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All Over the Map

TRAUMA CENTER

SEPTEMBER 11

Empire Opens July 18, at Cinema Village

An omnibus of short films about September 11, rushed into production within months of the attacks and timed to premiere on the one-year anniversary, is at best irrelevant and at worst obscene. The distastefully precious conceptual gimmick doesn't help: 11 filmmakers from 11 countries, each with a time limit of 11 minutes and nine seconds plus one final frame. (Retitled *September 11* for U.S. release, the French-produced anthology played in Europe as *11'09"01*.) While most of the individual entries either coyly sidestep or are helplessly ensnared in the ethical thornbush of aftermath art, the project as a whole reeks of arrogance—a monument to artistic imagination in the wake of tragedy.

It may be no coincidence that the two worst seg-

ments, moral black holes both, are the only ones presumptuous enough to situate themselves in Lower Manhattan on that very Tuesday morning—in the service of enlisting the actual disaster as a plot twist. Insufferable as always, Claude Lelouch has the unspeakable nerve to engineer an ash-covered reconciliation between a deaf-mute French translator and her tour-guide boyfriend. Sean Penn likewise goes rooting for redemption amid the rubble, capping his sappy portrait of a morose widower (Ernest Borgnine) with a magic-realist flourish that registers as either a mind-boggling injunction to look on the bright side (literally) or a deeply sick joke about Tribeca real estate.

Mira Nair's contribution, the only other one set in New York, stiffly re-enacts the true story of a Pakistani American who went missing the morning of the attacks and was promptly fingered as an Al Qaeda operative. Setting aside Shohei Imamura's noncommittal head-scratcher of an anti-war fable (in which a WWII Japanese soldier thinks he's a snake), you're left for the most part with fumbling attempts to provide an international context for an earthshaking event—some, naturally, start from the position that there is no universal definition of a global tragedy.

Samira Makhmalbaf and Idrissa Ouedraogo both

highlight the disconnect between first and third world by adopting child's-eye viewpoints: uncomprehending Afghan refugee schoolkids in a remote corner of Iran and Burkina Faso youngsters angling for bin Laden reward money (they spot a look-alike in their village). Most of the shorts make their point by focusing on other atrocities—an awkward comparative method that only Ken Loach pulls off and that, in the more tone-deaf pieces, verges on the competitive. Amos Gitai's grandstanding harangue is a single take of the chaos following a same-day Tel Aviv car bombing, the hysteria diffused as news bulletins flood in from New York. More solemnly, Danis Tanovic observes a commemorative rite for the Bosnian Muslims massacred at Srebrenica on July 11, 1995—a mourning procession that takes place on the 11th of every month.

Two shorts explicitly link 9-11 to U.S. foreign policy, but with antithetical approaches. Youssef Chahine's blustery sermon is mainly an exercise in egotistical hand-wringing: "Chahine" (as played by an actor) wrestles with his conscience by debating the ghosts of a U.S. marine and a Palestinian suicide bomber. Loach's starkly lucid segment, in contrast, cedes the spotlight to Vladimir Vega, a Chilean exile in London (who appeared in Loach's *Ladybird Lady-*

bird). Like Tanovic, Loach emphasizes a calendrical coincidence. Backed by newsreel footage, Vega recites an open letter to the loved ones of the 9-11-01 victims, recounting the bloody 9-11-73 overthrow of Salvador Allende's elected socialist government by the Pinochet-led, CIA-backed coup. Vega's even-keeled, plainspoken missive concludes with a pledge and a plea: "On September 11, we will remember you. I hope you remember us."

Which leaves the most problematic and also the most horribly effective piece of all. Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Amores Perros*) orchestrates a black-screen requiem, flooding the soundtrack with a sickening crescendo of prayer chants, news reports, eyewitness hysterics, and final phone calls; the only images are flash cuts of bodies falling from the twin towers. Witnessed at last year's Toronto Film Festival, on the anniversary of the attacks, after months of narcotic CNN immersion, this vortex-like film was a genuine shock to the system. But it's hard to say if this devastating, nakedly exploitative work has a larger point beyond the evocation and infliction of trauma. A repeat viewing might clear that up, but it's an experience I'd rather not relive—and one that I cannot in good faith recommend to anyone. —Dennis Lim

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