

TOWARDS A THIRD CINEMA

9.11: The Video

by Eric Breitbart

Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the system finds indigestible

Discussed in this article:

- 9.11: Another World is Possible produced by Paper Tiger TV, the Independent Media Center, and Big Noise Productions
- From the Ashes Prod. Martin Kraml, Dir. Deborah Shaffer
- 9/11 Jules and Gedeon Naudet and James Hanlon/CBS
- WTC Uncut by Bryan Kortis and Steven Mudrick
- WTC: The first 24 hours by Etienne Sautet
- In Memoriam: September 11, 2001—A Brad Gray film (Home Box Office)

INTRODUCTION

The Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center was perhaps the most widely seen event in history; it will certainly prove to be the most heavily documented. Whether this was part of the hijackers' plan will probably never be known. Nevertheless, by the time the second plane hit the south tower, the explosion was broadcast live around the world, and thousands of photographers, amateurs and professionals, were roaming New York's streets, recording the day's events on film and videotape.

Since then, images of the second plane crashing into the building and the collapsing towers have become etched in our minds. Endless repetition has not dulled the impact; they still provoke a visceral reaction. At the Armory Show in New York last February, an installation by an Italian artist that used video of the burning towers was removed from the exhibit after workers installing the show, many of whom had participated in the rescue effort, objected to it. Although the rubble has now been cleared from the site, the memory

of the buildings, and those who died there, hovers just below the surface, unseen, but ready to burst out whenever an image appears.

In our age of digital manipulation, the destruction of the World Trade Center appears to have reaffirmed, if only temporarily, the once unshakeable faith in the ability of photography to tell the truth. This time, the cameras did not lie. Two hijacked airplanes hit the towers, which burned and collapsed, taking down four other nearby buildings as well. This did happen. Thousands of people did die. It was not the creation of a Hollywood special effects team. The events of Sept. 11 were so far outside anyone's normal range of experience that the filters we normally use to "screen" television didn't work; the images seemed to bypass the medium altogether. Unfortunately, this unquestioned truthfulness may, in the end, obscure the images' full implications. We have given television god-like powers to recreate the world in its own image. If the "fact" of Sept. 11 is clear, its meaning is not.

Understandably, most attention has focused on New York City and the World Trade Center, given the spectacular collapse of the buildings and the almost instantaneous loss of 3,000 lives. The attack on the Pentagon in particular has faded from public view; the few published photographs of the blackened shell of the Pentagon west wall quickly disappeared, leading to speculation in some quarters, notably France, that the attack itself never happened. For all intents and purposes, the destruction of the Twin Towers has become the symbol of Sept. 11.

Leaving aside the U.S. government's response—bombing Afghanistan, reconfiguring an "axis of evil," and declaring an open-ended "war on terrorism,"—reactions to Sept. 11 have varied. Depending largely on one's cultural and political beliefs, it has been depicted as everything from an unprovoked, murderous assault on innocent people and the American Way of Life to a fiendish plot by the C.I.A. and Israeli intelligence services to discredit the Moslem world. As we know all too well, visual media define how current events

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are perceived and how they will be remembered. For the moment, Sept. 11 has not yet become history.

All governments go to great lengths to control what their citizens see and how the present passes into public memory. Because the Sept. 11 attacks were so unexpected—even, apparently, by US intelligence services—there was little time to censor early news reports. Recognizing this, the White House moved quickly to label any criticism of the US military response as unpatriotic, and to discourage historical or political analysis that might divert attention from the “war on terrorism.” Now, as the first anniversary of Sept. 11 approaches, it is possible—necessary even—to examine how documentary filmmakers and television broadcasters are using the images.

Of the six documentaries discussed, four are independent videos—independent in the sense that they were produced outside major media organizations and the people who made them had creative control over the content. One was shot and edited by independents but packaged and broadcast by CBS. The last is a one-hour program from Home Box Office, Brad Grey Pictures, and Kunhardt Productions that was shown on cable nationally in July. Though not a comprehensive selection—many more videos will be available after Sept. 11, 2002—these videos are representative of what’s been made in the last year, and provide a good framework for discussion.

