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Embedded: A Q&A with Iraq in Fragments director James Longley  
BY MAX GOLDBERG

It only takes a few minutes of watching Iraq in Fragments to recognize that the film stands apart from the Iraqumentary pack: dazzling cinematography in place of the dull visuals of the evening news, slice-of-life narration instead of talking heads. Divided into three sections, director James Longley's reportage shows us the everyday chaos in Baghdad and beyond with dramatic vividness — a vividness that, if nothing else, makes us realize how degraded most of the imagery we receive from Iraq is at the moment.

Longley's style owes as much to neorealism as it does to vrit documentary, with an emphasis on rhythm, ritual (school, shaving, washing feet), and — somewhat tiresomely — child perspectives. The director doesn't explicate politics and often drops us into complex situations without explanation — he expects a lot from his audience but at the same time knows that the tangled human emotions cast before us will give the film meaning. It's the kind of ambitious work one imagines a director like Gillo Pontecorvo (The Battle of Algiers) would have made if he'd had access to digital technology.

Though the film nabbed a couple of major awards at Sundance, it's taken months for Iraq in Fragments to get a proper theatrical release here. Fortunately for Longley, the film's material is evergreen, not tied to specific events, and still wholly relevant to the unfolding devastation. I spoke with the director during last spring's San Francisco International Film Festival.

SFBG: How did you decide to make a documentary about Iraq?

JAMES LONGLEY: In 2002 I premiered Gaza Strip [his first feature-length documentary] up in Seattle, and someone asked me what I was going to do next. By then it was already clear that we were going to invade Iraq ... and I just said I was going to make a film about Iraq. I didn't know how I was going to do it, I didn't know what to expect, but I just decided [to] dive in no matter what.

SFBG: After getting kicked out of the country in the immediate buildup to the US invasion, when and how did you return to Baghdad?

JL: I waited for [the war] to end in Cairo. The last two weeks in April, the war was running down, the statue fell, and I flew immediately from Cairo to Amman, Jordan, and then drove across the border, which was totally open. I just kind of settled in. I had my camera and found an apartment. I found people to work with as translators and started filming.

SFBG: It's striking how comfortable the film's subjects seem around your camera, especially since you're an American. How do you go about getting embedded in this way?

JL: Mostly it's just a matter of making friends with people and hanging out.... It was a conscious choice to have that feeling of being a fly on the wall. When you make that choice, you do whatever it takes ... and really, what it takes is a lot of patience. I went through 12 different translators. The difficult thing for them was when I would go out to a farm or wherever I was filming and just stay there from ...

morning until night, just hanging out. Most people demand some kind of action, but in this case the work was really in action, punctuated by really fast decision making. You're going to be a fixture in this place. Everyone's going to know who you are, and you're going to have to say hi to everyone and drink tea with everyone day after day.... If you're willing to do that, after a while people won't think it's such a big deal when you're filming.

SFBG: Given the on-the-fly nature of the scenes, Iraq in Fragments is also a powerfully cinematic documentary.

How does this level of film style factor into your direction?

JL: When I was shooting the film, I was definitely thinking of cinema, not of television. I grew up hating TV and never actually had one.... Conceptualizing the movie while shooting it, I was always thinking, "What's this shot going to look like on the big screen?" Having that in your mind the whole time changes the way you imagine it, changes the way you shoot; it changes everything. I want to shoot the next film in high-def 3-D [laughs]. (Max Goldberg)

IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS

Opens Nov. 10 in Bay Area theaters [www.iraqinfragments.com](http://www.iraqinfragments.com)