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Sifting Through the Debris for the 'Real' Iraq

Movies

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The title of James Longley's impressionistic documentary, "Iraq in Fragments," which opens today at Film Forum, could well describe the brief history of Iraq documentaries so far. Utilizing a mosaic of perspectives, each filmmaker has essentially tried to improve upon a predecessor's oversights. The grim patrols of "Occupation: Dreamland" tempered the mercenary thrills of "Gunner Palace," while the outspoken soldiers in "The War Tapes" uncovered even more of the heartbreaking emotional toll with their diaristic cameras.

The next wave showed the war from the other side, which is where "Iraq in Fragments" fits in, though not as neatly as most would have it. Unlike Laura Poitras's "My Country, My Country," which was pegged to Iraq's historic first elections, Mr. Longley's triptych of Iraqi experience — spanning Shiite, Sunni, and Kurd — aims for an aesthetic take on the country's welter of emotions. The result is beautiful, at times magical, but the film frequently threatens the limits of poeticizing so slippery a subject.

"Iraq in Fragments" begins with a section loosely centered on a fatherless 11-year-old who is tormented by his mechanic boss. It proceeds to a bracing plunge into the Islamism of radical Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr, before concluding with a bucolic look at a family of brickmaking shepherds in the Kurdish north.

Mr. Longley establishes his vivid approach early on with young Mohammed, who juggles working at a garage with school. Through a sunset palette of glowing reds and golds, Mr. Longley's nimble camera renders the streets of Baghdad and Mohammed's schoolroom as places that seem to hum with a life. The boy's fragmented, wondering voice-overs heighten the effect with a dreamlike quality (and expose the unsung importance of the film's creative sound design).

In other words, this isn't some representative look at Iraqi youth, or even this particular boy. "Iraq in Fragments" is a visceral experience, but not in the same

way as the life-or-death tension leveraged by a combat diary. Mohammed's frustration with work and joy in learning come across as ambient emotions of the society as a whole, especially as they interplay with scenes of adults grumbling over the latest American army snafu. There's even an element of Freudian psychodrama in the boy's failure at school: His boss berates him for being unable to write the name of his deceased father. The past refuses to leave quietly.

The film's second segment is in many ways even more engaging and unnerving than the first, exploring the al-Sadr-led movement for an Islamist state. In his depiction of a funeral procession self-flagellating to resounding drumbeats, Mr. Longley accomplishes the rare filmmaking feat of making viewers feel the mystical power of religion in action. ("Iraq in Fragments" is in this sense an improvement on James Berends's "Blood of My Brother," which explored the radical milieu as an eruption of repressed vengeance.) The messianic nature of the speeches and sermons that follow, including one by a mesmerizing young boy, are therefore that much more gripping. Ensuing scenes of masked raids on a booze market complete the current from belief to day-to-day economic reality. Such overwhelming sequences are clearly the reason that, to judge by the array of Sundance Awards (for direction, editing, and cinematography), "Iraq in Fragments" is viewed by many as the ultimate cinematic statement on Iraq.

But as bewitching as Mr. Longley's film can be, there are moments when its vaunted Iraqi's-eye view can feel like a poetic depiction of familiar problems, without being newly informative or confronting Iraqi viewpoints. The central

use of children, for example, can effectively evoke national immaturity (Mohammed) or the depths of belief (the child preacher), but that kind of lyricism only underlines how the situation still wants for clarity of explication (or accountable perspectives).

The dangers of this tendency come to a head with the final segment, which focuses on a Kurdish family of shepherds and brickmakers. Mr. Longley goes all out, pushing images of brick-kiln flames, swirling smoke, and windswept plains into the territory of Terence Malick or Victor Erice in "The Spirit of the Beehive." The patriarch of the family, wrapped in ominous shadows, sagely expounds about the deficiencies of the nascent state. The segment opens with a cryptic image of two children tumbling in a field; it is almost disorienting in its remove from the preceding segments' realities and from the fractious scenes of Kurds voting that end the segment.

All of which is to say that the idea of filming "through Iraqi eyes" is a more fraught endeavor than usually admitted. Diving into individual viewpoints, especially ones that happen to produce such magical moments, can obscure as

much as it enlightens (what do any of these Iraqis think of insurgents murdering fellow Iraqis, for example?). It's tempting to suggest that a sensual, aestheticized approach is Iraq au naturel, but the truth is sometimes messier.

Mr. Longley, however, is both a tremendously skilled filmmaker and a brave one, having spent two and a half years gathering his footage. "Iraq in Fragments" is a valuable document and, given the security situation, perhaps the last, and the most enduring, of its kind.