“9/11: The First 24 Hours” and “WTC Uncut” are almost conceptual works, one relying primarily on visuals, the other on sounds, to convey the feeling of the attack and its aftermath. Both “From the Ashes” and “9/11: Another World is Possible” were shot and edited soon after the attacks and concentrate on first person accounts to give a sense of how New Yorkers reacted. The CBS program, “9/11,” provides a vivid, on-the-spot account of the events from the firemen’s point of view. “In Memorium” combines interviews with Mayor Giuliani and his staff with footage from more than a hundred individuals and news organizations into what the producers call a “historical document.”



THE VIDEOS

WTC Uncut consists of an almost continuous shot of the Twin Towers after the second airplane hit, accompanied by a collage sound track built up from interviews, radio broadcasts, sermons at memorial services, and vocal improvisations. When asked at a screening how the video came about, one of the producers recounted that he was in his midtown office on the morning of Sept. 11 when he looked out a north-facing window and noticed a number of people looking south. He went to the roof, saw smoke pouring from the north tower and immediately ran down to get his video camera. He set it up on a tripod and let it run for the next hour and a half.

The camera doesn’t remain static, zooming in and out erratically from time to time, and panning quickly from one neighboring roof to another. The neutral density filter is turned on and off, over- and underexposing the image. We are always aware that someone is behind the camera, which seems, understandably, to be connected to his nervous system. Some compositions are held longer than others, particularly a medium shot with seven water towers framing the Trade Center, as if we in the audience were in the far background and the water towers were silent witnesses in the middle distance.

When the camera remained fixed for any length of time, my eye tended to wander around the frame, dividing it

into finite sections. In the upper right hand corner, the fragment of another building was outlined against a clear blue sky. Here, everything appeared normal. In the center of the frame was a completely different scene; seemingly endless clouds of dense black smoke billowed out from the towers. In long, static shots even the smallest changes become magnified: a helicopter circling the towers looks like an insect; people on a nearby roof walking from one side of the building to another ruffle the calm at the bottom of the frame. And yet, even knowing that the buildings would eventually collapse didn’t take away the shock when it happens. About a minute after the second tower falls, the image slowly fades to black and the video ends.

At the New York Historical Society, the producers emphasized the sound track since they intended “WTC Uncut” to be a video for the ear rather than the eye. They felt that the image of the burning towers had been seen so often that it had lost its effectiveness. By focusing on words and sounds they argued, audiences would “see” the event in a new way. This viewer at least found himself paying more attention to the image, rather than less. I was unable to fully concentrate on the sound track because it had been dislocated in time and space. While the image takes place in a fixed, continuous time frame (though there appear to be at least two edits or camera stops), the sound track jumps back and forth over a period of several months, and uses numerous voices in different locations.

This disjunction begins immediately. We hear a newscaster announce that it is 8:40 a.m., six minutes before the first plane’s impact; the image on the screen shows the buildings already on fire. Though the sounds are primarily chronological—live radio broadcasts and sirens in the beginning, then eyewitness accounts and later, memorial services and reflections about the event—this progression is interrupted from time to time by a more thematic organization of the audio. Only when the towers collapse do sound and image come together.

For me, anonymous stories and commentary are a mixed blessing: the person’s face or appearance doesn’t divert my attention; on the other hand I don’t



have the advantage of a human face to anchor the words. I did, however, recognize performance artist Pat Oleszko's voice from Deborah Shaffer's video "From the Ashes" (see below), in which she tells the same story about making love with her Yugoslavian boyfriend on one of the upper floors of the Trade Center while it was under construction thirty years ago. Unfortunately, on the sound track you can't see her dangling earrings and gauntlets made out of dominoes.

Etienne Soudet's ten-minute video, "WTC, The First 24 Hours," is divided into four sections: Day, Night, Early Morning, and The Next Day. There is no voice over commentary and, in fact, little sound at all. We do not see the towers burn and fall. In the daytime footage, most of firemen, police, and rescue workers, appear to be in shock. Most often, no one is visible. The camera pans slowly over crushed, smoldering buildings, abandoned stores, and cars covered with gray ash. It zooms back from a close-up of rescue workers to a long shot of seemingly endless devastation. At night, streets appear to be covered by a light snowfall; by the light of day, we know differently.

Though I couldn't discern a logical progression or rhythm internally in each section, it didn't really matter; the shots worked individually. An early morning shot with the rays of sun bleeding through smoke has an eerie beauty but esthetics are not the point here; the focus is on the utter, complete destruction. Because there is so little

sound, what we do hear is magnified. An unseen television set plays in an abandoned store. We hear a commentator asking why this might have happened. The answer is lost. In the last shot, a lone figure walks through the wreckage. He calls out "Hello" twice. There is no answer, only a deafening silence. The video makes its point with economy, austerity and brevity.

