

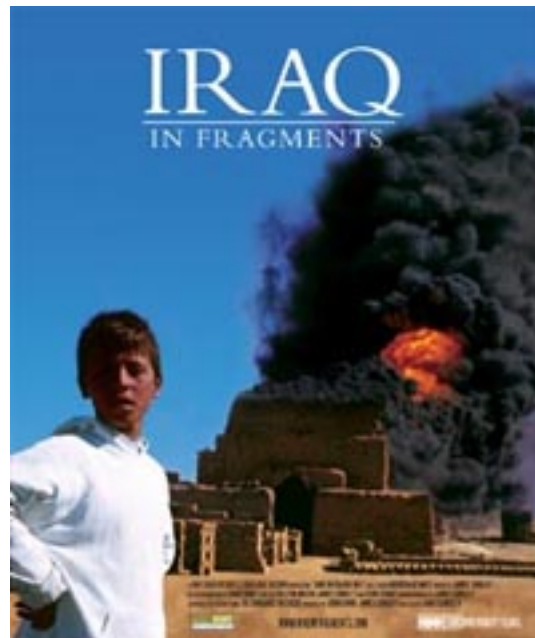


APRIL 18, 2007

Iraq In Fragments

War Is Hell

BY [TYLER BREWINGTON](#)



Sometimes knowing too much about a film's extensive list of honors lessens its impact, and when you finally get to watch it for yourself, it's as if the joy of discovery has already suffocated in an airless atmosphere of expected excellence. And sometimes, as in the case of James Longley's Academy Award-nominated and Sundance Film Festival-feted *Iraq in Fragments*, no amount of advance praise can prepare you for the shock and exhilaration of a job expertly done.

Longley traveled to Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003 and stayed until April of 2005. *Iraq in Fragments* is the result, a reflective and complex portrait of a country equally devastated and determined. The documentary's title describes the state of post-invasion Iraq and the structure of the film itself. Divided into three sections that explore the lives of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, Longley's movie combines artful, impressionistic images with unscripted narratives to produce something as timeless as it is timely.

In the first section we meet Mohammed Haithem, an 11-year-old auto mechanic who lives and works in the Sheik Omar district of Baghdad. Mohammed is torn between attending school and working to help support his family. Obviously bright but

basically illiterate, Mohammed lands an apprenticeship with a man who seems generous and fatherly. Mohammed's own father, a policeman, has long since vanished into Saddam Hussein's prisons.

At first, Mohammed insists that he is happy with his life, but gradually it becomes clear that the shop owner is domineering, capricious and cruel. He ridicules Mohammed for being unable to spell his father's name, but tells him he's too stupid to attend school. Mohammed grows increasingly angry and disillusioned, and, while Longley avoids anything heavy-handed, it's tempting to read Mohammed's situation as a metaphor for Iraq under the rule of Hussein.

In his production notes, available at www.iraqinfragments.com, Longley writes: "I didn't just want to bring the viewers into Mohammed's neighborhood—I wanted to put them inside his head. I wanted them to see what he saw, hear what he heard, including the sound of his own thoughts." Mohammed does provide voice-over narration, which Longley and his translators culled from hours of interviews, but the gorgeous cinematography contributes just as much to the sense of intimacy. Through Mohammed's eyes, we see a Baghdad exploding with color and life. Banners of brilliant emerald, scarlet, and yellow whirl and blur together as Mohammed navigates the teeming streets; a mosque's golden dome and spires shine against a sun-drenched, smoke-filled sky; a hovering U.S. helicopter blots out the sun. The effect is slightly over stimulating and completely unforgettable.

Part two, the film's darkest and most violent section, explores the rising Shiite power in the town of Najaf. Here anti-American sentiments were at their strongest, and forces mobilized around leader Moqtada al Sadr, who envisioned and campaigned for a new Islamic state entirely free of U.S. influence. To that end, Sadr's followers worked to organize direct local elections, and the cooperative effort is initially inspiring to watch. On April 4 2004, Spanish soldiers opened fire on demonstrating Sadr supporters, and Longley was there to capture the resulting violence. Nothing on network news quite compares to watching these events unfold in real time on high-definition video--the footage left me breathless and shaken.

Longley also shows Islamic fundamentalists raiding a market in order to stop the sale of alcohol, one of the West's most insidious and sinful imports. The raid turns brutal; the accused men are beaten, handcuffed, and led to jail at gunpoint, apparently on the strength of suspicion alone—if there's actually alcohol present, it doesn't appear on film. We do see the wife of one of the jailed men crying and pleading for his release, and swearing to God that her husband is innocent. Again, the experience of watching people brutalize one another in the name of religion is terrifying—one wonders how Longley was ever allowed to film as much as he did.

The film's final section observes the inhabitants of a Kurdish village in northern Iraq. The scene and the tone here are entirely different—children speak and study English at school, and Longley's subjects are full of praise for the Americans. At one point, a farmer says, "No one on earth can escape the reach of America," and it's meant to sound positive, hopeful and optimistic. We also see Kurdish children engage in a snowball fight, and then, as the months progress, we see their delight as the fields around them turn green.

Poverty is still endemic in the Kurdish community, but the children here dream of higher education, perhaps even medical school. Again, Longley focuses on one teenager, a farmer's son named Suleiman, who is also caught between the desire to learn and the need to work. There's a theme of father-son relationships running through the entire film, and Longley forces us to think about the passage of time, about the differences in opportunity and outlook in pre- and post-invasion generations.

That conditions have not improved—have, in fact worsened—for much of Iraq in the two years since Longley completed filming makes the film heartbreaking, and also completely essential. In the end, Longley asks viewers to do what may be the hardest work of all, which is not to simply choose sides but to fully take the measure of oneself in the present moment, alive and aware in wartime.

Opens Friday at Flicks. F-Su: 1:05, 5:05, 9; M-Th: 5:05, 9