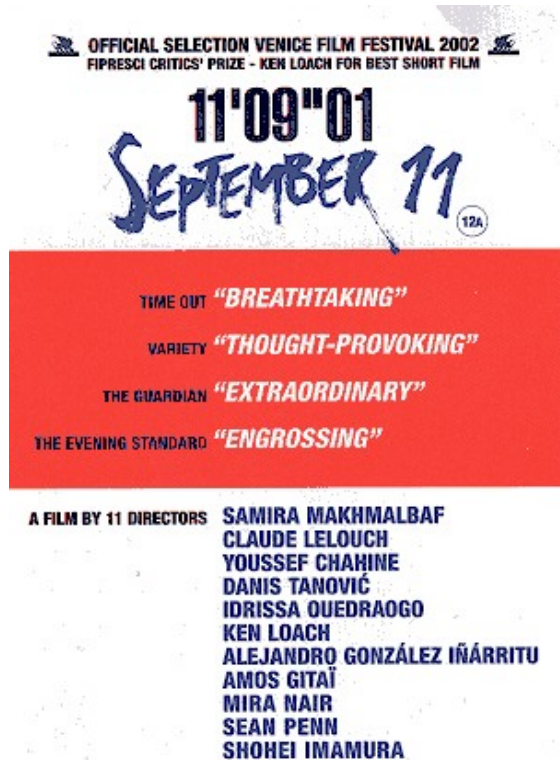


## A very different take



Eleven film-makers from 11 countries have each made 11-minute films to commemorate September 11. Jon Henley watched the result and spoke to Ken Loach, one of the directors.

A remarkable film was shown at the Venice Film Festival this week. As the inescapable raft of first-anniversary TV documentaries unfurls across our screens, 11'09"01, shot in haste, on a shoestring budget and against near-impossible odds, is cinema's first direct response to the events of September 11 2001. A French television director, Alain Brigand, had the idea the day after the attacks: 11 film-makers from 11 countries, 11 short films each lasting 11 minutes, nine seconds and one frame. Television, he felt, was altogether too reductive a medium for this moment.

The films were to be identical in length; they were to be co-produced with a local company. They would have to be finished in time for a first anniversary release; delivered in the same technical format, to ensure a coherent end-product; and cost the same whether shot in Burkina-Faso or New York.

"I wanted to invite reflection, respond to the mass of televisual images with other images," says Brigand. "Everyone was to take hold of the subject and translate their interpretation of the event, fed by their countries, their history, their languages, their memories. There were different sensibilities, different engagements, and everyone should be free to express themselves freely and equally."

So Brigand found 11 very different film-makers, including relative unknowns in the west, but also such established figures as Britain's Ken Loach, America's Sean Penn and Frenchman Claude Lelouch. The result is an extraordinary mixture of ideas and genres, from fairytale to history lesson and morality play to terrifying psycho-sensory experience - reflections not so much on the events themselves, but on their wildly different worldwide resonance.

The segments are, of course, uneven in quality, but each embodies a fresh voice that stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming weight of media "war against terror" imagery. Some are frankly polemic, and have already been condemned, notably in the US entertainment business magazine *Variety*, as "stridently anti-American". The Egyptian Youssef Chahine, for example, in an imaginary encounter between an unnamed film director, a US marine killed in Beirut, and his fundamentalist assassin, coldly counts up "the millions of victims" of US foreign policy, from Vietnam to Somalia, and has his main protagonist say: "America should propagate its values; instead, it destroys civilisations."

Loach focuses on a different September 11: the day in 1973 when the democratically elected Chilean government of Salvador Allende was bloodily overthrown with the backing of the Nixon administration. Against a backdrop of black-and-white footage of the coup and subsequent terror, Loach's character, Pablo, a Chilean living in exile in London, speaks sympathetically to the families of those who died on September 11, but points out that 30,000 people died after "your leaders set out to destroy us": George Bush's "enemies of freedom" also reside in America. The film ends: "On September 11, we will remember you. We hope you will remember us."

The segment aims, says Loach bluntly, "to point out the irony of the situation that on September 11 1973, the United States had inspired a terrorist attack. In fact, there is a case for saying that the major terrorists of the second half of the 20th century have been the Americans." The central character is, in fact, a real person, Vladimir Vega, with whom Loach had already worked on *Ladybird Ladybird* in 1994. "I thought it best to be true to one person, and to hope the implications would reverberate without actually spelling them out," he says. "The film is really a documentary about him."

The first segment, by the Iranian film-maker Samira Makhmalbaf, opens with Afghan refugee children in Iran making bricks from mud. "Hurry," urge their elders, "the United States wants to bomb us, we must build shelters." Others even use a dash of humour. Idrissa Ouedraogo, from Burkina-Faso, says his film addresses the sentiment that "while I sympathise with the pain of the families and of the American people, I expect in return the same wave of solidarity with Africa for malaria, Aids, famine, thirst." The segment is about a young boy forced to leave school and sell newspapers to earn money. Convinced he has seen Osama bin Laden in the marketplace, he and his friends dream of what could be done with the promised \$25m reward. Bin Laden, of course, evades them; as he flies off from the airport, they cry: "Osama, come back! We need you! We need that money!"



Some avoid the politics completely. Sean Penn's beautiful and moving short film shows the ordinary early morning of an elderly New York widower. He shaves, he dresses, he talks constantly to his dead wife, tells her the apartment is just too dark. When he wakes up from a mid-morning nap, the room is flooded with sunlight and the dead flowers on the windowsill are blooming: the towers that had blocked out their light have crumbled to nothing.

Lelouch delivers a romantic silent movie about a deaf and dumb French woman on the point of leaving her New York lover; Mexico's Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu presents a hugely powerful piece combing original footage and sound clips - "Honey, I love you. We're having a little trouble on the plane." - with muttered prayers, and ending with a single question on a white screen. In Arabic and English, it reads: Does God's light blind us or guide us?

Loach who, like most of the directors, has not yet seen the finished product and was not allowed to talk to his fellow film-makers during the process, says the project appealed to him "because I liked the idea of different points of view from different perspectives. The ownership of that event belongs to everybody; if it's owned by the United States, it becomes a propaganda weapon for them. History belongs to all of us - that's a very, very important idea."

11'09"01 does not belong to all of us yet. It will be released in France, Belgium and Switzerland on September 11 and has been sold to Italy, Spain, Germany and most of the countries from which its makers come. It has still, however, to find a distributor in either Britain or the United States, and may well fail to do so. Which would be a shame for many reasons, only one of which is that all profits from the film are to be donated to Handicap International.

**Jon Henley, 4 September 2002, The Guardian. © Guardian Newspapers Limited.**