"WTC, the First 24 Hours," played continuously at the "Here is New York" photo exhibit on Price Street for several months. The VHS and DVD copies also have a 30 version that has much of the same kind of footage, plus several minutes of the burning towers. The impact of the second airplane happens outside the frame. A split-second before the fireball rises up, the camera shakes slightly and a pigeon flies off from a building ledge in the foreground. After the second tower collapses, the camera holds on the telephoto shot, the roof of a nearby building compressed in the foreground. The smoke drifts quickly away. We are left with a clear blue sky, framed by the building, as if nothing had happened.

The improbable saga of 9/11 by Jules and Gedeon Naudet and James Hanlon is well known but worth repeating. In the spring of 2001, the Naudet brothers teamed up with a friend, New York City fireman James Hanlon, to make a documentary about a rookie fireman. After talking to a number of recruits at the Fire Department Academy they picked Tony Benetatos as their subject. After graduation, he was attached to Hanlon's firehouse, just a few minutes from the World Trade Center.

By September, the Naudet brothers had recorded a lot of material on daily life at the firehouse but had no real drama; they needed a big fire. On the morning of Sept. 11, a truck went out on a routine call—a gas leak on West Street. Jules, who usually did the sound recording, went along with a camera to get more experience shooting. As the firemen were checking the street gratings for gas, they heard a roar overhead and everyone looked up. The camera pans around, we hear one of the firemen say "Oh shit!," and the first airplane hit the North Tower. With Jules Naudet right behind them, the men jump on the truck and are among the

first units to reach the Trade Center. For most of the next nine hours Naudet stayed with Battalion Chief Pfeifer, the only cameraman inside Tower 1.

The Naudet brothers edited their 180 hours of footage into a two-hour program that was broadcast on CBS in March 2002 with Nextel as the single sponsor and Robert DiNero as host. At a panel discussion on television documentaries, the Naudet brothers said that they had creative control over the program, so perhaps we can't blame CBS for the banal script that DiNero appears to be reading from a teleprompter on the sidewalk. Yes, DiNero is the unofficial spokesperson for Tribeca, but do we really need him, or anyone else, to tell us that we are watching an Important Event? Instead of commercials, the program seamlessly integrates public service spots featuring photographs of public safety workers from around the country—police, firemen, smoke jumpers, border guards, deputy sheriffs, forest rangers—a large group, well integrated by race and gender. Tom Ridge, Director of the Office of Homeland Security, introduced the spots, emphasizing the importance of these men and women in protecting us from terrorists.

Most of the program's first half-hour is taken up with daily life in the firehouse, intercut with sound bites of the Naudet Brothers and Hanlon, recounting their experience. Tony, the rookie, is an engaging and unaffected subject. He tells us that became a fireman because he wanted to be a hero, and the Fire Department was really the only place where he could do that. He absorbs the good-natured hazing of the veterans because this is what a rookie has to do if he wants to become part of the family. The Naudet brothers have already been accepted into this closed fraternity, joking and eating with the firemen, then cooking them a French meal. In spite of the Naudets' obvious closeness to the firemen, or perhaps because of it, we never really feel the intimacy of the firehouse and its rituals. The camera always keeps us at a distance.

The program is strongest at moments of high drama and emotion: the first plane hitting Tower 1; inside the lobby of the North Tower when the South Tower collapses; standing in the shadow of the North Tower when it begins to



fall. The tearful reunion of the Naudet brother at the end of the day and an emotional interview with Chief Pfeifer, whose brother, also a fireman, died in Tower 1, are moving. In the last analysis however, these moments don't make a two-hour documentary.

Sometimes I wished that the camera-work had been better, outside as well as inside the buildings, but fate decides these things, and no one knows if a more experienced hand would have been steadier under those conditions. As Jules says in the beginning: people are chosen to be the witnesses of history, and this time it was us. In the future, perhaps the Naudets will have more confidence in their footage-and us-instead of using a celebrity presenter, and voice-overs to tell us what we were seeing. When Jules says "seeing the look on the firefighters' faces ... it wasn't fear, it was disbelief," I found myself thinking: "No. That's not disbelief. That's fear."

