

# Longley in Fragments:

An Interview with Award-Winning Filmmaker James Longley

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## R. Colin Tait

This past September, at the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Vancouver International Film Festival, documentary filmmaker James Longley was on hand at the Canadian premiere of his important and timely film *Iraq in Fragments*. This film, in addition to winning all the major documentary awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006, was nominated in the Best Documentary Feature Category at the 2006 Academy Awards. The documentary, which chronicles the unfolding reality of the year in-between the invasion of Iraq by American forces and the lead up to the civil war in the country, records the three major regions of the country and presents a compelling portrait of the people, their landscapes and their hardships that face their daily lives in Post-War Iraq.

*Cinephile* was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to sit down over breakfast to discuss Longley's important film with him.

**Colin Tait** – First off, let me say that I was really impressed with your film. I think it's obviously timely, not only given what we continue to find out coming from Iraq, but also a really important historical record.

**James Longley** – Thanks.

**CT** – I really appreciated how you managed to put a human face back onto the Iraqi people. I wonder if using children to tell the story of the new Iraq was part of a strategy on your part.

**JL** – Well, maybe. But mainly it's merely practical. It's just far easier to film kids than adults. Adults, they want to go to work, it's just harder. With kids, they're interested. They get excited by the idea; nobody pays attention to them, they like it if someone pays attention to them. Generally, nobody

wants to know their opinion and suddenly someone asks them about their world. So I think for kids, being in a film like this, we filmed for a year, they're more interested in it. It becomes cathartic for them. And also they just tend to be better subjects. They're changing really fast, their lives are moving from being a kid to a teenager within a couple of years after that so it's possible to capture the changes in their lives. So for longitudinal documentary work they just tend to be richer material.

**CT** – So it's not necessarily a metaphorical choice?

**JL** – It also works on that level, but when you're making a documentary your first considerations are practical. If you're not going to have access, if you're not going to have permission, then you can't make the film.

**CT** – It's interesting in the first section, dealing with the child Mohammed, almost this wisdom that he seems to have in these monologues that are overlaid in the film. Which is opposed to the fact that he can't write his father's last name...

**JL** – Right. He's uneducated. But as Iraqi kids go, he's fairly inarticulate. When I was first interviewing him I was thinking to myself "do I really want to interview this kid?" I'd ask him to tell me about his family and he'd say "I have three uncles, and three uncles..." and he'd be repeating himself all the time. He was so shy that he could barely speak. And normally he's okay, but on camera, it took him about a year to get into it.

**CT** – In terms of filming, I know you spent two years doing it, but did you do a cycle of two years by visiting one spot after another...?

**JL** – Yes. I would start a story then move on. I filmed the Baghdad story for a month or two then before I wore out my welcome, I'd take a break from it, go start a different story and then film that for a while, build up those relationships and then come back to the first one for a week or two.

You have to start the story early and follow it no matter what happens. No matter whose life it is things are going to happen. Pick anybody practically. Things are changing, their wife is having a kid or they're about to get married...

**JL** – Yeah. It's very old, it's very new. Things are happening all the time. People's ideas are changing. In that first year, people went from accepting Americans and thinking that they were doing something good to sort of hating them and hoping they would leave...

## “I just didn't want to be in the situation where the United States started dropping bombs and you really have no idea anymore what the truth is.”

**CT** – So the chances are eventually...

**JL** – There are actually story elements like you would need in a fiction film that are taking place in people's lives. So those anchor the bigger picture; things that you're trying to do. The thing is a lot of times in documentary you find yourself essentially making a film that follows a lot of the rules of fiction just to keep the audience interested.

**CT** – Right.

**JL** – There are a lot of documentaries that don't do that, but they might not appeal to such a broad audience and no one will ever see them. As a documentary filmmaker you want people to see your work. Even if you're making a film about a difficult subject in a foreign language, you want it to be accessible in some way. The way that you do it is having these characters you can identify with and things that are happening in their lives. A plot emerges. There's some kind of arc. This film doesn't really follow that in a conventional way but as a filmmaker you still have to pay attention to these things. I feel like I have to.

**CT** – One of the things that the film reminded me of is the post-World War II films like *Rome: Open City*... This idea of a look to what is essentially a brand-new country...

and wanted to kill them, you know? So on that level things are changing a lot.

