

STANLEY KAUFFMANN ON FILMS

Altering States

Post date 11.18.06 | Issue date 11.27.06

James Longley is an American maker of documentaries, now in his mid-thirties, who studied film in the United States and in Moscow and in 2002 made a film about Palestine called *Gaza Strip*. His new film is **Iraq in Fragments**, a considerable achievement because of what it does and what, as Longley knew, it could not do.

He spent two years in Iraq, apparently accompanied only by translators. (His picture is well shot, sometimes even lovely; he acknowledges help in all the technical work after the three hundred hours of film were done, but the actual shooting is his.) His intent was clear. He says in his notes (and it is evident in the film): "It was never my intention to make a 'war documentary.' I wanted to make a film about Iraq, the people of Iraq." A war documentary would, in some ways, have been simpler.

For his own purposes, Longley divided Iraq in three parts--or, rather, he accepted the three existing divisions: Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. For part one of his film he lived in a Sunni district of Baghdad and concentrated on an eleven-year-old auto mechanic, slipping into the lives of the boy, his employer, acquaintances. For part two he went to the Shiite region of Najaf and became friends with a young man who is the head of a nationalist organization. Through him, Longley followed all the inevitable ramifications. Part three inevitably was in Kurdish country. Longley lived in a hamlet near an oil plant. Here his method was to avoid groups and to concentrate on ordinary folk--farmers, traders, and so on. Here he found the strongest pro-American feeling.

Every moment of Longley's film is interesting, and the more we watch, the more clearly we realize that the film cannot solve anything for us. Some Iraqis love America; some think America is a curse and cannot wait for our troops to leave. Some hated Saddam Hussein; some wish he were back again, because at least the streets were safe--from individual criminals, if not from Saddam himself.

So we are left with a copious collection of intimacies, some remarkable faces, some affecting tiny details of daily life, some poignancies, some astonishing backwardness--all filmed well. And we are also left with the old nagging questions about documentaries. Who pointed the camera? Who did the editing? Whose truth amid the available truths, none of which is complete, are we getting? One point, however, we are certainly convinced of. Longley is a film-maker of intelligence and empathy.

STANLEY KAUFFMANN is The New Republic's film critic.