Although it passes by quickly and is never brought up again, a brief comment raises the issue of ethical judgments about what to film. As Jules runs inside Tower 1 we hear him in voice over saying that there were two badly burned people to his right that he decided not to tape. This could have been done out of respect for the victims-or fear that he might be tempted to use the shot if

he had it. Instead, it is the sensibility of the viewers that concerns him. "No one should have to see this," he says.

Photographers have grappled with this question since Matthew Brady took pictures of dead soldiers on the battlefield during the Civil War. John Huston's W.W.II documentary "The Battle of San Pietro," was banned because the film's images of dead Americans were judged to be too unsettling for the home front, and bad for troop morale. The same was true for most of the news coverage of the Vietnam War on American television. Photographers and cameramen in questionable situations will often take the shot, then leave the decision on whether or not to use it to their editors. In the hours after the planes hit the Twin Towers, newspapers and television stations ran pictures of people jumping from the upper floors; in most cases these images were quickly withdrawn. In Europe and Latin America this was not the case.

By staying so close to the firemen, the video provides a disturbing picture of the impossible conditions they faced in Tower 1 before the collapse of the south Tower. As the men arrive in the lobby of Tower 1, Battalion Chief Pfeifer quickly takes charge of the situation but it is soon obvious that the radios do not work and he can't communicate with his men in the building, or other Fire Department commanders outside. There is none of the precisely choreographed action we are accustomed to seeing in disaster movies. Many of the firemen were unfamiliar with the layout of the World Trade Center; Chief Pfeifer writes "Tower 1" in big letters in front of his makeshift command post so newcomers will know where they are. Loaded with sixty pounds of gear, we see the firemen beginning the long climb up the stairs to try to contain the fire and rescue survivors. We know that many of them will not return.

When the South Tower falls, Chief Pfeifer leaves a group of his men in the lobby while he searches for a way out beyond the falling debris. He finds one, but is unable to contact the men on the radio, so he walks all the way back, only to find that they discovered another exit on their own and had left. Once outside, it is clear that he and the other firemen had no idea that the South

Tower had collapsed.

Back in the firehouse, Gedeon Naudet and Tony are alone. For different reasons, both are anxious to get to the Tower-Gedeon to find his brother, Tony to join the men—but Tony had been ordered to stay and doesn't want to leave the firehouse empty. A group of off-duty firemen, including a retired battalion chief, arrive and the chief orders Tony to get his gear and go with him. Soon after, Gedeon hitches a ride with three off duty firemen in the back of a pickup truck. Scenes like this were repeated throughout Manhattan as firemen rushed directly to the site, ready to help in any way they could. Although these actions were indeed selfless, they made it difficult to maintain discipline, or keep track of anyone.

In a long article (July 7, 2002), the New York Times discussed a report analyzing the Fire Department's performance on Sept. 11. One of the findings was an almost total lack of communication between the Police and Fire Departments, because of long-standing hostility between the two uniformed services. To cite just one example, helicopter pilots gave Police Department officials a fairly accurate picture of the Towers' condition and the possibility of Tower 1 collapsing 20 minutes before it happened. No firemen were aboard any of the police helicopters and that information that was never relayed to the Fire Department.

Seeing the program a second time, months after its initial broadcast, I still found the picture of the insular, male world of the firehouse over-romanticized. Still, it made me understand the sometimes reckless courage you'd need to put other people's lives ahead of your own. By the end of the program, Tony has gone through a more harrowing initiation than he could ever imagine. If he wasn't a fireman, he tells us, he could join the Army. He now knows that he could kill someone. The long, sad epilogue of slow pan shots over photographs of the firemen who died, while "Danny Boy" plays on the sound track, can't help but remind us of the racial makeup of the Department.

"From the Ashes," produced by Martin Kraml, directed by Deborah Shaffer, filmed and edited by Michael Berz, looks at the reactions, personal and profession-

al, of nine SoHo and Tribeca artists (ten, if we count Deborah Shaffer herself) to the events of Sept. 11. The documentary was shot and edited in six weeks, and broadcast in Austria in Nov. 2001, giving it a sense of immediacy, and capturing reactions that will change over time. The artists, include musicians, painters, performance artists, and an independent video maker, are, as one might expect, a mixed bag. Their reactions cover a wide range: one woman goes to have her hair style and color changed, another spends her time delivering supplies.

