

# The Cornell Daily Sun

## Cornell Cinema

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Some films receive respect merely for the fact that it was near impossible to produce them in the first place. However, with *Iraq in Fragments* — a film whose direction, sound, cinematography, music and editing was completed by one man over a period of two years in a war zone — you may just ask yourself, has James Longley created one of the best documentaries ever?

Longley, almost unbelievably, takes the audience on a stunning visual tour of Iraq for a little over an hour and a half. The title is not really a metaphor, but rather a declaration of the film's structure (although one could easily interpret a double meaning from the word choice). Basically, the documentary is broken into three chapters, each dealing with a different segment of Iraqi society.

In the first, we are introduced to a young, 11-year-old Sunni boy named Mohammed. The boy is continually stuck between attending school and earning money for what remains of his family at an auto repair shop; it is suggested that his father was killed by the Saddam Hussein regime. Unfortunately, Mohammed is unable to commit himself to either activity and fails at attempting both. He must repeat his grade several times and is bullied around by despondent men at the repair shop who apparently have given up on any hope to advance themselves.

Next, Longley takes us southward to the city of Naseriyah where Shia groups are organizing themselves to participate in the new Iraq. While at first their attempts at town-hall meetings, political independence and discourse show promise, we are shocked to see the debate spiral into violence. This culminates with an attack on the local market to capture alcohol sellers and bring them to "justice" — the film's most intense moments.

The final stage of the film takes us to the relative peace of the north where Iraq's Kurd population shows gratitude for their new post-Hussein freedoms. The last segment provides the audience with a much-needed relief from the despondent and violent tones of the first two segments. Instead, the concern in Kurdistan is the great question of "what comes next?" In between the everyday talk in the small

northern communities, we sense the latent debate over whether the Kurds should invest themselves in the future of Iraq or go it alone.

What's more impressive than Longley's access to so many areas of Iraq — some extremely dangerous — is the fact that the director has created a visually stunning film. Longley's use of long tracking shots, music and editing are top-notch — almost to the extent that at times we forget that we are watching a documentary. In one stunning shot, Longley captures an entire train ride from the South to the North, speeding up and slowing down the film to whisk by the Iraqi landscape but also to pause at empty and abandoned train station platforms representing the commercial stagnation of the country. It's no surprise that *Iraq in Fragments* captured the top awards for documentaries at the Sundance Film Festival and has received an Oscar nomination.

Watching this film made me realize for the first time how little we actually see of Iraq. Longley's work is admirable for the fact that he takes our focus off of the roadside bombs and burning car shells to which we have grown disturbingly complacent and focuses his camera on the realities of life for the Iraqis. The director shows us a world where backgammon and personal hygiene bookend conversations about personal safety and politics.

However, the true success of *Iraq in Fragments* is its non-polemic nature. Longley gratefully ignores outside commentary from either liberal or conservative blowhards. In fact, Longley himself abstains from inserting any sort of commentary. Instead, we hear about the situation in Iraq from its own citizens. I would like to think that Longley's final message is carried out through his film's format — that instead of projecting our own political preconceptions on Iraq and its citizens from the outside, it's time to listen to the Iraqis themselves.