalism because of a desire to monopolize the oil reserves under their

control. To satisfy more fundamentalist Islamist views from neighbouring countries, as well as the largely Arab Sunni and Shi'i population, Saddam combined ancient pre-Islamic civilizations with medieval Islamic history:

Unlike the communists, the Ba'ath avoided a rift with the more traditional masses by paying lip-service to religion, while striving to defuse Islam as a political and social force. The principle of separation between mosque and state could ease the integration of secularly-minded Shi'i (and Christian) Arabs into the political system.⁴⁵

A secular nationalism could go only so far. After the invasion of Kuwait in 1991, Saddam Hussein supplemented the discourse of nationalism with that of religion by becoming publicly devout so as to avoid antagonism from neighbouring Arab countries. "I have become a Muslim" he exclaimed, and then launched Scud missiles at Israel. This action was followed by pro-Iraqi demonstrations right across the Middle East. His religious ruse worked. Throughout the 1980s, the United States seemed to turn a blind eye to the outright demonization of Israel by Iraq because Iraq was at war with Shi'ite Iran. Furthermore, the turn to an Iraqi-centred rather than pan-Arabic identity was largely due to the conflict with Iran, and the need to secure Iraqi interests in the Persian Gulf. Since the battle of Qadisiyya in 637 AD, identity in Iraq had always been in opposition to Persia/Iran; the problem remained that many Shi'i Arabs had ancestral, religious, and cultural ties with Iran.

The excavation of ancient Mesopotamian and Assyrian sites, the reconstruction of old sites that had disappeared, and the repatriation of archeological artifacts seized by the West was one of the most expensive cultural/political Ba'ath campaigns. Another symbolic move in the construction of an imaginary community was the renaming of cities and sites in modern Iraq to Mesopotomian and Medieval-Islamic ones: e.g., Babylon, Nineveh, al-Quds. The ancient site of Babylon was reconstructed with little regard for authenticity and any real permanence, a Disneyfied facsimile of its former self.⁴⁶ All of these propagandistic projects were made possible by the lucrative oil trade.

The promotion of what essentially came down to an Orientalist identity by the Ba'ath regime was in keeping with the European modernist project of voraciously consuming all particularities between peoples and perpetuating myths of naturalized truths about "difference". In the postwar period, newly independent countries took on forms of state inspired by non-Western examples: e.g., Socialism. But as Chatterjee points out:

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain modular forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.⁴⁷

Middle Eastern countries have acquired an image of themselves via the Western media that perpetuates monolithic stereotypes of Islamic and ancient Near Eastern identity, and only limited options for “civilizing” change: “We cannot underestimate the role of Western mediatic representation in this archaization: exotic, marginal religious manifestations are presented as central, civil wars or insurrections . . . and are presented persistently as sectarian—and these representations are transmitted back to their countries of origin, at once distorting realities, and actively inciting sectarian conflicts.”⁴⁸ Thanks to American propaganda, the many Islams occurring all over the world are all lumped in with Islamic fundamentalism, especially of the Wahhabist variety, after 9/11. Sometimes the desire to distance oneself from the colonizer, the imperialist power, can result in taking on the forms of government of the opposition or “enemy”, Saddam Hussein himself took on elements of Stalinist socialism, but he moulded it to the circumstances of Iraqi history, and personal circumstance. However, since the first Persian Gulf War, he has turned to Islam and a more modern kitsch militarism.

The most recent monument that Saddam Hussein had commissioned was a mosque, named *The Mother of All Battles*, a monument to the Persian Gulf War of 1991, when supposedly the Ba’ath regime emerged victorious over the United States and its allies. Like the *Victory Arches* monument, the mosque symbolized a disavowal of military defeat and of the massive destruction to Iraqi infrastructure. This white limestone and blue mosaic Islamic-kitsch mosque has four minarets that look like the barrels of Kalashnikov rifles and four others that look like Scud missiles. To prove his Islamic faith, Saddam put on display within the mosque a copy of the Quran written in his own blood. This consubstantiation of the blood of the cult leader with the words of the Quran spells out the sacredness of his own blood. The gesture connotes sacrifice in the name of Islamic belief, the very thing that he encouraged in his armies. The last monument that Saddam had planned to execute was the Tower of Babel.

