

**THE REVOLVER**

# Axis of artists

A new documentary offers hope that culture can engage seriously with the tragedy of Iraq

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It is surely a failure of contemporary culture that it's not possible to think of a single, serious work of art that addresses the most urgent geopolitical issue of our time, which is the disintegration of Iraq. The willingness to engage is there, to be sure. But we find ourselves at a curious historical point, where the traditional disciplines at culture's disposal find it hard to make an impact when it really matters. So over-refined have the visual arts become, steeped in irony, adolescent shock tactics and obtuse layers of deferred meaning, that it is inconceivable that there could be another "Guernica", screaming its protest at generations to come. Who would even notice it, amid the filth and the flotsam?

On stage and on screen, it seems we have reached a kind of end point. Satire cannot become more scabrous than in Armando Iannucci's splendid *The Thick of It*, a programme that makes it impossible to watch the admittedly polished homilies of *The West Wing*, or indeed any genuine politician. The recent one-off special featured a Conservative shadow minister wrestling comically with a Paul Smith suit and a Ted Baker shirt to freshen his appeal to the masses. But Iannucci knows, and we know, that the masses are already more knowing than that, happily immersed in makeover shows and a showbusiness world that deftly conjoins artifice with reality.

Contempt for politics and politicians cannot become much more pronounced. In David Hare's play *Stuff Happens*, the playwright used real quotes to furnish his

parodic text, and why wouldn't he? On Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, the US president's slow-witted soundbites are endlessly replayed, like a calamitous dropped catch in the outfield, for their sorry mixture of blather and bathos. And this is, remember, a daily show. A body politic cannot hope to prosper on a drip feed of ridicule. It will eventually sit up and demand better nourishment, or wither.

Two of the West End's current heavy-weight hits – and there aren't many – are *Frost/Nixon* and *Rock 'n' Roll*, exercises in nostalgia that yearn for an age when one man's questions of another man could resonate throughout the hemisphere, and when popular music appeared to move, and be moved by, events. Why is there not *Stewart/Bush*, or *Rap 'n' Rave*?

But, to quote the stock phrase of the flummoxed world leader, we are where we are, and when we are. And I did see something last week that offered a tentative way forward. James Longley's documentary *Iraq in Fragments*, released in London later this week, is a rarity. Most of the movies that have been a part of the documentary boom of recent years are not subtle affairs: Michael Moore just hits you square on the head; most of the rest have been humorous (*Super Size Me*), heroic (*Touching the Void*) or just plain weird (*Capturing the Friedmans*).

*Iraq in Fragments*, from the poignant double-entendre of its title onwards, is a different matter. Longley first travelled to Iraq in early 2002, just before the US invasion, and could barely contain his artistic aspirations, wanting, as he says today, to "document everything". Instead, he focused on three discrete stories, which form his compelling trilogy. The first follows an 11-year-old boy who works as a car mechanic in Baghdad; the second follows the Shiite supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr, ending in the holy city of Najaf; the third takes place among the Iraqi Kurds as they make their fumbling moves towards independence.

Goodness knows there is plenty to say about Iraq, and about all three of Longley's stories; but he chooses not to say it. There is no preaching here, no cheap polemicising,

no narrative at all. Some of the episodes are shot in freewheeling vérité style, capturing the violence and the chaos that we read about daily, while others are shot with a lyricism that melts the eye (Longley tellingly studied at the All-Russian Institute of Cinematography in Moscow; there is poetry in his images).

The participants in the three stories talk directly to the camera, with an intoxicating blend of metaphors and folk wisdom. Some of their observations have a terrifying conciseness. One old man observes neutrally that things seem to be getting worse by the day. "Today is better than tomorrow," he says, a phrase that somehow sounds so much bleaker than if he had said: "Today is worse than yesterday." Human hope is founded on the assumption of amelioration; how else can it thrive?

*Iraq in Fragments* has the feel of a new, or at least a refreshed, art form: highly accomplished technically, shot on the run, non-judgmental and firing questions at us from a dizzying variety of perspectives. It takes a stand on the Iraq issue that is at

once more sophisticated, more challenging and more nuanced than anything heard from any politician. That is as it should be: artists should not be held responsible for solving the world's ills, just for portraying them with more intelligence than anyone else. That imperative occasionally gets lost, but it resounds here with clarity and we should all be grateful.

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*"Iraq in Fragments" opens at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on January 19.*



