An interview with James Longley, the director of Iraq in Fragments

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American filmmaker James Longley's remarkable documentary, Iraq in Fragments, *screened recently at the San Francisco Film Festival (see* WSWS review*).*

Longley's film, which pays considerable attention to the lives and suffering of ordinary Iraqis, is divided into three sections, following individuals and events in the Sunni, Shia and Kurdish areas of the country. As the WSWS comment noted, "Longley's film establishes the disastrous character of the US encounter with Iraq and the almost universal hatred felt for the American occupiers."

The 34-year-old documentarian filmed in Iraq between February 2003, one month prior to the American invasion of the country, and April 2005, long after, as he describes in the movie's production notes, "Baghdad had descended into a regime of looting, kidnappings, shootings, bombings, and a deep uncertainty about the future of the country."

Joanne Laurier recently conducted a telephone interview with James Longley.

WSWS: Could you explain how you came to study cinema in Russia in the early 1990s, and how you experienced the disintegration of the Soviet Union?

James Longley: I started studying Russian language at the age of 16 and with the end of the Cold War, with *glasnost* and *perestroika*, I developed an interest in that part of the world.

In 1991, at the age of 19, I was there during the last year of the Soviet Union. Things were already collapsing and people were ready for a change. When it did come, many people were made unhappy because of hyper-inflation, the rise of the Russian mafia, big business crime and the privatizations, which really meant the looting of the economy by a minority. In 1992-93, when I was studying at the All Russian State Cinematography Institute in Moscow, the government began charging tuition in universities.

WSWS: Your first documentary feature film, *Gaza Strip*, was about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

JL: How I came to make this film was just a coincidence of circumstances. I lived in Russia again between 1995-1998, first in a steel town in Siberia and then working for television and the *Moscow Times* newspaper. The Asian financial crisis seriously affected the Russian economy. I then moved to New York City in time for the dot-com boom, trying to save up enough money to make a film.

The end of 2000 saw the second Palestinian Intifada. The Gaza Strip was a perfect subject because no one had actually done a feature documentary about the territory since 1984 with *Gaza Ghetto*, since most TV networks in the US are afraid to finance documentaries that feature a strong Palestinian point of view. Technology had also changed, and now I could shoot and edit the film myself at a relatively small expense. Filmmakers can now control the means of production in what has, in the past, been a very financially restrictive medium.

I started filming in Gaza in the spring of 2001 during the first major Israeli incursions. I began in Gaza City and then went to Khan Yunis and Rafah where Rachel Corrie was killed two years later in 2003. [Corrie was a 23-year-old American student killed by an Israeli military bulldozer, crushed to death for trying to prevent the demolition of Palestinian homes in Rafah.] The southern refugee camps were the scenes of the most brazen Israeli military operations at that time.

WSWS: You recorded some 300 hours of material in Iraq between February 2003 and April 2005 for *Iraq in Fragments* [a 94-minute film]. Could you describe something about the conditions of life in Iraq?

JL: The vast majority of Iraqis are poor or working class, and most feel dissatisfaction with their leadership. I personally do not approve of nationalism or the breaking up of the country along ethnic or sectarian lines. This is moving the world in the wrong direction. In the Kurdish north, the old farmer in the film was brave enough or naïve enough to speak out against the Barzani clan which runs the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the major power in his area. The KDP is shamelessly corrupt and this is frustrating to most people. The Baghdad government has been largely ineffective at providing for the basic needs and desires of the population, such as security and utilities, or ridding the country of foreign occupation.

WSWS: Is there a left wing, secular opposition in Iraq? The Iraqi Communist Party once had a large following. Because of Stalinism, the party's subservience to the Baathists and repression by the Hussein regime, the party lost its support. Did you encounter the Iraqi CP or its influence?

JL: Secular opposition is muddy, like Allawi is secular, but he's a former CIA asset and in the public mind is corrupt. There is really not an idealistic secular opposition that has any weight or popularity. There is the old Communist Party and the new Communist Party in Baghdad. I'm not really clear about the distinction between the two, but the Communist Party did join the provisional government, right after the invasion and occupation. There is an illuminating film about the history of Iraqi politics.

The movie, *Forget Baghdad*, concerns itself with the period during and after the British occupation. It's about Iraqi Jews who were members of the Communist Party forced to move to Israel. The filmmaker's father was in the CP and these were his friends. It's also a fascinating insight into Israeli society. [A review of this fascinating film appeared on the WSWS]

WSWS: What were the major changes that took place during your stay in Iraq?

JL: One month before the invasion, I met a young Iraqi, probably a student, who asked me if I thought the Americans were going to invade. When I answered 'yes,' he thanked me, which made me very sad. The Iraqi people were given a false choice: You can be invaded and occupied by a foreign power or you can continue to live under this dictatorship. Iraq fell easily after the invasion because many people wanted a change. Initially, they were guardedly optimistic. They took the Americans at their word that there was going to be real democracy and economic development.

For a year after the invasion, people wondered what the Americans were doing. Then things started changing—the Americans began making enemies, arresting of a lot of people and holding them in prison without charge, the "security detainees." The Iraqi population started out by being patient with the occupation and then they saw that things were not working. For example, electricity was only on 50 percent of the time one year after the occupation. After the 1991 war, it took Saddam one or two months to get the electricity working, as everyone pointed out to me.

WSWS: Tell us about the 11-year-old boy, Mohammed, in the first chapter of the film.

JL: There are different dynamics in this segment. There's a change of attitude. Where people used to blame Saddam for their conditions of life, they now blame the occupiers. There is something of this dynamic between Mohammed and his tyrannical boss, the difference being that the boss is bitter because he lost a part of his leg and also his brother during the Iraq-Iran war. It's very complicated. Mohammed is also a product of the sanctions period. He is typical in that he is small for his age due to malnutrition.

WSWS: What role can filmmaking play in clarifying or illuminating complicated social or historical problems?

JL: Although film is a powerful medium, it can only do so much. The written word can impart hard information and enormous research. But film has something that can't be matched. It takes an audience through an experience. I like its experiential nature. It gives people the intangible. It can depict complex relations and cultures, aspects of life that cannot be put into words. I was drawn to film because it is a medium of expression that combines many art forms I'm interested in, such as music, photography, writing, painting. Film is also very accessible, which is what makes it so powerful.

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WSWS: The war in Iraq has been a disaster for the Iraqi and American populations. The violence seems to be reaching a crescendo in the country, yet the Bush administration is determined to carry on, supported by the Democrats. The existing political system in the US is committed to the war policy. Doesn't opposition have to take place outside and even against the existing political framework? What is your opinion of the political problems in the US?

JL: It's not only the war in Iraq, but also in Afghanistan and more wars are coming. I am one of those Americans who doesn't feel that my views or interests are reflected by either of the two major political parties. But instead of sitting back and feeling hopeless I prefer to go out into the world and experience it myself, to see for myself what's really taking place, so I can form my own opinions based on experience rather than second-hand information. Ultimately, people are responsible for their own actions, and responsible for creating an alternative course of action when the systems in place no longer represent them.

WSWS: By what and whom have you been artistically influenced?

JL: The influences on me have been very broad, from the silent film era to the French New Wave, particularly Truffaut's *400 Blows* and Godard's early films. Also *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker, and so on.

WSWS: Your next project?

JL: This summer I'm working on editing the fourth chapter [of *Iraq in Fragments*], making a short film from some of the remaining footage shot in Iraq. Then we'll see.