As a filmmaker, that's exciting to be in a place where things are changing and it's not just things that are happening in the lives of your characters but things are happening in the life of the country. If you have that situation where you can be recording things on a lot of different levels – the country, the personal level, it is to me, the most exiting kind of filmmaking.

**CT** – This film really takes place in, not a magical time, but the in-between time that you described as the current civil war situation and the invasion of Iraq by America. That's what is really compelling about the film.

**JL** – You know, it's a gradual slide.

**CT** – ...and that's clear. You can really see this trajectory within the course of your film.

**JL** – Thanks.

**CT** – The obvious question now would be what was your impetus for making the film?

**JL** – Mostly I just wanted to see the country. I knew that the United States was going to invade and I was upset about that. Not just me but most of the other people I know. I just didn't want to be in the situation where the

United States started dropping bombs and you really have no idea anymore what the truth is. Do you know what I mean? It goes out the window...and I just hate being lied to. I hate it. I really want to know what's going on, and I want to have my own opinion based on my own experience. I don't want to be told what to think. I have that kind of compulsion.

**“So is it better? I don't know, I don't think it is. I'd prefer not to be responsible for that death rate. I don't know, I say we give it to Saddam if that's the choice.”**

So I wanted to go there. I wanted to see it; I knew it was going to happen. It wasn't something that I thought I could *stop*. I mean, I spoke out against it. So in the end I wanted to be there to see it myself. To really know what was going on. To be able to have a conversation with someone and really know what I'm talking about.

**CT** – What's interesting to me is it seems to stand as a record. Like you said, there weren't a lot of non-embedded journalists in the country.

**JL** – Yeah. And it's no big secret the direction the country is going and people's opinion of it. I think there's a Zogby poll or something. Two-thirds of Baghdad residents oppose the occupation and want the U.S. to leave. So if you think about it, if you're in the United States and you know that two-thirds of the population opposes you being there there's some sort of contradiction going on.

The fact is from the very beginning you could say that the whole trajectory of how this was going to go was clear.

**CT** – Yeah.

**JL** – This has happened before in history. This is not the first time that a Western power invades a country for imperial ambitious reasons. We know how it's going to end, essentially. There's no mystery here. And yet, still

you have to always go through the process of people discovering, bit-by-bit... (*mockingly*) “Oh my god, there's a civil war?” and “Oh my God, they hate us?” and then gradually come to the inevitable conclusion that they have to withdraw from the country. But it takes so long, and so many people get killed in the meantime, but here we are.

**CT** – There were a couple of people during the Q and A following the film who seemed to have a great deal of resistance to some of the ideas, not *your* ideas, but the question of whether Iraq is a better place now. What do you think accounts for that kind of resistance? There were repeated questions relating to the idea that people are no longer being killed by Saddam Hussein and that this is a good thing.

**JL** – I don't know what to say. It strikes me that if you're a person, it makes no difference to you whether you're going to be killed by Saddam or by someone else. The death rate because of politics is just as high, if not higher than before. So is it better? I don't know, I don't think it is. I'd prefer not to be responsible for that death rate. I don't know, I say we give it to Saddam if that's the choice.

**CT** – If you read the *New York Times*, and read someone like Thomas Friedman's column, he's always talking about how Muslims need to have an open dialogue about their culture. But what's interesting about your movie is that it seems like all the characters in your movie, that *all they do is talk about politics*...

**JL** – What was the first part of your question?

**CT** – Well, Thomas Friedman is always telling us that the moderate Muslim population of the world needs to have a dialogue amongst themselves...

**JL** – Thomas Friedman is an idiot. I'm sorry but he is. Anyone who argues that having a larger number of McDonald's makes you safer and more democratic is just talking out of his ass. He was a good correspondent back in the day when he was covering Beirut in '82 but...I'm sure he's a smart guy. But ever since he started getting paid to stay in nice hotels and talk to all the right people I think he just really lost it.

**CT** – I guess what I'm asking is that from the media depiction of the Muslim world it looks like that no one is talking about anything at all, but...

**JL** – The only thing that people do is talk about their situation and what's going on.

**CT** – They seem, at least in your film, to be *very aware* of what's going on...

**JL** – And if you go to United States, there's no real debate. You know, people watch TV. The official debate and the actual debate that goes on in the United States is kind of on the level of...well, what is it on the level of?...Terry Schaivo and that kind of thing. They're not really thinking about the larger issues.

