The 9/11 movie Hollywood won't let you see

The "stridently anti-American" anthology film "11'09"01" is sometimes arty, sometimes preachy and sometimes brilliant. In Bush's America, it's also commercially untouchable.

By Sarah Coleman

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Nov. 25, 2002 | As movie premieres go, it was a low-key event. There was no red carpet, no one arrived in a limo and the press was noticeably absent. Instead, picture a crowd of graduate students with rain-dampened hair shuffling into the Roone Arledge Auditorium at Columbia University in New York on a blustery Sunday evening. It was the kind of premiere you'd expect for a Japanese art-house flick or a four-hour documentary on rural electrification in Rajasthan. Instead, though, the film being screened was the first major feature to deal with the events of Sept. 11, 2001, on the big screen.

Two months after it was ready for release, and after it screened at high-profile international film festivals in Venice and Toronto, "11'09"01," the French-produced movie about the international repercussions of Sept. 11, can't get no respect in the U.S. Dubbed "stridently anti-American" by Variety, the movie is in distribution limbo despite the participation of hot international directors such as Mira Nair ("Monsoon Wedding"), Alejandro González Iñárritu ("Amores Perros") and Danis Tanovic ("No Man's Land").

The controversy is easy to understand, especially in light of the current political climate in the U.S. After all, if Susan Sontag can get dragged across the coals for drawing a link between American foreign policy and 9/11, and if Bill Maher can lose his "Politically Incorrect" gig for questioning the description of the hijackers as

"cowards," then it goes without saying that a film that looks kindly upon the family of a Palestinian suicide bomber and calls attention to U.S. complicity in murderous South American regimes might stick in the craws of executives at Sony and Universal.

French television producer Alain Brigand, who conceived the idea for "11'09"01," says that he wanted to make a more permanent statement about the attacks than his own medium would allow. "It seemed that the rest of the planet had to be able to react, not just Americans and Europeans," Brigand told the French paper Le Monde. The concept he came up with is pleasingly simple, if a little self-consciously arty: 11 short films, made by 11 directors from 11 different countries, each lasting 11 minutes and nine seconds, plus a single frame. (The title refers to that duration, as well as to the date of the attacks as it would appear on a European calendar.)

The filmmakers Brigand chose vary in terms of age, style and agenda, but all can be described as political. They include champions of the working class such as Britain's Ken Loach ("Bread and Roses") and Israel's Amos Gitai ("Kadosh"), indie directors with mainstream appeal like the Indian-born Nair and America's own Sean Penn ("The Pledge"), and rising stars like González Iñárritu and the 22-year-old female Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf ("The Apple" and the forthcoming "Blackboards").

Nair, who introduced the film at Columbia, said that directors "don't often get a chance to make a film that is so contemporary and immediate ... in a context of complete artistic freedom." Under Brigand's fairly straightforward conditions, the filmmakers were each given a budget of $400,000, the same standards for format and sound, and the same completion date. In return, they each had to promise not to produce anything that incited hatred or bigotry, or to share notes with any of the project's other directors during production.

What emerged was "a very brave and interesting film," said Nair (whose strong links with the film division at Columbia had led to the screening there), adding, "which is perhaps why it will never be sold in America." The audience, mostly drawn from current and former students in Columbia's graduate film division, chuckled knowingly at this.

In fact, though, it was appropriate that "11'09"01" screened at Columbia, since what it resembles most is a program of thesis films by a supremely gifted group of graduate students. That is to say, it is patchy, sometimes brilliant, occasionally laughable and much too long.

The two segments of the film that have generated the most controversy are by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine and British director Loach. To be honest, neither is a transcendent piece of filmmaking: Both bog down under the kind of heavy-handed polemicism that can make a work of art wither on the vine. (Don't get me wrong, I'm not against films having a political message -- I just think that the story should drive the politics, and not vice versa.)

Loach's film revolves around the fact that Gen. Augusto Pinochet's bloody coup in Chile also took place on a Sept. 11 -- in 1973. In the film, Pablo, a Chilean exile in London, writes a letter of sympathy to the families of 9/11 victims in New York, but the letter is a thin cover for a lesson about the atrocities perpetrated by Pinochet and the covert support he received from the U.S. "Your dollars brought violence to the streets," Pablo writes to the New Yorkers, and concludes: "We will remember you. We hope you will remember us."

Loach has always been an unapologetic leftist, and there's something bracing about his refusal to buckle under to received opinion. (I can't think of another director who'd have had the guts to interrupt the narrative of a war movie with a 20-minute political debate, as he did in "Land and Freedom.") But here, although his history lesson is thought-provoking, its tone is grating. It's simply too difficult to believe that a former torture victim

would think it useful or sensitive to tell bereaved family members in New York about Chilean torture camps where "men trained in the USA ... put rats in women's vaginas."

At least Loach's film is lucid, unlike Chahine's rambling, postmodernist fable, in which a filmmaker called Youssef Chahine meets the ghost of a U.S. Marine killed in a 1983 terrorist attack in Beirut. When Chahine takes the Marine to visit the family of the fundamentalist who assassinated him, the bomber's parents explain how "the Israelis fool everyone" and give a litany of America's foreign policy sins, from Hiroshima to Vietnam to Iraq. ("America says it defends its own values, but it destroys other civilizations," the filmmaker concludes.)