Independent video producer Skip Blumberg, who begins the program, is almost a caricature of the self-absorbed artist. He walks around the area as if he owns it (referring to City Hall Park as "his" park), oblivious to almost everyone. As he enters the building where his studio is located, he remarks that he's had to cancel a studio visit from the Museum of Modern Art. In response to a question about whether he shot any video, he answers that he doesn't make videos about horrifying events, only celebrations. We then see a clip of a short video portrait he made of a young girl in the neighborhood giving out home-baked cookies to the firemen and rescue workers. When Shaffer asks him what his biggest concern is, he answers that he's looking at her and it wouldn't be a good camera angle. I thought he was joking.

Not all the artists are as self-centered as Blumberg. One of the men, musician Tony Nunziata, goes to his neighborhood firehouse to volunteer and soon finds himself in full gear, working with the rescue squad. Performance artist Pat Oleszko, appears to be the most unnerved by the experience. Unable to continue playing the fool, as she puts it, she works long hours as a volunteer, bringing food to the rescue workers. A Tribeca resident for more than 30 years, she offers her personal stories (see above) and the most insightful comments when she says that we as a nation have to be responsible for what we've done and who we are. Laurie Anderson, who seems totally detached from the events in the first interview, does eventually say that Sept. 11 has forced her to rethink some of her preconceived ideas about Islam and the Middle East, but



she's not convincing. She does get the best (and perhaps the only) laugh of the program when she says that if the reason for the attack was hatred of our technology and fast food, the French would have done it years ago. Two other artists, Lisa Corinne Davis and Shahzia Sikander, speak eloquently about becoming more conscious of their racial and ethnic identities, as well as their art, but ultimately, the artists are neither articulate nor compelling.

What comes out most strongly in the video is their isolation. Before Sept. 11, most saw Tribeca as a separate universe from the Twin Towers and the World Financial Center, which were, literally, just around the corner. The destruction of the World Trade Center had a tremendous physical impact on their lives, forcing them to temporarily locate in several cases. It also seems to have awakened them to the fact that whether we like it or not, we are all living in the same world. How it affected their creativity, and their personal lives, remains to be seen. A sequel, showing their reactions over the first year, is in the works and may answer these questions. Or it may not.

"9/11: Another World is Possible," produced by the Independent Media Center, Big Noise Tactical, and Paper Tiger TV, was shot and edited even quicker than "From the Ashes"—the half hour video was finished on Sept. 27. On one

level, "Another World is Possible" is flip side of HBO's "In Memorium:" a collective work with its anti-war stance out front, made quickly with minimal resources and destined most likely only for alternative distribution outlets. This is unfortunate, because in spite of its flaws, 9/11 offers an important corrective to the drum-beating patriotism in the mainstream media, and is as much of a "historical document" as "In Memorium," which relegates anti-war demonstrations to oblivion.

The beginning is promising. After a short title sequence, we hear a voice singing a spiritual, "Please Lord, speak to me ..." as we see firemen and rescue workers walking through the dust in slow motion, and people in Union Square lighting candles. Then we cut to the inside of a subway car and the unidentified Black man who is singing the spiritual. "Everybody say Amen," he says, "We're at war, and the only thing that war means is that a lot of people gonna die and it won't be the government, because they're protected." "Anybody on this train know why we're at war?" he then asks. No one answers. "Another World is Possible" attempts to provide an answer through interviews with unidentified experts (we know they're experts because we can see bookshelves behind them), and the common sense of in-the-street interviews with "ordinary" New Yorkers.

Most of the street footage was shot around Union Square, which became an unofficial gathering place in the days after Sept. 11, both because of its history, and because it was the northern boundary of Ground Zero. Votive candles, pictures of the dead and missing and scrawled messages filled the Square, and the camera rightly lingers over these eloquent testimonies. Several of the people interviewed speak about the need to find and punish those who organized the attacks, but also question the wisdom, or the need, for an all out bombing campaign. Later, at



night, a young Muslim woman speaks about the violence that had taken place against men who looked like they were from the Middle East, and cars with stickers in Arabic on them. The video is most successful in capturing the atmosphere around Union Square in the week after Sept. 11, when people's reactions were fresh and immediate.

