

the Stranger

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Truly Astonishing

See James Longley's *Iraq in Fragments* Now

BY [ANNIE WAGNER](#)

The opening passage of *Iraq in Fragments*, a film about the war, is a memory. Filmed shortly after the 2003 invasion, the streets in Baghdad are crowded with buses and cars and donkeys and people. James Longley's digital video (blown up into creamy 35 mm) makes the colors pop—ardent greens and fiery reds stand out against walls and buildings the color of sand. In voiceover, a boy recalls a favorite destination from before the war: "It

was beautiful," he half whispers, half chants, "the bridges/the water..." The camera fairly swoons along with his vision, hitching on smeary reflections and monstrous goldfish and then, in what will become a motif, chases his gaze upward to the occupied sky. "The war was overhead," the boy explains, with the halting, wondering diction of the very young. "I was afraid at night. People were saying, Baghdad has fallen. The Americans have taken it."

This is the invasion according to Mohammed, an 11-year-old boy who works in a Sunni neighborhood as a mechanic's apprentice. His heartbreaking situation, which has something to do with the political situation under Saddam Hussein (his father was imprisoned) and something to do with the prewar economy (child labor, irregular education), is

straight out of Dickens. His charismatic boss drags him around by the ear and harangues him to learn to write his father's family name; Mohammed tearfully repeats to himself that his boss loves him like a son, that his boss would never fire him, that his boss never hits him or swears at him. As these facts unravel, he revises his narrative. It's just like history.

The Stranger gave local filmmaker Longley the 2006 Genius Award largely on the merits of this truly astonishing film (his previous feature, *Gaza Strip*, is another must-see). It's hard to count the ways this movie departs from the standard photojournalistic techniques for documenting a war. There are its highly psychological portraits of children, who have nothing to do with the politics of the region and little interest in the religious and ethnic divisions that are pulling the country apart. The process of shooting is hands-off, in the cinéma vérité tradition; but during editing, the footage turns in on itself, burrowing into the minds of its characters through asynchronous voiceover, provided by the subjects themselves. At the same time, the footage of a vigilante attack on alcohol vendors in Nasiriyah is the stuff of traditional, daredevil war correspondence. *Iraq in Fragments* bears more relation to the close-range reporting of *Washington Post* Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Shadid (whom Longley met while they were both in Iraq) than it does to any of the other documentaries about the war. This movie deserves to play the Varsity for months—flood the theater this weekend and they might extend the run.

Iraq in Fragments is presciently organized into three separate chapters—Mohammed's tale is the Sunni section, then comes a broader Zeitgeist story about the rise of Moqtada al-Sadr's Shiite militia, and last an oil-fueled pastoral about a sheep-herding family in Kurdistan. The second chapter is by far the most harrowing. Loosely trailing the exploits of handsome young cleric Sheik Aws al-Khafaji, the

camera brings a rush of vivid emotion to the performative marches and flagellations of Shiite religious observance, being freely expressed for one of the first times in decades. Of course, blood-spattered rituals aren't the first things that come to mind when most Americans think of freedom of religion; and purges of men selling alcohol at open-air markets doesn't exactly look like a community service. It's a hard picture, but an important one.

Finally, the relative calm of Iraqi Kurdistan lulls the film to a close. The pace is meditative, the tone almost playful. (The image of two teenage boys wrestling in a stand of sunflowers is one of my favorites.) Here, too, there are broken dreams. Suleiman, the main character, wants to become a doctor. But his family is too poor and his father too old to keep him out of the workforce. And while the mood at an election is buoyant, the repeated whispers of poll workers coaching voters to check the box for their Kurdish ethnicity, rather than a political party, is sobering. It's a glimmer of Iraq's tripartite future—one that is, incredibly, coming to seem optimistic. ★