

# VILLAGE VOICE

## Style Offensive

Poetic construction makes film not just another Iraq war doc

by Nathan Lee

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### **Iraq in Fragments**

Directed by James Longley

Typecast Pictures

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The damage wrought by the ruinous American occupation of Iraq has been well chronicled by documentary filmmakers—and largely ignored by documentary audiences. As recently noted in *Slate* and grumbled about by bloggers as long ago as July, the glut of Iraq docs hasn't exactly caught fire with moviegoers avid for inconvenient truths. Now here comes *Iraq in Fragments*, entering the fray armed with three prizes from Sundance and a booking at the quality-controlled Film Forum. Whether or not James Longley's boldly stylized reportage breaches public indifference, its enduring value is assured: When the war is long gone, this deft construction will persist in relevance, if not for what it says about the mess we once made, then as a model of canny cinematic construction.

The fragments in *Fragments* are of several kinds; priding poetry over politics, it's characteristic of the film to pun and layer meanings. Beyond the obvious shattering of landscape and livelihood, there is the older schism between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, and each receives a dedicated chapter of the film. In the words of an old Kurdish farmer, their embittered co-habitation forebodes a future of Iraq "in three pieces." But how can you cut a country in pieces, rebuts a village youth. "With a saw?"

Try Final Cut Pro. Deftly shaped from two years of guerrilla reportage on the ground, *Iraq in Fragments* pulverizes continuity and filters perspective, marshaling a complex arsenal of effects in service of kaleidoscopic patterning. The form is a high-def triptych with suavely inter-

woven motifs. Part one, "Mohammed of Baghdad," revolves around the eye of an 11-year-old apprentice to a Baghdad car mechanic. It doubles for the camera lens, controlling the p.o.v., casting sight on a tense, parched, monochromatic neighborhood, rooftops in the distance forever on fire. Longley rhymes Mohammed's eye with helicopter blades and a ceiling fan (shades of *Apocalypse Now*), accumulating further echoes still: the wheel of a sewing machine, the tile pattern on a dome, bullet holes in a window.

Part two reflects on Shiite social organization with an expanded arsenal of effects: strobe cuts, jump cuts, whip pans, lens flares, altered image speed, startling silhouettes. A fundamentalist raid on outdoor alcohol merchants provides a set piece that wouldn't be out of place in *Black Hawk Down*.

Such extravagance pays off in the fragile pastoral of "Kurdish Spring." The culminating section opens on a thick billow of smoke, recalling the many burning buildings witnessed throughout *Fragments*. It is revealed as a brick oven, a fragment of restoration. Two boys josh in a cornfield, hold hands in a meadow. Mohammed's eye returns as the sun. Longley now resolves his bucolic, his editorializing, his motifs, and his film with the resonant image of a tire aflame, venting black gas. "Today, everything in Iraq is controlled by America," comes the voice-over. "Nobody can escape America's reach." And so the circle, finally, is this: the wheel of consumption, motored by oil. With that shrewd sequence, *Fragments* detonates its epiphany, addressing itself to anyone who drove a car to the movie theater.