

‘After 9/11’: 25th Hour

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In a now-famous short essay included in his weighty tome on *Negative Dialectics* Theodor Adorno argues that a new epoch of world history began “After Auschwitz”:

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate . . . If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims. ^[1]

It is not my intention to enter into the debate over Adorno’s redefinition of history in which the harmony of classical music, the closure of classical narrative, the idealism of positive (versus the aforementioned “negative”) truths, etc. effectively ended after the new era of meaninglessness which began after the world learned about the Holocaust.^[2] My intention is to use Adorno’s new notation to introduce a similar refiguring of historical time which may prove less debatable if only because it is less global and far-reaching—less “idealistic,” as it were. While it may or may not be the case that the world has changed “After Auschwitz” (I agree with Adorno that it has), it does indeed seem to be the case that, here in America and probably elsewhere, such a historical re-configuration has indeed occurred “After 9/11.”

I am not referring to the notion resembling this idea made popular by an increasingly shallow, media-driven culture which regularly transforms sound bytes into truths. Indeed, I do not think that a genuinely philosophical redefinition of time such as that suggested by Adorno lies within the realm of our media’s “thinking,” if one can even use that term to refer to what the media does. I have not, in fact, heard much in the popular press or television about how America is now to be redefined as a post-9/11 America, although there are certainly numerous, almost daily specific references to how this or that has changed after 9/11. (Significantly, the more philosophical version of this idea is made by Spike Lee in his own commentary on the film we will be discussing shortly.) It is the quantity, and not the quality, of such references which support the point I am making here. Speaking as a citizen of the U.S.A. and as a literary theorist—a philosopher of sorts, —not as one who is overtly interested in contemporary political issues or so-called “cultural studies,” I would simply assert as a matter of incontestable truth, and without yet entering into the debate over the significance of this truth, that beyond the current presidential term or terms, beyond the so-called “war on terrorism” (which has mercifully supplanted the

previous pseudo-war “on drugs”), beyond all such passing crises, America has indeed profoundly and fundamentally changed after the event of 9/11.

Beyond the mere fact of a new epoch having begun in America (and perhaps elsewhere) ‘after 9/11’, it is necessary to examine what this means for our current way of thinking and acting, which is thus a new way of thinking and acting. As a literary theorist it is my function to serve as the intermediary for works of art whose interpretation is to be carefully extracted from their essentially ambiguous meanings. (It is worth recalling here that “hermeneutics,” the art of interpretation, is derived from the role which the god Hermes performed in translating the language of the gods for human comprehension.) Although there has not yet been, nor should one expect there to be, much in the way of serious art concerning 9/11, there has appeared, in the last year, the first major American non-documentary film which deals at once directly and indirectly with the event: Spike Lee’s *25th Hour*.

25th Hour, which appeared in theaters last year (12/2002) and DVD last month and was adapted from a novel by David Benioff, concerns a young New Yorker whose chic Manhattan life-style is funded by drug-dealing. Monty Brogan, played by the brilliant young actor Edward Norton, had been busted months before the “real time” of the film (the scene is shown in one of its many flashback sequences) after the DEA burst into his apartment operating on a tip from someone and found Monty’s supply of money and drugs. It is now the last day before Monty is to begin serving his seven-year sentence; the title *25th Hour* refers, then, to the sentence which is to begin at the movie’s end. Or, more precisely, it refers to the twenty-four hours which have been spent in a sort of limbo saying good-bye to family and friends and a dog (a major figure both in the novel and the film) whom Monty had earlier rescued, in one of the aforementioned flashbacks, from near-death.

The film as just described, then, has nothing to do with the event of 9/11. In fact, the novel on which the film is closely based was written before the terrorist attack, and so obviously contains no reference to the attack whatsoever. The film’s references to “ground zero” (versus, significantly, to the attack itself) were all added to the film version at the insistence of the Director. But, are those really just “references”? Or, more precisely, what is one referring to when one calls the role played by ground zero in *25th Hour* “references”? To begin with, the stunning opening credits of the film appear over a steady, unmoving shot of the beacon tribute to ground zero which began on the 6-month anniversary of the attack (March 11 2002) and lasted for about a month, until April 13th:

Second, Monty’s father, whose role, given the considerable acting prowess of Brian Cox, is substantially expanded in the film, is a retired Irish NYC fireman (like the NYC police department, many of New York’s firemen are Irish) whose bar contains a shrine to some of the fallen heroes of the FDNY who died on 9/11. But, again, during the scene in which Monty meets his father for dinner at this bar, there is no discussion of 9/11.

