Journal of American Studies of Turkey
14 (2001) : 111-115

Review Essay

11'09"01

11 Different Ways of Seeing or not Seeing 9/11

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> [W]e're entering a phase where if you start to speak about this as something that can be understood historically—without any sympathy—you are going to be thought of as unpatriotic, and you are going to be forbidden.
> (Edward Said 2001)

11'09"01, September 11: A Film

11 directors from different origins and cultures

11 glances at the tragic events that occurred in New York City on September 11th 2001

11 points of view committing their individual conscience

11 gestures of peace

A total freedom of expression.

This is what the audience reads with the opening credits of *11'09"01 - September 11*, an anthology commissioned by French producer Alain Brigand to bring together eleven renowned filmmakers from eleven countries, in memory of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11th 2001. Each auteur is given 11 minutes, 9 seconds and one frame to tell their story. Although Hollywood producers had already announced forthcoming movies inspired by 9/11, like *Real Heroes are Dead* (a project by Tim Robbins with Susan Sarandon, and *The Guys* with Sigourney Weaver and directed by Jim

Simpson), *September 11* is actually the first non-documentary film (or the first eleven films) inspired by the events of 9/11.

The disappearance of the Twin Towers proved to be doubly annoying for Hollywood producers. Film companies became extremely cautious about showing the World Trade Center in films that were completed before the towers' destruction. While the original marketing campaign for Spider Man, for instance, featured the twin towers prominently, the trailer was pulled after September 11. The original publicity poster for the film showed Spider Man between the twin towers, but the new poster was released with no towers. Several films were digitally modified in order to exclude any visual reference to the towers. These strategies may prove once more that Hollywood producers are keen to create 'historically informed' films or that they try to insulate the American audience from sorrow, as writer-director Peter Hyams stated, "If I had a film that was a comedy and there's a scene of two people walking up the street and in the background is the World Trade Centre, I'd want that out of my film, because that would certainly make people like me start to cry" (Adnum 2002). It seems that seeing the towers in Hollywood movies won't be possible until an official 9/11 production is released.

September 11, bringing together such important directors as Samira Makhmalbaf (Iran), Claude Lelouch (France), Youssef Chahine (Egypt), Danis Tanovic (Bosnia), Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso), Ken Loach (United Kingdom), Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu (Mexico), Amos Gitai (Israel), Mira Nair (India), Sean Penn (United States of America) and Shohei Imamura (Japan), premiered on September 11, 2002 in most Western countries, except in the USA where the film had difficulties finding a distributor, probably because some critics had already labeled it "anti-American". *September 11* met with strong critical reaction upon its screening at international film festivals. Negative comments included "not remotely adequate", "insulting", "harsh", "slow and off-beat", "gimmicky", "hubris", "offensive" and so on (Levit, no date). The *Washington Post* film critic denigrated the anthology for being "ominous" and "unpalatable", and maintained that "for a great many people, and not just Americans, the tragedies of that day are still too emotionally devastating to swallow anyone's filmic interpretation -- particularly if that interpretation smacks of political hostility or admonition" (Howe 2003). A superficial glance at the anthology might indeed give the impression that some of the films profess a strong anti-Americanism: Youssef Chahine's didactic episode mentions the training Osama bin Laden got in the USA and the frightening number of people in the world killed by Americans and their policies; Ken Loach's contribution compares 9/11 with another event that occurred on the same date - the overthrow of the elected Socialist government of Chile by a murderous coup arranged by the U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the CIA in 1973; Shohei Imamura's film is a twisted tale of the return of a Japanese World War II soldier who thinks he is a snake, the director telling us that "there is no such thing as a holy war" and thus rejecting both "wars" - the war *of* the terrorism and the war *against* terrorism; and finally Mira Nair tells the (true) story of a New York Pakistani mother whose son disappeared in the 9/11 disaster and is now accused of being one of the terrorists, apparently only because he is Muslim. It is finally discovered that the son was in fact one of the heroes, sacrificing himself for the sake of others. Nair says that she wanted "to make a statement against the current Islamophobia that is sweeping the world since September 11" James Petras reports that the FBI soon after

September 11 exhorted every U.S. citizen to report any suspicious behavior by friends, neighbors, relatives, acquaintances, and strangers. Between September and the end of November almost 700,000 denunciations were registered. Thousands of Middle Eastern neighbors, local shop owners, and employees were denounced (cited in McLaren 2002: 175). If we take a closer look at the episodes "accused" of anti-Americanism, however, we might realize that the authors are not radical in their statements; Chahine accuses USA of being an organized murderer but his own statements are also confused; Loach's protagonist, exiled Chilean singer Vladimir Vega, writes a letter of sympathy and solidarity to relatives who lost loved ones in the Twin Towers, and ends his letter with a poignant wish: "we will remember you, I hope you'll remember us"; Imamura's story is too detached from any contemporary political context to be labeled anti-American, the director being concerned rather with the absurdity of holy wars, Nair shows that the Pakistani son's coffin is draped in an American flag at his funeral, although he was previously marked as a terrorist. His mother tries to convince the FBI that his son is "a regular American boy" and "loves *Star Wars*".

