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Spoiling War

By [Emiliano Garcia-Sarnoff](#)

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A fragmented Iraq is presented in filmic slices.

The fragments in James Longley's Oscar-nominated documentary *Iraq in Fragments* have, since it was shot in 2003 and 2004, further splintered, disintegrated and fallen into chaos—the country has been literally blown to pieces.

But this stunning achievement of documentary insight—as mesmerizingly beautiful as it is repulsively



A young boy offers an up-close view of war.

repugnant—holds together with the force of pure observation. It listens, it sees, it never speaks.

Fragments is divided into three sections, along the tripartite fissure so familiar and yet so little-known: Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish. It begins with a young boy, Mohammed, in a working-class Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad. Mohammed shuns school and instead works at a mechanic shop, where he is berated with insults from his boss, who is “like a father.” The relationship presents a microcosmic display of the codependence of dictatorial exis-

tence—that is, between the tyrannical father figure, with his power, praise and abuse, and the child-citizen, with his fear, meekness and reverential devotion.

Fragments then moves to the Shiite-dominated south. The religiosity that permeates everything in Iraq seems particularly fierce here: Processions of entranced men flog themselves, clerics dominate political life and religious morality is enforced with brutality.

It is in the middle of *Fragments* where Longley's achievement becomes clear—he has unmatched access. He is so imperceptible and so in control that he seems to be outfitted with a cloak of invisibility. In one particularly amazing scene, he rides ignored and with perfect composition, with a group of Shiite vigilantes as they track down, beat, capture and blindfold several men suspected of "alcohol selling." One of the captured men complains that he was blindfolded under Sadaam, and that this new power taking hold in Iraq's south is just "another Sadaam." And somehow a white, American man from Seattle, still alive, captures this footage with compositional delicacy that stands up to any art film.

The final portion is dedicated to the Kurdish population of northern Iraq. The Kurdish region is gorgeous, open and calm, a strong contrast and welcomed respite from the previous urban sections—which are filled with the cracks of gunshots and the chaotic violence of a war zone. The Kurds had, perhaps, the most to gain from the invasion. They delight in elections and provide rare voices of support for Americans.

To ignore *Fragments* while the US occupies another nation, kills its citizens and causes untold devastation is to be willfully ignorant—to turn a blind eye, because it hurts to look.

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