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Author(s)	Deborah Young
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By DEBORAH YOUNG

An omnibus movie made by 11 of the world's au courant directors, "11'09"01 — September 11" is a sober, thought-provoking response to a tragedy of worldwide import, and a much better film than one might expect from the pre-release publicity. Included among the 11 segments in the Galatee Films/StudioCanal production that are linked only by theme, are many emotionally moving pieces that powerfully evoke the tragic day without being exploitative. The gist of the film, if one can be found in such diverse works, might be the deep sense of horror felt around the world from the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Towers and part of the Pentagon, and broader, global implications of such an act. Though it commands the viewers' attention for most of its two-hour-plus running time, it is hardly an easy film to watch and contains anguishing moments that will put off casual moviegoers. However, its release in most territories through arthouse distributors can count on the news interest the pic is bound to stir up.

Clearly the filmmakers' concerns are much more complex than simply staging a made-for-TV memorial homily. Although at least two segments voice criticisms of American foreign policy, reports that the film is anti-American in focus are greatly exaggerated.

The most controversial and confused episode is that of Egyptian vet Youssef Chahine, who sets up actor Nour el-Sharif as his alter ego, a filmmaker called Youssef Chahine. He is too upset over the events in New York to go through with the press conference for his film, scheduled the following day.

Instead he takes a solitary walk in which he imagines talking to a young American soldier killed in Beirut in 1983 and buried at Arlington National Cemetery. With this ghost, Chahine visits the home of a Palestinian suicide bomber of the same age, whose family is proud of his sacrifice.

The point is not to condone the bomber, however. Rather clumsily Chahine recalls the suffering of the Palestinian people and the deaths caused by America, from Hiroshima to Vietnam. He'd like to reconstruct the World Trade Towers, but the dead cannot be resurrected.

Other episodes, like French helmer Claude Lelouch's moving anecdote about a man who sets out to lead a group of tourists through the Towers and comes back covered with ashes and in shock, or the Mexican Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's

anguishing flashes on bodies falling from the Towers, use the power of cinema to make familiar images reverberate again.

Indian director Mira Nair recounts a true story of Sept. 11 — that of a New York Pakistani family whose missing son, Mohamad Salman Hamdani, was suspected by police of being one of the terrorists. Only months later, when his body was discovered among the wreckage, was he revealed to be a heroic police cadet who had rushed to the scene to help.

The double edge of Nair's story, in which Americans are not only victims of terrorism but are in some measure culpable, finds an echo in one of the most shocking segments, that of militant English director Ken Loach. In the seg, Chilean exile Vladimir Vega writes an open letter to the American people from his London home, offering condolences for their loss, and recalling that 28 years earlier, on precisely Sept. 11, 1973, elected Chilean president Salvador Allende was murdered in General Auguste Pinochet's coup d'etat, financed and approved by President Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. It ranks among Loach's finest film work.

Four other episodes focus, in completely different ways, on how local tragedies took precedence over the one in America. In the film's opener, young Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf shows a camp of Afghan refugees (there are 3 million living in Iran, she tells us) whose main worry is that America is going to start bombing them.

An educated young teacher tells them that "bricks won't shelter you from an atomic bomb." Instead she convinces her pre-school age pupils to stand at the foot of the smoking brick kiln and observe a minute of silence in honor of those killed on Sept. 11.

Another excellent tale, whose sadness is masked by its humor, comes from Burkina Faso's Idrissa Ouedraogo. A young boy who can't afford to buy pencils for school or medicine for his dying mother thinks he spots Osama bin Laden on the street. Knowing his capture is worth \$25 million, he enlists his friends to corner him with bows and arrows.

Danis Tanovic from Bosnia links Sept. 11 with the massacre of Srebrenica, a tragedy that the heroine won't allow America's to overshadow, while Israel's Amos Gitai puts it in relation to the "smaller" one of a terrorist bombing in Tel Aviv.

Sean Penn's story features a touching solo perf by Ernest Borgnine as a widower so completely wrapped up in the personal tragedy of losing his wife that he doesn't notice the collective drama going on outside his window.

Japanese master Shohei Imamura wraps up the film with an odd and apparently unrelated story. A Japanese soldier returns from the horrors of WWII convinced he is a snake. "There is no such thing as a holy war," film concludes.



MOVING PICTURE: In "11'09"01 — September 11," Israeli helmer Amos Gitai juxtaposes events of Sept. 11 with terrorist bombing in Tel Aviv.