

***September 11: 11 Directors, 11 Stories, 1 Film***

Empire Pictures, 2002.

Arabic, Bosnian, English, Farsi, French, Hebrew, Japanese, and Spanish.

English and French subtitles. Colour. Duration: 135 m.

*Directed by* Samira Makhmalbaf (Iran), Calude Lelouch (France), Youssef Chahine (Egypt), Danis Tanovic (Bosnia), Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso), Ken Loach (United Kingdom), Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu (Mexico), Amos Gitai (Israel), Mira Nair (India), Sean Penn (United States), and Shohei Imamura (Japan)

*Produced by* Galatee Films, Studio Canal. Executive Producer: Jean De Trigeomain; Associate Producers: Jacques Perrin and Nicolas Mauvernay; Creative Producer: Alain Brigand.

ASIN: B00062J0NA.

A DVD Review by

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*September 11* is a global interpretation of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. This series of short films portrays people engaged in their regular routines, intercepted by the news of September 11, 2001 (9/11). It portrays their global experiences and interpretations of this singular day and in some manner, the impact of this horrific event.

The French film company, Studio Canal, brought together acclaimed producers from eleven countries to portray their perception of the climatic moment on 9/11. Filmmakers were free to interpret their individual observations or national response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as they saw fit, or more broadly, they were free to create a short film that was inspired by the events of 9/11.

Because each film is totally independent of the others, there is no discernable sequence or apparent logic. The experience is rather jolting as random and diverse narratives, set around the world, take the viewer from pre-event through to post-event encounters. The only parameters set were that each short film should be precisely eleven minutes, nine seconds, and one frame. Thus the original title: 11'9"01 (it was re-titled for the U.S./Canada DVD release).

The following year, 2002, the film showed in film festivals around the world, and the year thereafter garnered a theatrical release. The film has been described as daring, artful, illuminating, intensely moving, and provocative.

The eleven vignettes range dramatically in their emotional and cognitive impact on the viewer, often shedding new insight and fresh perspectives, but sometimes eliciting shock and confusion.

The brilliance of this film is its scope and profundity. Filmmakers share different worldviews not only on the event, but also on how death and tragedy is experienced by other

societies, and how history and politics can provide a cognitive framework for perception. Viewers may identify with some personal or communal responses to 9/11, yet other cultural responses draw no familiar parallel but introduce viewers to perspectives never before imagined or entertained.

Depending on a viewer's tolerance of variance, some may feel angered to perceived political, American, or other messages. The film, however, is not a political analysis or a historical restatement. It is not a noble tribute to those who perished, or a rebuke of perpetrators. Each is its own story—something that happened on 9/11—however remote and distant or akin to the experiences of New Yorkers or Americans.

The genius of *September 11* is in the eleven lenses through which the viewer may examine a range of abstractions made real by happenings set in time and place. These abstractions include love and hate, suffering and sacrifice, heroism and ideologies. Abstractions, as cultural themes and values, are, for some, black and white in the unqualified ethical code they set for society; however, cultural themes and values also portray life in full color. One cannot deny the pervasive influence on a society's values, and thus these vignettes provide an opportunity to see the world, others and ourselves in a new light. Thus the eleven directors give us an extraordinary experience and with that also an opportunity to (perhaps) think, as others might think. Consequently this film delivers diverse sensory experiences, some very dramatic; and hence its messages confront and challenge us.

Each short film has its own cinematic approach. Alejandro Geonzalez Inarritu of **Mexico** uses silence and blackness. There are few images, except for split-second flashes of real news footage. The sensory experience is primarily created by silence and sounds of the disaster, and only fleeting visuals. Very powerful, if one can immerse oneself into the drama of the moment!

Danis Tanovic (**Bosnia-Herzegovina**) draws a poignant parallel to Europe's worst tragedy since World War II—the Srebrenica genocide. He shows the persistent pain and silent fortitude of widows commemorating their husbands, sons, and fathers killed in 1995. Grieving for 8000 of their countrymen, they now also embrace all those victimized and bereaved on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. This segment is unhurried. It communicates sadness and reflection through the effective use of silence.

Ken Loach of the **United Kingdom** also recalls history, but this time South American history interwoven with American foreign policy. In this segment, a Chilean narrator recounts the events of 9/11 coup d'état of 1973 in which Chile's democratically elected president was overthrown. For those seeing these short films through political lenses, this film could be seen as having political messages embedded in it, and hinting at a political relationship that was highly controversial.

First in the series is Samira Makhmalbaf's story of an **Iranian** teacher trying to help her students, very young children, understand the significance of a cataclysmic world event. To honour those who died, the teacher commands one minute of silence. They fidget and giggle, struggling to sit still and keep silent. Young as they are, they struggle to comprehend God's sovereignty and power in the midst of tragedy. Their dialogue is quite philosophical and engaging.

