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Powder keg

by [Matthew Schniper](#)



In the Kurdish-controlled northern region of Iraq, workers burn petroleum in the process of manufacturing bricks. Black smoke fills the sky over a local boy and the desolate desert landscape.

***Iraq in Fragments (R)**

Kimball's Twin Peak

To relate ideas well, English teachers instruct, "Show, don't tell." Filmmaker James Longley was clearly one of the kids paying attention in class.

His achievement, *Iraq in Fragments*, stands weighted by gobs of accolades, including editing, cinematography and directing awards from Sundance in 2006 and an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary in 2007.

Reminiscent at times of Ron Fricke's *Baraka* (1992) or Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) — both full of fantastic cinematography set to music, minus plot-lines — *Iraq in Fragments* vividly captures peoples' lives in an afflicted country without burdening the observations by forced structure and agenda.

To assemble the film, which is divided into three chapters (one each for Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds), Longley lived and filmed in Iraq between February 2003 and April 2005, accumulating 300 hours of footage and 1,600 pages of translated material for editing.

In his production notes, Longley says he spent hours a day for months on end, "gradually becoming part of the furniture until nobody paid attention to me or my camera ... achiev[ing] invisibility."

His commendable patience gifts viewers a colorful, sensory, fly-on-the-wall experience inside places where few could imagine a Westerner granted access and trusted by locals.

In the first segment, "Mohammed of Baghdad," the filmmaker follows an 11-year-old boy around his workplace, a mechanic's shop in a mixed, central Baghdad neighborhood. The boy is scared, fatherless, a school dropout and the picture of disenfranchisement. But he's compelling to follow and leaves viewers bleeding sympathy all over their theater seats.

Part two, "Sadr's South," captures the southern, Shia-dominant cities of Naseriyah and Najaf, where ultra-conservative Islamic law rules. Longley follows Sheik Aws al Kafaji, a 32-year-old cleric inside Moqtada al-Sadr's Shiite regime, which aims to push the "occupiers" out of Iraq and turn it into an Islamic state.

This emerges as the most lively and charged part of the film, documenting not only traditional dance, song, prayer, ceremony and political rallies, but also a guns-blazing raid on alcohol sellers in a local market, who cry innocence and declare the radicals "just another Saddam." The bouncing camera racing past vendor stalls amid the crackle of gunfire resembles the typical chase-scene cinematography of an episode of "Cops" or a beach-landing scene in a war movie.

The film's third chapter, "Kurdish Spring," departs from the violent war zones for the quieter (for now) Kurdish-controlled north, to a desolate, remote town called Koretan, where locals run century-old brick ovens that spew black clouds from burning petroleum. The final segment depicts the day-to-day laboring of the Kurds, and tracks a pair of neighboring boys and fathers who become query vehicles into generational barriers and challenges.

The filmwork here — with shots including the boys rolling and playing together in a field — is gorgeous, reminiscent of a Terrence Malick (*The New World*, *The Thin Red Line*) film, where body language conveys more than the script.

To its detriment, *Iraq in Fragments* does rely on viewers to be at least fairly educated on Iraqi history and issues. But to its credit, the collage ultimately works because it is anything but cavalier in telling Iraq's muddled story. Longley leads with humility and observation, allowing the characters to speak for themselves.

It's heady art meets sad beauty.

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