Another criticism, along the same lines, revolves around the claim that these episodes miss the point by trying to stress that Americans were not the only ones to suffer. Danis Tanovic parallels the event with the tragedy of Srebrenica and the regular demonstration of women who lost their husbands and sons in the 1995 (July 11) massacre. A young woman decides to march despite the fact that other women around her, touched by the terrorist attacks in New York City, refuse to do so. When she starts her march in solitude, she finds that other women join her. Tanovic says that he constructed the idea of his film on the idea of forgetfulness; people easily tend to forget events such as those happened in Bosnia, Chechnya or Rwanda. Amos Gitai, too, links 9/11 to another terrorist bombing in Tel Aviv. As a reporter fights to cover the incident and is about to broadcast, she learns in outrage that her story will not be on air because a bigger terrorist attack has just hit USA. Although Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf's contribution might evoke a different take on 9/11, the audience is faced, once again, with other human "realities" and tragedies far away from New York City. Makhmalbaf tells the story of a young teacher in rural Iran trying to teach her young Afghani pupils about the recent events in New York City. She asks them if they heard about a very tragic event, but all they know is that two men fell in a local well and that one of them died. When she insists, a girl finds the answer: her aunt was buried in the sand and stoned. When the frustrated teacher asks them to observe a minute of silence as a sign of respect for the victims at the World Trade Center, which is beyond the scope of the imagination of these little children, they fail to comply until the teacher takes the class out to stand in front of the chimney of a brick-making factory that looks like a tower. The children keep silence this time, overwhelmed by the massive 'tower'. Although these little Afghani refugee children risk being killed in an American anti-terrorist attack anytime, their teacher's empathy links them to those who have lost their lives in the terrorist attack on the other side of the world. This episode allows different readings. On the one hand, the story might well point to the absurdity of wars - terrorist or otherwise - and the absurdity of a globalized mourning given the many other tragedies constantly shaking forgotten parts of the world. On the other hand (not unlike in Tanovic's story), as Makhmalbaf says in an interview, she wanted to show "how people who had no role in the destruction of those two

towers, who did not even know that they existed, could become homeless and bereft of everything as a result of this incident".

Claude Lelouch and Sean Penn's respective episodes center on individuals who are unaware of the disaster happening on their television screens because they are lost in their own private worlds. These are two love stories with a lack, and the lack is filled thanks to what is commonly considered a loss: 9/11. A deaf woman in the Lelouch segment is writing a farewell letter to her lover, while he is caught up in the chaos near the WTC and returns home in a ruined state, like a ghost. The episode ends there, but it is almost certain that the letter will never reach the man; 9/11 thus restores their relationship. In Penn's American allegory, an old widower, who still lives with his wife's imaginary presence long after her death, complains about the darkness in the apartment where flowers cannot grow. When the Twin Towers collapse, sunlight returns through the window, and magically, the dried flowers bloom to become a beautiful bouquet. This makes the old man very happy but he is finally confronted with the "truth" and weeps: "my dear, I wish you could have seen this".

The most experimental entry comes from Alejandro González Iñárritu, who leaves the screen at black for the most of the 11 minutes, cut by flashes of bodies falling from the Twin Towers while we constantly hear mourning chants and the newscasts of that day. When the black screen gradually turns into white, an Arabic sentence followed by an English translation appears on the screen: "Does God's light guide us or blind us?" Iñárritu confided that he saw this project as an opportunity to express the sorrow he lived and felt on that day. Several critics hailed this entry, as it appears to be the only short in the anthology to relate directly to the 9/11 tragedy and to empathize with the pain that those in the WTC on that day would have felt. He is also the only director not trying to link the event with another story or incident.

Although Idrissa Ouedraogo's story is the most charming and funny of all, it shares the viewpoint of other films in the anthology: local, and sometimes personal, concerns are more important than global(ized) sensibilities. The director says: "Like all Africans, I was shocked by the violence of the attacks. Like them, I felt sympathy, for the pain of the families and for the American people. I am also waiting (like all Africans everywhere) for the same surge of solidarity with an Africa beset by malaria, AIDS, famine and drought". The story revolves around a group of schoolboys living in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, one of whom spies a man in town who looks exactly like Osama bin Laden. The group decides to capture the terrorist and receive the reward. But they fail to realize their dream and beg Bin Laden to come back: "we all need you!"

9/11 did not only take place in New York City; it did not only take place at the World Trade Center. *September 11* offers only eleven of those countless stories; there are many other 9/11s.

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Alejandro González Iñárritu

Samira Makhmalbaf

Mira Nair

Idrissa Ouedraogo

Danis Tanovic