The one exception to this silent tribute to 9/11 running throughout *25th Hour* (the popularity of such “moments of silence” in the USA owes something, no doubt, to its Protestant origins) occurs when two of Monty’s friends, Jake (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and his stockbroker friend Frank (Barry Pepper), meet up at one of their apartments before joining Monty to “celebrate” his last night of freedom. The apartment in question, which belongs to

Monty's childhood friend Frank, whose seeming indifference to his friend's fate ("he got what he deserved") is later unmasked as really anguish over his friend's "death sentence," is adjacent to Ground Zero, and a long conversation Jake and Frank have about their friend occurs while the two stand before a window overlooking Ground Zero where, at night, large bulldozers are still at work sifting through the remains of what is now a gaping hole in NYC's otherwise crowded skyline.

Significantly, the camera does not move throughout the long scene overlooking Ground Zero which the Studio pleaded with Lee to shorten, and again the discussion is conspicuously lacking in any discussion about 9/11. The only reference to Ground Zero at all which is made during this scene occurs before the two friends begin their heated conversation about Monty, when Jake asks Frank about the wisdom of continuing to live where he does because of the contaminated air around Ground Zero. In other words, there is again, even here, in the film's most explicit "reference" to Ground Zero, significant silence on the subject of 9/11, something which is to a certain extent reflected in this essay on Lee's *25th Hour*, although my silence, like the proverbial "moment of silence," is devoted to the very subject which is not being discussed. Finally, I would add that, included in the just-released DVD, with its now customary list of "bonus features," there exists an extraordinary "Tribute to Ground Zero" in which the camera, again, remains motionless as bulldozers, moving about like some colossal anxious dinosaurs awaiting their extinction, move silently about the rubble.

Beyond the mere fact that Spike Lee has included such moving, conspicuously inconspicuous "references" to 9/11 in *25th Hour* (again, the first such referencing in any major American film), how is one to interpret the significance of such references? Can we learn something from this film about the significance of 9/11 that will justify our contention that life in America has been forever altered after the event of 9/11? Before turning to the more obvious question of how the storyline of the film relates to 9/11, it is worth returning to the beginning of the film in which the beacon tribute to Ground Zero is used as a background for the film's opening credits.

As all film students and aficionados know, such title-sequences are an art in themselves; e.g. Saul Bass' work on Hitchcock's films such as *Psycho* and *Vertigo*. But this opening scene (actually, like many title-scenes it begins after an introductory scene in which the abused dog is rescued) is, in itself, evidence of my claim that 9/11 is no mere "reference" in the film but, rather, the film itself. For in this sequence, one in which the Director and crew took considerable pride, Ground Zero is used to illustrate the essence, as it were, of the film itself, i.e. the names of all the people, from the most significant to the least involved in the film itself. The image of the lights themselves has a number of other meanings which deepen our understanding of the connection between 9/11 and *25th Hour*. The image of beacons shining up into the sky must remind us of the earlier use of such beacons as emblematic of Hollywood, often still occurring at the beginning of films and at award ceremonies such as that of the Oscars. The image is thus a synecdoche of film, an acknowledgment of the importance of light shining in the darkness without which, both in its production as well as its

exhibition, film would not exist. The image thus connects the medium of film with the reality of 9/11, much as Spike Lee is connecting them in this particular film, itself a commercial, “Hollywood” film. The cinematic representation of 9/11, then, is connected to the reality of 9/11—the beacon tribute—in a way which suggests an identity rather than just a representation, a close relationship which one could ascribe to the way 9/11 has imposed itself onto a film which is in many ways unrelated to it. The opening scene is thus evidence of my contention that, after 9/11, life in America has profoundly changed, for it has even taken over a film which should be separate from it. This, I would argue, is all the more powerful as a tribute to 9/11, more powerful even than a more direct representation of 9/11 would be, for it has reenacted the reality of 9/11 in taking over a culture by surprise, a culture which is supposedly safe and protected from it.

It is thus, I would contend, that Spike Lee has made the most memorable tribute to date to 9/11 by showing how it has ripped through the fabric of our culture by imposing itself on a film in which it supposedly has no business. But I would also argue that the Director is aware of the connection between the story of *25th Hour* and 9/11, of how 9/11 has also taken over the meaning of lives such as that of Monty’s. In one of the film’s most memorable and controversial scenes the main character goes into the Men’s Room of his father’s bar after the two have been morosely pondering the son’s imminent departure to prison. Looking at the mirror over the washbasin Monty sees the not infrequent “Fuck You” written on the latrine wall. Seeing this, Monty explodes into a litany of abuse—of his own “Fuck You’s”—directed at the various sub-cultures which inhabit New York:

