

Documentary gives glimpse into future of Iraq

Jay Stone, *The Ottawa Citizen*

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Iraq in Fragments Rating *** 1/2

Directed by: James Longley

Parental guide: Scenes of violence.

In Arabic with English subtitles

Playing at: ByTowne Cinema, through Tuesday

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James Longley's *Iraq in Fragments* is an impressionistic portrait of a country that uniquely lends itself to such a treatment. This is a film in shards: three stories of three areas of the nation, Sunni, Shia and Kurdish, each broken into montages of protestations, angry speeches, sad children, and lyrical countryside. You are invited to put them together yourself, but beware if you are looking for hope.

The movie, nominated for an Oscar, is told in cinema verite fashion, with the accompanying air of reality, but also of raggedness and jumble. There is no storyline or narrator. There is no thesis, really, except for what you can cull from scenes of young men marching through the streets praising God, or old men sighing in hopelessness ("Why don't they take the oil and leave us alone?") or robed women pleading for the release of husbands rounded up during a fundamentalist raid on a market where liquor was being sold.

Perhaps something just as quietly horrifying could have been made during the regime of Saddam Hussein, but that's not the point of *Iraq in Fragments*. "They kicked out Saddam and brought in 100 Saddams to replace him," says a man wounded in a demonstration. "Where is the democracy?"

Longley lived and filmed in Iraq from 2003 to 2005 and gets about as close to the ground as you can get. He tells the story in three segments. In the first, we meet an 11-year-old boy named Muhammad. His father is dead, taken away by Saddam's men for some political crime. He works at an auto repair shop in a crumbling Baghdad, where the owner alternately babies

him and beats him. Muhammad has been in Grade 1 for five years and can only just write his name; his boss calls him "brother of a whore," and worse, for his ignorance. Muhammad's story is, if you dwell on it, the story of Iraq's future. Its present comes in the conversations of the old men outside the cafe who ask: "The humanitarian aid they talk about, where is it? Did you get some?"

Part two is set in the southern cities of Naseriyah and Najaf, where a cleric named Moqtada Sadr heads an army of acolytes and fundamentalist soldiers. The images are compelling: groups of men marching to drumbeats, flagellating themselves with what look like metal whips; angry imams making speeches about American betrayals. There is an election coming up, and a scene in a meeting house is a confusion of arguments about what democracy means and the functions of a political party. Most gripping is the scene in the marketplace, where masked men attack and arrest those selling alcohol. They are rounded up, bound and blindfolded, and it is mark of what appears to be an unquenchable Iraqi predisposition for argument and politics that as they kneel on the floor, their eyes covered, they protest their innocence in terms of history: Saddam is gone, but they are in ropes again.

Part three of the movie is set in a tiny settlement in the comparatively lyrical Kurdish-controlled north, where things are quieter -- no war is evident here -- but history weighs heavily. There is a sort of industrial beauty in the village's brick ovens that release black smoke into the country air. "Any place touched by sunlight will be governed by Islam," someone quotes the Koran, as Longley films the fire of the ovens. The movie's imagery is both stark and poetic: the director's camera finds yearning faces and blazing sunsets amid the ruins of the cities and the mud of the countryside.

"The future of Iraq will be in three parts," a Kurdish elder predicts. Iraq in *Fragments* may be a look at how that will look: confounding, tragic, ruined, defiant.