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Moving Pictures: Iraq Documentary is Stirring, Poetic



Now that the election is over, with all its slogans and clichés and simplistic solutions for myriad complex problems, along comes a documentary that provides a solid, sobering dose of geopolitical reality.

Iraq in Fragments, opening today (Friday) at Shattuck Cinemas, is like a Terrence Malick celluloid tone poem, an epic tale in three chapters examining the hope, despair, fear and tragedy of occupied Iraq. But most of all it is about humanity, about people of all ages and walks of life reflecting on what it means to be an Iraqi under the most difficult and tenuous of circumstances.

Director James Longley has fashioned a documentary that plays like the most meticulously planned fictional narrative, taking the words of Iraqis and draping them over his lush photography. Lines of great beauty and poignancy adorn a continuous stream of stunning imagery that captures the essence of the land and its people at a time when the nation's fate is at best uncertain.

Longley's compositions are lovely, his images haunting, and his subjects are the most engaging of characters. The film could not be more striking and affecting had it been crafted with great foresight and care in a Hollywood studio.

Longley himself never intrudes, not upon the images and certainly not upon the words. There is no narration other than the words spoken by the Iraqis onscreen; the photography never draws attention to the photographer, the images never betray his presence. It is easy to forget there is a camera there at all; it's as though we are simply catching glimpses into everyday lives, the lives of anonymous everyday Iraqis, the poor and the powerless, people whose names will never spread beyond their small villages, but lives which, under the patient gaze of Longley's lens, take on epic proportions. Iraq in Fragments elevates each life by respecting its inherent dignity and beauty.

The film recalls Malick's *Thin Red Line*, the 1998 movie that tracked soldiers in battle in World War II and made audible their private thoughts, memories and fears. Iraq in Fragments has that quality; the words of the subjects almost seem to be flowing directly from their minds to ours, as though we are not hearing them but receiving them—a sort of stream-of-consciousness documentary.

There have been many documentaries made by filmmakers who have spent time in Iraq over the past few years, and several of them have been excellent. But none has covered the terrain staked out by James Longley in this film. He has adopted much of the cinema verité style while bringing to it an eye for imagery that calls to mind the dramatic landscapes of Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* trilogy. He has transformed the words and lives and visuals of the Iraqi people into poetic incantations that provide an impressionistic glimpse of the struggle to retain one's dignity and humanity in the face of global machinations over which they have no control.

IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS Written, directed and photographed by James Longley. 94 minutes. Playing at Shattuck Cinemas.