The **French** director Claude Lelouch also predominantly uses silence, and focuses on emotional display. Sub-titles occasionally explain what the actors are communicating. Lelouch shows a deaf woman penning a love and farewell note to her lover who had gone to work at the World Trade Center. She asks for a miracle and in that very moment is granted it when her partner returns, a victim but not a casualty of the falling towers. The cultural theme I found

evident in this narrative is the protection of a significant relationship. This is seen through the character's need to give and receive singular devotion, implying a distrust and wariness of outsiders.

Youssef Chahine's film (**Egypt**) is the most emotionally charged and politically nuanced. His conversations alternate between those he has with the living and those killed in action. Chahine encounters the ghost of a U.S. Marine killed in Lebanon. In his dialogue with this marine, and his dialogue with a Palestinian family, they all struggle with personal pain as victims of hostilities and battle. As a producer, he examines national ideologies through facts pertinent to America's involvement in conflict. This film explores the concept of democracy and the reality of death through grappling with the notion of responsibility (blame) as being collective, with reference to a nation's population, or individual, as in putting blame on the individuals responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This Egyptian Arab rendering of *September 11*, shows conflicting values and perspectives, and illustrates human loss and pain. The struggle to understand the Other is an overwhelming enigma that confounds comprehension as it is complicated by a host of varying cultural values.

Idrissa Ouedraogo of **Burkina Faso** gives a light-hearted cultural account of village life and five teenagers impacted by poverty and their struggle to pay school fees and the medical bills of one of the student's dying mother. News of reward money for capturing Osama bin Laden motivates these youths to capture a man whom they believe is Osama bin Laden. Their motivation speaks of hope in the midst of despair and illustrates the values of family and friendship, and of collective responsibility to achieve basic human rights—health and education.

The **Israeli** entry by Amos Gitai shows security and media responses to a car bomb attack in Jerusalem. Throughout the film, the scene is chaotic and the sound effects penetrating. In many ways the scene portrays not only an incident, but also the stereotypical Israeli personality: self-assertive in all its forms. The reporter on the scene covers global events of 9/11 and seems incapable of comprehending that an event in another part of the world could overshadow the current crisis on "Jerusalem Avenue". The reporter on location is numbed by the need for information and is obsessed with suspicion that the car bombing was a terrorist attack. Despite the constant feeling of insecurity, even the crisis of this moment, Israeli life goes on as if all is normal: journalists reporting and paramedics rushing to the latest scene. Is global terror the 'new normal'?

Mira Nair of **India** portrays the grief of a Pakistani Muslim mother and family at the news of their missing son, Mohammed, who is accused of being a terrorist, and is believed to have been detained by the FBI. In his mother's search for him, she encounters the prejudice of those who associate terrorism with race, ethnicity, religion and names. Nair skilfully reveals the ruinous impact of "mistaken identity". The film ends with Mohammed being honoured as a hero for giving his life in the rescue of others at Ground Zero; and in that, honour is restored. The producer effectively illustrates the prevalence and persistence of our predisposition to labelling others. The film begs the question whether society has grasped the harm and fallacy of stereotyping.

Of all short films, Sean Penn received the lowest ratings in citizen media reviews. I would sum it up as 'disappointing'. Risking cultural generalization, this **American** short film depicts the individualism and isolation of Americans. In this film, an old man living next to the World Trade Center is oblivious to what is not seemingly in his own world. He is obsessed with the loss of his wife. Life for him has become a massive void filled with negativity. The relevance

of *September 11* may be found in pondering in the association between death and, time and space, colour and light, flowers, and loved ones.

Shohei Imamura's depiction of a World War II **Japanese** soldier, who becomes deranged and writhes like a snake, is most bizarre. This film shows the shame and rejection that is faced when a family member fails to uphold family and societal honour. Being battle-scarred and psychotic, this soldier loses face and dies a second death, in that he is regarded "as good as dead" to society. His family suffers the same degradation. The connection to 9/11 is seen in the magnitude of the tragedy: the insanity of human life lost to conflict. The meaning of this narrative is very obscure. The viewer is left searching for meaning long after having viewed *September 11*.

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### About the Reviewer

Ella Ruth Anaya, DLitt et Phil (cand.), is Assistant Professor of Cross-Cultural and Leadership Communication in the School of Media, Art and Culture and also in the School of Business at Trinity Western University, Canada. She specializes in teaching and research on culture, leadership, and international development. Her success in blending these themes earned her TWU's 2005 "Dean's Innovative Teaching Award". As researcher and practitioner, her research centers on poverty issues in rural Kenya. In her doctoral work through the University of South Africa, and in collaboration with the G.L.O.B.E.'s cross-cultural research program, Ruth is studying Kenyan leadership, specifically culturally authentic and endorsed leadership styles and behaviours. Ruth is a member of the International Academy for Intercultural Research and the International Leadership Association.

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