

## 'Iraq' documentary reveals what's concealed

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Iraq in Fragments is touching and revealing as it illuminates life conditions of a country torn-apart by what people are considering more and more to be a needless war. The verité style documentary artistically condenses 300 hours of filming on location in Iraq into a sentimental portrait painted with the most striking of cinematography.

James Longley's second documentary feature embraces no scripted narration as it explores the lives of ordinary Iraqi civilians. Separated into three sections, the documentary features eloquent vignettes taken from the lives of 11-year-old Mohammed Haithem, shiite political/religious movement of Moqtada Sadr and a family of Iraqi Kurds. Each sequence depicts these people's thoughts, beliefs and aspirations, not to mention their concerns, which all tie together to personally illustrate the larger issues plaguing Iraq today.

The documentary is simultaneously hard to watch and hard to look away from. The severed streets and musky buildings of a devastated Baghdad are among the first images of the film's 'fragmented' scenery. A collage of poverty, pain and injustice; this film succeeds in harnessing every aspect of human compassion.

In 2001 the director traveled to Palestine to embark on his first feature documentary *Gaza Strip*, which took an intimate gaze at the lives and views of Palestinians in Israeli-occupied Gaza. After being screened to a number of international film festivals (and in numerous U.S. theaters) *Gaza Strip* was smothered in critical acclaim. The filmmaker traveled to Iraq in 2002 to begin pre-production work for *Fragments* which was released in 2006.

Longley's documentary captures the experience of Iraq's children with the young, touselled Haithem. The child lives in the mixed Sheik Omar neighborhood in the heart of old Baghdad. With his father missing and his domineering boss verbally abusing him on a regular basis, Haithem's daily life seems unbearable. Caught between school (which he's several years behind in) and working exhaustedly in an auto-body shop for survival, Haithem's situation is indicative of the city itself. Like Baghdad, his budding life is torn between an idealized past, a dangerous present and an uncertain future.

The second part, filmed inside the Shiite political and religious movement of Moqtada Sadr, travels between Naseriyah and the holy city of Najaf. The film allows us to witness the

inner workings of Iraqi local politics as tension mounts in the country. The Sadr movement pushes for regional elections and enforces their interpretation of Islamic law, assuming control over the region. Armed Islamicists overtake open markets and imprison suspected alcohol merchants (the country practices prohibition). To American audiences, viewing authorities further impoverish the families of the detainees as they plead for mercy may strike us with bewilderment, but it's moments like these that the film urges consideration of cultural and religious contexts.

The picturesque landscape of rural Iraq is splashed onto the frame in the third part of Iraq. In this section, the documentary follows Iraqi Kurds as they assert their bid for independence and rebel against the past atrocities of Baghdad rule. The audience views this situation through the eyes of a family of brick makers and their childhood friends; all of whom reside on a farm south of Arbil, Iraq. At the head of the family is an elderly farmer who reflects on his family, his God and his people while being mindful of the legacy they all share. Throughout this segment we hear voices of independence and nationalism which echo both secular and religious sentiments. Their outlooks reveal a community where politics and faith are both personal, public but more importantly are eternally intertwined.

The film crew's intimate connection to its civilian subjects is evident throughout the entire documentary. Trust is clearly there. The crew's three-year presence formed a solid root for their impressive inside-perspective of Iraq and its people.

Longley's cinematography glows with the dusk of an Iraqi sun, and the poetic rhythm of the film's mosaic scenes captures and releases the eye with each frame. This lively and breathtaking documentary is one not to be missed, so buy it, rent it, Netflix it, and prepare yourself for 94 riveting minutes of real-life in Iraq.