

THE NATION

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The Tracks of My Tears

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As many critics have pointed out, Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* is both a World War II epic and a pressing, critical commentary on today's events. Soon, I hope, I will have something to add to the discussion of this picture. For now, though, I feel it's more urgent that I tell you about James Longley's *Iraq in Fragments*, a nonfiction film that addresses contemporary reality without metaphor and yet is every bit as artful as Eastwood's movie.

It is practically handmade: produced, researched and shot in Iraq from 2003 through 2005 by Longley himself, who recorded both image and sound. He also edited the material (with Billy McMillin and Fiona Otway) and composed his own *musique concrète* for the soundtrack. The result, as you see from the start, is perhaps less a document than an impression, conveyed through partial glances, stream-of-consciousness juxtapositions, unpredictable rhythms, a collage of sound. Without apology, Longley offers you his fractured, subjective view of Iraq under US occupation. What justifies the film, and makes it compelling, is the corresponding subjectivity of its Iraqi narrators, who lend this movie not only their voices but their eyes and ears.

Part one, set in a poor Sunni quarter of Baghdad, focuses on a fatherless 11-year-old, Mohammed Haithem, who was working in an auto-repair shop

and flunking out of school for the third or fourth time. As Mohammed had come to fear his native city--which used to be beautiful, he said, but now was full of helicopters and tanks--so too did he cringe before his boss. "He loves me like a son," Mohammed insists on the soundtrack. "He doesn't swear at me or hit me." At which point, you see the perpetually simmering, impecunious "father" strike Mohammed while shouting abuse at him for his tears.

Part two looks at the Shiite south through the eyes of Sheik Aws al-Kafaji, a cleric in Muqtada al-Sadr's movement. But in this section, *Iraq in Fragments* also goes beyond the individual viewpoint and becomes a film of masses: flagellants in a procession, protesters at a rally, vigilantes carrying out a punitive raid against liquor sellers. The sporadic, personalized violence of part one gives way to something seething, generalized, apocalyptic.

Part three moves north into a Kurdish farming area, where you again listen to a young boy. Unlike his counterpart in the first section, he can dream of attending medical school; and his elders speak of independence. At last you hear a note of hope--and yet the smoke billowing from nearby brick kilns reminds you of smoke you saw earlier, rising from the explosions in Baghdad.

No truth about the war can be found in *Iraq in Fragments*. Longley discovers only truths--in individuals, in masses of people, in landscapes--that fit together provisionally, if at all. That is the heartbreaking lesson of *Iraq in Fragments*, and its indispensable art.