Given that "11'09"01" has positioned itself partly as a memorial to the events of Sept. 11, Chahine's use of his segment as a critique of American imperialism could certainly be called tasteless. Actually, though, it doesn't seem altogether inappropriate for an Arab filmmaker to address the rage and frustrations of the Arab street -- it's just a shame that he chose to wrap important issues in a veil of postmodern flim-flammery.

Mira Nair's politically charged contribution succeeds better because it has a lighter touch. It tells the true story of Salman Hamdani, an American-born Muslim who disappeared on Sept. 11, 2001, and was at first accused of involvement in the attacks by the FBI. (Six months later, his body was discovered in the rubble of the World Trade Center, where he had rushed to help victims escape.) "First they called you a terrorist, then they called you a hero," says his mother in the film. Nair manages to remind her audience how easy it is to fall back on racial stereotypes, but also offers a searing portrayal of one mother's grief in the face of an incomprehensible loss.

Other segments in the film offer fascinating windows into how other countries absorbed the events of Sept. 11. Bosnian Danis Tanovic, whose "No Man's Land" won last year's Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, offers a finely tuned piece about rural Bosnian women who gather on the 11th of every month, as it happens, to remember the horrors of Srebenica. In another segment, by Israeli Amos Gitai, an arrogant reporter stumbles onto the chaotic scene of a car bombing in Tel Aviv and becomes obsessed with filing her story. (When her editor tells her news is coming through of a big event in New York, she responds, "Who gives a shit?") As with Loach's, these pieces suggest that news is above all local, but also that violence and tragedy have the potential to unite people across borders.

A few directors focus on the personal rather than the political: There are two 9/11-related love stories, by French director Claude Lelouch and U.S. actor-director Sean Penn, as well as a strange entry by Japanese director Shohei Imamura, in which a Hiroshima war veteran deals with his psychological trauma by pretending to be a snake, and concludes that "there is no such thing as a Holy War."

Children feature in engaging segments by Iran's Samira Makhmalbaf and Burkina Faso's Idrissa Ouedraogo, their innocence providing a stark contrast to the hatred and cynicism that were displayed so effectively on Sept. 11. (In Makhmalbaf's piece, a teacher in an Afghan refugee camp in Iran tries to instruct her young pupils about the events in New York, only to find that "a very important global event" to them means, "somebody dug a well, and two people fell in and died.")

The most powerful entry, and also the most experimental, is by González Iñárritu, who contrasts an almost entirely dark screen -- interrupted by brief flashes of bodies falling from the twin towers -- with a cacophonous soundtrack in which Mexican prayers for the dead mingle with radio reports and cellphone messages from Sept. 11. A sensory flashback to the confusion, incomprehension and agony of the day itself, the film is almost unbearable to watch, and impossible to forget.

Conceptually, "11'09"01" isn't revolutionary: It revives a 1960s genre, the international omnibus movie. In 1967, a director's collective that included Jean-Luc Godard, William Klein, Agnès Varda and Joris Ivens put together "Far From Vietnam," a movie in seven segments that aimed to expose conditions in wartime Vietnam (other examples include 1962's "Boccaccio '70" and 1969's "Spirits of the Dead"). But anthology movies rarely spell commercial success, and times being what they are, "11'09"01" is unusual in terms of its conception, production and creative license.

In the end, though, the most provocative thing about this film might be that it wrests the narrative of Sept. 11 away from Americans and puts it in the hands of other, far-flung observers -- the implication being that the historical event belongs, in some senses, to everyone.

Though this doesn't seem like a radical assumption, one only has to scratch the surface of American open-mindedness to see that it touches a nerve. Take, for example, the only other currently completed movie that deals with the attacks on the World Trade Center: Jim Simpson's "The Guys," which is scheduled to be released in the U.S. on Dec. 13.

"The Guys," which was adapted from Anne Nelson's hugely successful stage play of the same name, stars Sigourney Weaver as a New York journalist who helps a fire chief (Anthony LaPaglia) write eulogies after eight of his men die in the World Trade Center attacks. Both play and film show the way in which New Yorkers, with their feelings rubbed raw, formed unusual alliances in the weeks after the attacks.

Nelson's script is poignant, humorous and evocative, but not even the most generous viewer could accuse her of having an international agenda. At one point in the play, the journalist (a supposedly liberal former war reporter who worked in Latin America during the 1980s) decries the way that people all over the world are appropriating the tragedy as their own. "It's about us!" she cries.

"Americans don't want anyone to speak of their tragedies except their own," said Amos Gitai at a director's panel that took place after the screening of "11'09"01" at the Toronto Film Festival. (He added, "As an Israeli, I understand the Americans' attachment to their narrative.") There does seem to be an attitude in this country that our grief is special, our fear more justified, our right to dictate to the rest of the world more valid than anyone else's.

"11'09"01" is far from a masterpiece, but it's a film Americans should see. It's true that Sept. 11 was an event of unprecedented trauma for most Americans, and that we have stories about it no one else can tell. But by not listening to what the rest of the world has to say about it -- by ignoring the international community's criticisms of American foreign policy since 9/11, say, or shutting out the voices in a film like "11'09"01" -- Americans run the risk of isolating themselves in a cocoon of self-righteousness and arrogance. The consequences could be devastating. As Gitai put it: "I say to them, if they do this, they will fulfill the desire of their enemies, which is to create one exclusive version of everything."

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