‘Fuck Me’? Fuck You. Fuck you and this whole city and everyone in it . . . Fuck the Sikhs and the Pakistanis bombing down the avenues in decrepit cabs, curry steaming out their pores, stinking up my day, terrorists in fucking training, SLOW THE FUCK DOWN! . . . Fuck the Russians in Brighton Beach, mobster thugs sitting in cafes sipping tea in little glasses, sugar cubes between their teeth, wheeling and dealing and scheming; go back where you fucking came from. Fuck the black-hatted Hasidim, strolling up and down 47th St. in their dirty gabardine with their dandruff, selling South African apartheid diamonds. Fuck the Wall St. brokers, self-styled masters of the universe, Michael Douglas Gordon Gecko wannabes. . . send those fucking Enron assholes to jail for fucking life. You think Bush and Cheney didn’t know about that shit? Give me a fucking break . . . Fuck the Puerto-Ricans, twenty to a car swelling up the welfare rolls, worst fucking parade in the city. . . Fuck the Bensonhurst Italians with their pomaded hair, their nylon warm-up suits. . . Fuck the up-town brothers; they never want to pass the ball, they don’t play defense, they take five steps on every lay-up, and then they want to turn around blame and everything on the white man. Slavery ended one hundred and thirty-seven years ago, MOVE THE FUCK ON! And while we’re at it, fuck J.C.: a day on the cross, a week-end in Hell, and all the Hallelujas of the legioned angels for eternity, try seven years in fucking Otisville, J. Fuck Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda and backward cave-dwelling Fundamentalist assholes everywhere. On the names of innocent thousands murdered I hope you spend the rest of eternity roasting in a jet-fueled fire in Hell; you towel-headed camel jockeys can kiss my royal Irish Ass!. . . Fuck my Father, with his endless grief,

sitting behind that bar, sipping on club soda, selling whiskey to Firemen and cheering the Bronx bombers. . . Fuck this whole city and everyone in it. . . Let an earthquake crumble it, let the fires rage, let it burn to fucking ash and then let the waters rise and submerge this whole rat-infested place. <Pause> No, fuck you, Montgomery Brogan, you had it all and you threw it away, you dumb FUCK!

Gays, Puerto Ricans, Hassid Jews, African-Americans, Italian-Americans, et al. (I have shortened the speech considerably here) are all subjected in turn to Monty's anger at these different life-styles, life-styles which anger Monty only because, it seems, they are different from his own. In reality, Monty is angry with these minorities only because he is angry in general, something he himself realizes at the end of his speech when he turns his last "Fuck You" against himself and the bad decisions he made which are about to land him in jail. In visual terms the most striking thing about the sequence is the high-contrast photography Spike Lee uses to film the different groups, a sharp focus which mirrors the anger of the protagonist whose voice is speaking over them. The scene literally explodes in the middle of the film, and its power and importance is such that it returns at the end of the film when the same faces of these representatives of the different ethnic groups of New York are looking at him quizzically as he drives to jail to surrender himself and begin his seven-years of incarceration.

Why does Monty vent his wrath in this way, on groups of people who, in a reality which does not escape the character played by Norton, have nothing to do with his current predicament? The answer lies, I believe, in the two close relationships Monty has with members of two of the groups mentioned: his Russian friend Kostya and Naturelle, the Puerto-Rican girlfriend whom he had wrongly suspected throughout the film of being the one who set him up. Indeed, Monty's suspicions about Naturelle's fidelity, in all senses of the word, are the central (but certainly not the only) concern of Norton's character as he prepares to begin his sentence. The trajectory of this sub-plot as just described thus mirrors the way Monty first rails against, and then relents from, the accusations hurled against the various minorities—including the Russians and the Puerto-Ricans—who are also exonerated in the scene at the end of the film when these same figures are shown looking directly at him as he goes off to jail. Not only are they, and particularly Naturelle, not deserving of Monty's "Fuck You," but also their role is finally to show how such marginalized groups (including the Arabs and Muslims also mentioned in the abovementioned harangue) are victims of an anger which is more rightly directed at ourselves. The reason 9/11 has forever changed the direction of American life, Spike Lee's *25th Hour* seems to be saying, is that, like Monty, we have now been sentenced to a world where the hegemony of the straight, white, middle-class life, a life based on hypocrisies no less self-indulgent and harmful to others than those of Monty, is the Ground Zero of a world which will never be the same, despite whatever attempts we make to build over the open wound which Spike Lee's film wisely chose to leave uncovered.

^[1] "After Auschwitz," *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1973 (1966) 361.

¹²¹ One could argue that the end of the so-called “classical” era predates the Holocaust, as Roland Barthes, for example, argues in *S/Z*, where the lack of closure associated with the “scriptible” is found in pre-Holocaust works such as Kafka’s. One could also question whether the success of Polanski’s recent film on the Holocaust, *The Pianist*, might not signal a defiant rejection of Adorno’s thesis about the relationship of the devastation to such classical music as that of Chopin.