



## **Broken Pieces**

The haunting new documentary *Iraq in Fragments* offers no pat answers or cheap analysis.

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Web Exclusive: 11.17.06

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Will U.S. audiences avert their eyes at the latest Iraq documentary? A splintered mirror in three shards, *Iraq in Fragments* reflects realities that U.S. viewers [haven't wanted to see](#) -- jangling fear, black blooms of smoke, Iraqis' faces flickering with rage or pinched hope.

Like its setting, *Fragments* presents too many ruptured ideals and bruised lives, too few exits and settled truths -- which is precisely why Americans cannot afford the luxury of looking away. Poetic rather than prescriptive, allusive rather than allegorical, James Longley's guerilla masterwork brings us to where we should have started in Iraq: the humble regard of people whose problems cannot be fixed in a month, much less in the blink of an Iraq-fatigued eye.

The film's title refers to its structure -- three wrenching portraits -- as much as it does to the schisms that are tearing the country apart. Longley draws on the fault lines in tracing the tales of a Sunni boy, a Shi'a uprising, and Kurdish families clinging to a battered dream.

*Fragments* is a marvel of slow cinema. Shot over several years, the film layers ideas and images on top of each other to expansive effect. Longley worked with a bare-bones team and no security detail, and his small-scale operation allowed him to meld into scenes -- and seemingly, into the minds of the subjects themselves.

*Fragments'* first segment displays this depth most clearly. It opens with a shot of a young boy's eye -- the camera is trying to bring viewers as deep inside his experience and perspective as possible. Mohammad is just 11, but he has the sad, precocious body

language of someone forced to act the part of an adult. Apprenticed to a cheerfully cruel mechanic, Mohammad has a transparent face that telegraphs the suffering underneath his own reassurances about his bleak life. "He loves me," Mohammad whispers about his boss, "he doesn't hate me." This just before he gets cuffed about the head and verbally torn apart for not being able to write his dead father's name.

Mohammad's story could easily be pegged as a fable about life under Saddam -- the terrifying father figure, the mental convolutions needed to love him and survive his wrath. But because it is such an astute psychological portrait of one boy -- and because it is able to put viewers so completely inside his painful life -- the political parallel serves as only one layer to the segment.

Longley is fond of visual complexity -- in one instance in the first segment, he cuts from helicopter blades to a ceiling fan: very *Apocalypse Now*. Implicit criticisms of U.S. policy are conveyed through these sorts of stylistic decisions, or the unscripted snippets of voiceover or dialogue, rather than through more literal or bossy means. The segment combines the raw emotions of its child subject with visual polish -- it's Dickens in Iraq.

The second segment is even more visually stunning, not to mention headline-ready. *Fragments* focuses in on radicalization in the Iraqi South, with daring footage of raids on alcohol sellers, self-flagellation rites, and protests gone horribly wrong. With frenetic editing, jump cuts, and flash forwards slashing the camera across the screen, *Fragments* throws viewers into the violence on film, and only elucidates the situation afterwards. But where the visuals and the storyline in the first part create a staggering whole, the hyper-kinetic movement here distracts from the already riveting footage. Longley has captured more than enough natural intensity in his portrait of paranoia and the curdling of rightful frustration into violent brutality. "When Saddam fell, I was relieved!" shouts one of the bound, alleged alcohol sellers. "But once again, I'm being blindfolded."

Longley references the stagey qualities of an execution video, or layers the sound of a boy leading a prayer over images of the alcohol sellers' capture -- tactics that would come across as cheap editorializing but for the fact that they underscore the militants' own shouted intent to merge violence, vigilantism, and Islamist aims.

*Fragments'* final segment, meanwhile, is a bleak idyll. Set in a Kurdish region of Iraq, the piece focuses on two families whose trepidation about the future and ongoing poverty chip away at the relief they felt at the demise of Saddam's Iraq. Black smoke billows through this last segment as it did in the two previous tales, but this time it comes from a brick factory -- reminiscent of a motif in some of the Iranian Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi's work. First seen in Mohammad's Baghdad, then in Sadr's South, and finally here, the image seems to link destruction wrought during the invasion and the ongoing

insurgency with the Sisyphean task of rebuilding. This last piece is less fraught than the previous two, a welcome respite from their emotional intensity. But it is just as thick with the imagery that runs throughout the film -- ever-present smoke, broken-down cars, wheels fallen off and rolled away by gangs of boys.

The film's storytelling takes on mythic themes -- trauma, the vortex of violence, tremulous healing -- but etches its ideas in individual portraits. *Fragments* can't tell all the tales of Iraq, of course. (There are no stories that feature women here, even as minor characters.) But the film constitutes at least a partial attempt to show Iraqis struggling to make their country, and themselves, whole again, an effort that thankfully refuses to offer any more pat solutions or false promises to its subjects -- or its viewers.

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