The United States just did away with *habeas corpus*. That's a big deal! But that's not up for debate. That's not a big issue on the public's mind. I didn't see any headlines about it in the newspaper. We just did away with the most basic fundamental rights in a system of laws and democratic representation and so forth and so on and nobody says 'boo' about it. Whereas, in Iraq, people are concerned about it, all this stuff that's going on, and they talk about it.

**CT** – Maybe they don't have a 'star culture'?

**JL** – They just don't trust the TV as much.

**CT** – In *Fahrenheit 9/11* one of the biggest attacks against the film was

leveled at the scene that takes place just before the bombing of Iraq. People seemed really offended by this 'Utopian' imagery of Iraq as a place where children play and that kind of thing...

**JL** – Yeah, the kid flying the kite, right? I mean, the fact is, kids did fly kites before the war. I was there. I saw it! (*laughs*). I guess Michael Moore may have fallen into the position of having to describe too much while having too little time. He only has five seconds to cover pre-war Iraq so he throws in the shot just to remind people that there *are people in Iraq* and if you bomb them, that's not necessarily great.

I think Michael Moore is a nice guy, but I wouldn't want to make Michael Moore movies. It's not my style, but I know where he's coming from. It's not like he keeps it a secret (*laughs*).

**CT** – I guess my next question would be, since your film begins with this similar expression of the beauty of Iraq...

**JL** – The thing is in my film, it's different. Because, it's being portrayed as the subjective view of this kid. In his mind, the pre-war Baghdad is far more pleasurable because there's security. You could go out, you're not afraid... etc... Whereas now, he talks about how scary the war is and how frightening it is now with all the gunfire and 'we're afraid to go outside.'

That is the majority of the opinion for the non-political Iraqi. But what are you going to do? If you're living in a dictatorship, as long as you don't oppose the dictatorship, you can get by.

If you're living on a subsistence level, your main concern is the stability to earn a living for your family. It's not like, "Oh can I write an article in the newspaper and not get tortured..." So the majority of the population is really operating on that level, the level of "is the society working?" on a day to day level.

**CT** – Right.

**JL** – And it was before, it's just that it was a dictatorship. But it works,

you know, the trains run on time, more or less. It's cleaner. The state is functioning. They're living under draconian sanctions, so of course it's falling apart, but, it was working better than under American occupation with total anarchy. You know, an astronomical crime rate, people getting killed in the street...and this uncertainty.

Before there were rules, right? Don't oppose the regime, do your bit and you'll probably be alright. Now there are no rules. You go out and you try to drive to work, maybe you get killed. So people are afraid to go outside, they're afraid to send their children to school. It's a civil war. There's this slowly boiling civil war going on and absence of security and so on...

In that power vacuum these religious groups, the militias are coming to power because people want that. They *want* security. They *want* someone in charge and if the government is weak, it will be someone else. And maybe it's just a micro-thing like Sadr City is controlled by the Sadr militia and Motkada al-Sadr, and those are the people who keep security. They're the people you'd go to if you need something, like if your house has been destroyed or whatever, they'll help you out. They've become the new *de facto* government. Do you know what I mean?

**CT** – Is it the kind of thing that has happened elsewhere with any nationalist/factionalist group...?

**JL** – This is politics. But people forget that politics is not about Republicans and Democrats having their ad on TV, politics in that kind of place is more about functional politics.

**CT** – You mentioned al-Sadr. I thought it was interesting that your film also documents his, I don't know if I know enough to say "rise to power," but definitely the shift in his policies at the very least. Like the change from being a political figure to a militant one.

**JL** – But the film really isn't about him though. I didn't have the access. Even if I had wanted to. I never interviewed him. I filmed one of his press

conferences and some speeches.

You know, he's not a great speaker. His father, that's something else. This happens all the time, you know, the father is famous and well-respected and then he's out of the picture and gets assassinated in 1989 and then his older brother is killed, who was apparently more 'with it' than he was. (*laughs*) And then you get this guy who's really young, I mean, he's in his twenties, coming to power with not a lot of experience and people follow him because of the legacy.

**CT** – What do you think of the whole Orson Welles statement, where he said something to the effect that if he didn't have to do all of his own fundraising he could have made lots more films?

