

OTHER AMERICAN VOICES

Corinna Belz and Nel Hollander.
First Run/Icarus Films, Brooklyn, NY,
U.S.A., 2002. Documentary, 52 min,
color.

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The global response to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center was an immediate recognition that something unthinkable had taken place. In the United States we understood how solidly the world stood with us when we saw the images of Yasser Arafat giving blood and heard that the headline in the French newspaper *Le Monde* cried out "Nous sommes tous américains." Yet today the policies of France and Arafat are frequently at odds with the approach endorsed by U.S. governmental officials. The lines that have been drawn inevitably raise the question: why did things happen as they did?

Although *Other American Voices*, filmed in 2002, does not look at these questions from our vantage point as the Iraq war draws to a close (it was produced before the war and the politics directly leading up to it), the video does communicate the concerns of those within the U.S. who criticized the course of action taken after that fateful day. To their credit, Belz and Hollander provide a platform for some who have articulated pointed questions. The value of this is inestimable. In the States, I believe, the media has muted critical voices in the name of patriotism. This production, as the title emphasizes, introduces *Other American Voices*. Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now* sets the stage with her memory of how people began displaying pictures of the individuals reported missing after the attack. The inexplicable loss of so many innocent lives remains as hard to reconcile today as it was then. Goodman's thoughtful reflections and manner reminded me of the photographs shown to those of us far from the New York area. We were transfixed by the

walls plastered with these gripping signifiers of those who had vanished into thin air. Goodman aptly compares these heart-wrenching images with those held by the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina, who would walk around with the photographs of loved children they had lost, asking if anyone had seen those of their family long missing. Another voice, Asif Ulla of the War Resisters League, speaks of the Muslim community's fear after the attack. Noam Chomsky, Richard Deats and Katrina van den Heuvel (editor-in-chief of *The Nation*) are similarly convincing as they reflect on the curtailment of policy debate that accompanied the promotion of patriotism after 9/11.

The film parallels footage of the World Trade Center cleanup with all of the interviews, which returns the viewer to those days and their aftermath. Although each interviewee brings a different focus to the events that transpired, as a whole they articulate how 9/11 brought the face of terror to the United States. One recurring concern is that an Orwellian repression has prevailed since the attacks. Carmen Trotta of the Catholic Workers Party expresses this with great passion. His view is that one of the most disturbing aspects of the government's actions since that day has been its attack on the Bill of Rights, the very cornerstone of American democracy. Somewhat alarming is his statement that, based on his experience, he now assumes his phones are tapped. Jerry Lefcourt and Joshua L. Dratel of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers lament that we have moved into an era of political spying in which secret evidence and secret proceedings increasingly deny people basic rights. Overall, the consensus of *Other American Voices* is that the United States, born in dissent, could become exactly what it historically has stood against.

An effective technique adopted by the filmmakers is grouping the responses by theme. I had the impression they asked each of the figures filmed specific questions and then collaged their answers to create the script and pace. While it is hard to say precisely what these questions were, it is clear they include whether dissent is a patriotic act, whether the United States is once again entering a repressive period similar to the McCarthyism of the 1950s, and where Iraq fits in the post 9/11 world. What is perhaps most striking about the opinions presented is

their ability to convey fragments of my own experience of that time and the political climate that has taken hold since the devastating events of that tragic day. Even in the San Francisco Bay Area, one of the most radical spots in the country, there was evidence that times had changed almost immediately. Looking through my office window in downtown Berkeley shortly after the tragedy occurred, I saw protestors take to the streets almost as quickly as George Bush defined a black-and-white, good-vs.-evil position as the basis for the United States response. With signs of support for the victims, and speaking in favor of justice not revenge, the crowds grew larger each day. Many weeks passed before there were media reports acknowledging these ongoing protests, and even then the coverage was scant.

Surprisingly, this very serious, down-to-earth film seemed surreal as I watched in light of all that has transpired since. Politically, it was to the point. Each contributor spoke clearly and passionately, and effectively raised issues that need a platform, ranging from the lack of foresight in the administration's approach overall to the loss of civil rights and civil liberties that was triggered by the attack on the World Trade Center. Several mentioned how clear it was by 2002, when this project was in production, that the Bush team would use 9/11 as an excuse to wage a second war in Iraq, as they did. These voices also joined with other critics in noting that the new world that emerged after 9/11 has aided the present government in obscuring a sluggish economy, rising unemployment, the growing number of people without health insurance, and other maladies.

As a United States citizen I believe *Other American Voices* is a tremendous contribution to social history and to the political discourse as well. As a writer on topics relating to art, science and technology, I found that this tape reminded me of the close links between art and politics. Although artistically shot, and definitely contrived using technological tools, the theme is explicitly political and not intended to be characterized as art. Yet it is this tension between the need to ask questions and the script's focus on a particular point of view that allows the tape to fulfill a function often associated with art: stirring our emotions and presenting complex points of view in a way that allows us to wrestle with a larger picture. In this case, given the current mood in the United States, Belz and

Hollander do us a service in bringing together views that are being drowned out elsewhere. Thus this video accentuates what art can do and why, I believe, political statements by artists are increasingly important in our world today.

Throughout time all forms of art have raised complex questions and stirred emotions. Many of us studied the savage lyricism of Homer's *The Iliad* in school and recall how Achilles was emotionally torn when he was unable to fight with his companions. Greek tragedy as a whole, moreover, invariably comes to mind when discussing the World Trade Center event and its aftermath. On the whole, Greek tragedy saw hubris as a tragic flaw, and many critics in the United States and throughout the world characterize the Bush approach as hubristic. Greek tragedy also is known for raising questions about existence, justice, suffering, good and evil, freedom and necessity, truth and deceit, arrogance, infatuation and the tendency of people to overreach. These kinds of questions are certainly in the air throughout the world now. No doubt this is why the major Greek tragedians—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—still evoke our emotions and empathy. Moreover, almost 2 years later, the complexity of the reactions to the 9/11 tragedy underscores that tragedies in the theater of art and the theater of life urge all to bring timeless questions to the forefront.

This documentary, no doubt, stirs remembered passions. More unsettling is the way the tape melts into the world that came after it was produced. Scenes of the New York City workers cleaning the rubble after the attack reminded me more of the recent footage of U.S. bombings in Baghdad than the now highly politicized attack on the World Trade Center. As a result I found myself seeing 9/11 in relation to the footage of the devastation in Iraq. "Shock and Awe" bombings of Iraqi locations, we were assured, precisely targeted specific locations, and the word "precisely" was stressed to underscore that the violence of these actions was minimal. Seeing the ruins from the Trade Center site with devastated areas in Baghdad so freshly imprinted on my brain reminded me that the symbolic towers (and the Pentagon) were likewise targeted sites. Nonetheless, the impact of the devastation on United States soil was broadly felt. Time, I suppose, will reveal whether the war in Iraq has as much impact as the falling of the towers.

Produced in 2002, *Other American Voices* captures the shock of the World Trade Center attack, the humanity of those who cleared the rubble and the voices of some who understand that liberty and freedom only exist when people speak out. It is a tape that is important today in light of the move to stifle critics, and it should be shown in high school and college classrooms. Years from now, moreover, this kind of documentation will provide future generations with the words of those who saw that other paths were available. America prides itself on its tradition of dissent, and, from this perspective, this film's criticism of the domestic and foreign policies of George W. Bush celebrates this nation's identity.

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