Saddam Hussein's turn to religion was significant for reasons other than the contingencies of political alignment with other Islamic nations, for it unmaskes the ideological similarities underlying nationalism and political-theological absolutism. When Kantorowicz, an exiled European Jew in America, published *The King's Two Bodies* in 1957, he was responding not only to memories of the Third Reich but also to the actualities of the Cold War.⁴⁹ The construction of the nation around the spiritual authority of the leader and the mystification of the nation around notions of ideological purity were common occurrences throughout modernity. As in the case of Saddam Hussein and Iraq, what appeared on the surface as secular politics hid deep religious roots that had acted all along as a foil for the exceptionality of the law, and of the king (and of the law's foundation in violence).⁵⁰

Anyone who watched the news coverage of the recent war on Iraq heard about the suspicion that there was more than just one Saddam Hussein. Some thought he had a double, and others calculated that there were up to four Saddams roaming around Baghdad. A German forensic scientist, Dieter Buhmann, used the latest digital technology to analyze thousands of hours of video footage of Saddam Hussein and discerned at least three men doubling as the Iraqi president. This multiplication of the body in the form of victims suffering through plastic surgery and receiving the bullets meant for Saddam Hussein, was echoed in the many images of Saddam that haunted every Iraqi public space, in the form of murals, on billboards, even starring in music videos on TV. And yet Saddam Hussein was nowhere to be found. He hid in his many palaces, never staying in one spot longer than four hours at a time. The king with many bodies had made Iraq into a hall of mirrors.

Throughout the war on Iraq certain military terminologies dominated, amongst them the notion of an endless "operation", of entering the body and cutting it up. The idea of precision bombing had the character of zapping a localized cancer. It was an operation to rid the nation of Iraq of the symptom of Saddam Hussein. Like a virus, he multiplied and divided. Bio-medical metaphors were in abundance. The "decapitation" of Baghdad could be understood as a reference to the wave of "rational" violence that dismantled the monarchy in France in the eighteenth century. This neo-colonial war, more than any other war, played itself out "live" on the screen, in real time, the Western gaze glued to the Iraqi operating table. What the screen projected had been manufactured for a global audience long before the war even got off the ground. "Embedded" journalists regulated the public image of the military. What appeared "live" hid so much civilian death.

On April 9, 2003, the giant colossus of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square was symbolically toppled and his head dragged through the streets of Baghdad. The event was stage-managed by the U.S. media to make it

appear that Iraqis “welcomed the invasion and occupation of their country.” Of the 200 people assembled in the square only a few dozen were Iraqi: “The significance of this should be clear: those who ‘spontaneously’ gathered in Firdos Square included Iraqi political agents of the American military, dispatched from Nasiriya to Baghdad to serve as an appropriate backdrop for the visuals desired by Bush administration spin-doctors.”⁵¹

Why is Iraq now suffering from a complete lack of social infrastructure in the wake of the U.S. war to “liberate” Iraq? Iraqis now appear weaker than ever. The media too often portrays this as an essential flaw in Iraqi character (they looted their own country, they are belligerent, etc.). At the time of writing this, Saddam was suspected alive and his two sons Uday and Qusay had just been killed by U.S. troops. Virtually all of the paintings, mosaics, and bronzes depicting Saddam Hussein have been destroyed, thus shattering the monstrous illusion of their President’s “two bodies.” Reports of the looting of thousands of Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Persian, and medieval Islamic artifacts from the National Museum are now said to have been a gross exaggeration. Baghdad now appears to be in possession of most of the remnants of its “eternal past”.

Although an aesthetic of cultural regression under the Ba’ath regime served to uphold the law, this does not mean that the *Victory Arches* or the *Unknown Soldier* monuments should be obliterated. It is understandable that the Iraqi people would want to put this chapter of history behind them, but, while the destruction of monuments can be cathartic, it also hastens forgetting. Because so much of Iraqi national memory was constructed by Ba’athist ideology in the form of public monuments, one wonders to what use this memory can now serve. To the memory of Saddam’s atrocities to be sure. W.J.T. Mitchell states that “the pulling down of public art is as important to its function as its putting up.”⁵² The toppling of Saddam’s many monuments could give back to the Iraqi public some sense of dignity. Altering these monuments so as to subvert their original intention is another option. How does a disjointed nation begin to redefine its identity after the fall of a dictatorship, especially when it finds itself in the grips of an imperialist power? The chances of Baghdad and its remaining Ba’ath monuments becoming “a phantasmagoric garden of ‘post-totalitarian’ art”⁵³ are slight to say the least.