**JL** – Well, his problem was that he made fiction films. In my case, if I want to make a film, I'll find a way to do it. In these two documentary features I've made, I haven't had to ask anyone's permission. I just go do them. And then once you've been in Iraq for two years and filming three hundred hours of footage you'll always find someone who will want to put in the money to finish it. Because no one else has that.

If you work for TV chances are they'll never allow you the ability to go somewhere for two years and film. They'll say "you're working for us, do you have insurance?" It suddenly becomes more complicated, do you know what I mean? Whereas, if you work for yourself, you don't have to worry about any of that.

**CT** – So you won best director, best editing, best cinematography, at the Sundance Film Festival *and* you did the sound and music...

**JL** – (*laughs*) They don't have a sound award...

**CT** – But if there was one, you obviously would have gotten it there. Is that a practical issue or a megalomaniacal issue?

**JL** – Maybe if I had the money to hire a great composer or something or maybe if I had some guy to follow me around with a bunch of microphones to record all the sound I would have done it.

Although, it is actually an advantage to be by yourself. I mean I was always working with one Iraqi guy. And I only have this three-hundred dollar microphone. In the future, finances allowing, I might get a nice *stereo* microphone...

CT – ...To replace the three-hundred dollar microphone...

thing is sometimes you'll be working with someone and they'll show you something and you'll say "Okay great" and it goes into the film...

CT – You also talked about objectivity a little bit last night. What are your views on objectivity in documentary?

only have so much time.

If it takes me three years to make a film, I'm only going to make eight films in my life. This is a big consideration. I don't want to have to wait five years between projects. I need to go out and make another film.

CT – How long did it take you to edit this film?

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## “This is politics. But people forget that politics is not about Republicans and Democrats having their ad on TV, politics in that kind of place is more about functional politics.”

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JL – ...and train the translator guy how to use it. Because otherwise, they get bored. Especially when nothing's being translated. Usually I just tell them to get lost for a while, so maybe I'll give them a job next time. I mean, that's the way it goes.

It's a low budget film and most composers would probably want the equivalent of the entire budget to do the soundtrack, and I don't have that kind of money, so it's just cheaper to do it yourself. If you don't know how to make music, you learn (*laughs*). And if you don't want music, just don't have it.

CT – Yeah.

JL – I do know how I want things. On the other hand on my first documentary I did everything myself. I mixed it myself, I did everything on my computer and it was just the translating that I needed help with. I do like to make my own music though...

CT – So you can pick up that last award?

JL – I don't think about it in those terms. I don't know about *auteur* theory, but I do like to be the author of the movie. I don't like anyone else telling me what to do on a creative level on the film. I like to work with other people but I want the final word on how it's going to be. The

JL – People have this idea that documentary is supposed to be *objective*, fair and balanced and all this stuff. But that's a lie. That's not how it goes. Everybody is subjective.

CT – What do you think about the resurgence or popularity of the documentary form?

JL – Michael Moore deserves some credit for making it more populist and making films that could appeal to everyone, and they're kind of funny. My films aren't big on humour, though.

From my point of view, I like to make documentaries that are theatrical. I'm not interested in television. I like the idea of the 40-foot screen and the audience and as I say, I like fiction cinema as much as documentary. I really like that aesthetic.

Even though I'm interested in subjects that are real, I'm not really interested in fiction film, although I like to watch it. Because I feel like, "why would you want to make stuff up?" there's so much going on.

There are so many reasons. In doing documentary instead of fiction there's the independence of it. You don't have to ask anybody because it's so cheap and you can just go do it yourself. And not have to wait. Just like Orson Welles said, why waste all this time waiting for funding? You don't want to do that. Life is short, and you

JL – I was editing in Iraq and doing translation. There are about two thousand pages of translation that are all time coded. You know, time code to time code, sentence to sentence. We would do that with the translators sitting in a room in northern Iraq, that part. So I would type in the translations and they would be feeding me dialogue.

So I edited the rough cut of the first chapter while I was still in Iraq and then the last two chapters were finished in Seattle. So it took from April 2005 until last November [2005]. And then all the post-dubbing, sound mixing, colour correction stuff happened in early January.

CT – What's next for you after the festival circuit?

JL – I don't know. I've been looking around a little bit. I just went to Lebanon. I think that I would like to do something in Iran, but I don't know whether or not they'll give me a visa. We'll see. If I had my choice of anywhere to make my next film it would be Iran.