Notes

- 1 As with the Americans today, oil was the real reason for British presence in Iraq, not freedom from tyranny.
- 2 Boundaries for the new Iraq were completely artificial and ignorant of tribal dynamics.
- 3 Samir al-Khalil, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), page 130.
- 4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991).
- 5 “Faisal had won a singular victory by making Iraq the first Arab state in the Middle East to exercise even token sovereignty [However,] token independence did nothing to close the chasm of sectarianism, tribalism, conflicting economic interests, and differing definitions of identity that divided the urban Sunnis and the rural Shia.” Sandra Mackey, *The Reckoning: Iraq and the Legacy of Saddam Hussein* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), page 119.
- 6 My description of the monument is inspired by al-Khalil’s *The Monument*.
- 7 Final version of the monument worked-out by Khalid al-Rahat; the same artist designed the *Monument to the Unknown Soldier*.
- 8 Anderson, page 9.
- 9 The “single wills of individuals converge and are represented in the will of the transcendental sovereign. Sovereignty is thus defined both by transcendence and by representation.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), page 84.
- 10 Al-Khalil, page 66. In the end however, Saddam Hussein was not happy with any of the proposals and attempted to bring the architects together so that he might help them redesign their proposals. Venturi left Baghdad furious.
- 11 “The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects.” Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), page 19.
- 12 Mark Lewis, “The Technologies of Public Art,” *Vanguard* 16:5 (November 1987), page 15.
- 13 Medals and money “alone carry on their faces and alone are capable of eternally carrying a double authority, that of the prince, on the one hand, and that of public usage, on the other, which medal-money unifies perfectly as index, icon, symbol, and thing [I]t is an index that gives to the marked object its own potential, that makes of it an efficacious sign, and very precisely a power.” Louis Marin, *The Portrait of the King* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), page 127.
- 14 Michael North, “The Public as Sculpture,” *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), page 16.

- 15 The twin *Victory Arches* were designed to be the highest in the world, two and half times the height of the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris. Hitler also designed a triumphal arch in 1925, inspired by and meant to compete with the *Arc de Triomphe* (it was also to be two and a half times higher). It was to be a monument to the German soldiers killed in the First World War. See al-Khalil, pages 38-39.
- 16 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 17 North, page 15.
- 18 See Marin, pages 94-104.
- 19 “One of Saddam’s many homes crowns a hill overlooking the site [of Babylon], which suggests that the wonders of ancient Babylon . . . are simply follies on the grounds of his estate. The guide sneaks a timid peek at the palace, and then ducks back inside the ruins, as if Saddam himself might be gazing down with a critical eye.” Edward McBride, “Monuments to Self: Baghdad’s Grand Projects in the Age of Saddam Hussein,” <http://www.metropolis mag.com/html/content_0699/ju99monu.htm>.
- 20 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), page 135.
- 21 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957).
- 22 *The Commentaries or Reports of Edmund Plowden*, quoted by Kantorowicz, page 7.
- 23 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), page 93.
- 24 Anderson, pages 11-12.
- 25 Anderson, page 5.
- 26 Anderson, page 7.
- 27 Hardt and Negri, page 95.
- 28 Hardt and Negri, page 268.
- 29 Hardt and Negri, pages 70-83.
- 30 Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian, and Pagan Polities* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997), page 154.
- 31 Al-Azmeh, page 7.
- 32 Al-Azmeh, page 25. The basileus was a Byzantine ruler.
- 33 Anderson, page 19.
- 34 Abdelwahab Meddeb, “Islam and its Discontents,” *October 99* (Winter 2002), page 6.

- 35 Al-Azmeh, page 103.
- 36 Baram, page 136.
- 37 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), page 62.
- 38 Groys, page 49.
- 39 Baram, page 78.
- 40 Mackey, page 182.
- 41 Mackey, page 184.
- 42 Al-Khalil, page 78.
- 43 Baram, page 135.
- 44 Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), page 12.
- 45 Baram, page 21.
- 46 McBride, <http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content_0699/ju99monu.htm>.
- 47 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), page 5.
- 48 Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1996), page 75.
- 49 Kantorowicz, page viii.
- 50 An early manifestation of the “king’s two bodies” in “pagan” societies is outlined in René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), whereby the doubling of the sacred king, and the sacrificing of the king’s double in the form of a surrogate victim, was necessary to the preservation of a given society.
- 51 Patrick Martin, “The Stage-managed Events in Baghdad’s Firdos Square,” <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/apr2003/fird-a12.shtml>>.
- 52 W.J.T. Mitchell, “Introduction,” *Art and the Public Sphere*, page 4.
- 53 Komar & Melamid “What is to Be Done With Monumental Propaganda?,” *Monumental Propaganda* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1995), page 10.