The video is less convincing when it attempts to get at the reasons behind the attack through short interviews with unidentified experts and graphics outlining some of the past history in the Middle East. These interviews are not persuasive and unlikely to convince anyone who did already share the speakers' views. More convincing are the people on the street, though clearly angry in some cases, yet questioning whether an ongoing war is the only answer. The video ends with a peace march, and an eloquent statement from a young man who argues that a struggle for a better world is better for everyone, and that another world is indeed possible. We'd like to believe him and share his optimism.

"In Memorium: 9/11" is the most elaborate and sophisticated production of the group, using material selected from hundreds of hours of video and thousands of photographs. Sixteen news organizations and 118 individual photographers and cameramen are credited as each of their shots first appears. There are no end credits except for Brad Gray Productions. One could see this as modesty and self-effacement, unless you know that Brad Gray is Rudolph Giuliani's Hollywood agent. In this case, you might consider this a clever device to make a carefully crafted television program trumpeting America patriotism and Giuliani's heroic stature seem like a collective enterprise. A title card informs us that the program is a "historical document." Does this mean that we should assume that the video is a "document," therefore absolutely true and unquestionable? Or, that its place in history has already been reserved? In either case the label is presumptuous unless the video is to be used as evidence if Rudolph Giuliani is nominated for sainthood.

The documentary footage is organized around on-camera interviews and voice over with Mayor Giuliani and primarily, members of his staff—a deputy

mayor, the police and fire commissioners, the mayor's bodyguard, and his executive assistant, though a police helicopter pilot makes a brief appearance. The Mayor's companion, Judith Nathan, also appears, recounting the story of the Mayor's phone call telling her that he'd been reading Churchill in the early morning hours of September 12th to get a sense of what it was like to be a leader in wartime. In a perhaps unconscious acknowledgement of Giuliani's leadership, he is interviewed looking from right to left; almost everyone else is looking left to right.

The early scenes, recreating the terror of the first hours after the attack with aerial and ground footage, and cell phone messages from people trapped in the towers, are strong, and take full advantage of professional and amateur video footage from numerous locations. Unlike the Naudet brothers, the HBO program does show brief photo and video sequences of a man jumping from one of the towers, as well as a quick shot of what appears to be a burned body on the ground. On the soundtrack of the video sequence, we do hear a barely audible voice saying, "Oh man, you shouldn't show that" as people jump from the windows. Perhaps enough time has elapsed that these scenes can be shown. In general, the documentary material is not sensationalized.

Beth Petrone, Giuliani's executive assistant, whose husband, a fire cap-

tain, died when the towers collapsed, gives a heartbreaking interview because she is able to articulate her sadness and loss so well. Unfortunately, this and several other scenes are marred by the heavy-handed use of music, added to make sure that we get the point.

While the Mayor's calm, sure-handed leadership on Sept. 11 and the days afterward was admirable, portraying him as a calm, compassionate, fearless leader is at best misleading. If one considers, for example, the lack of communication between the Police and Fire Departments, some responsibility must rest with the Mayor, whose tenure in office was marked by an intense desire to control city government and its various departments. The commissioners were his appointees, answerable to him, which is obvious when we see the Mayor striding through downtown, the Police and Fire Commissioners following in his wake, then standing behind him at press conferences.

In the end, "In Memorium" is a call for unquestioning support of government officials and American policies. When Giuliani says that terrorists attacked the Twin Towers because they were a symbol of our freedom, particularly our economic freedoms, it would be pointless to contradict him because of the heroic stature the program confers on him. There is no attempt to understand why the attack might have happened, or that that any activities in New York after Sept. 11 included demonstrations against the bombing of Afghanistan. "In Memorium" depicts Sept. 11 as a finite, isolated moment in history, cut off from the past, yet attempting to define the future.

Nevertheless, images stimulate memories and sometimes one cannot totally avoid making connections. In the sequence of people with pictures of their missing relatives, an older woman, wearing a black shawl, stands holding a photograph of her son. I asked myself where I'd seen an image like that before, and then I remembered: "the mothers of the Plaza" in Argentina, searching for their children and husbands among the thousands who had disappeared under the United States-backed military junta. This too is the history of September 11th, but you won't find it here.



CONCLUSIONS

In the final analysis, all these videos are dissatisfying and incomplete in different ways because they try to erect traditional media structures around an event that, initially at least, refuses to be contained. Sept. 11 broke down the traditional framework of how we perceive events and how they are portrayed on television. The images don't "fit" our preconceived ideas about how the world is supposed to work, and any discussion is inextricably linked with emotions that overpower the images.

In a way, the very idea of attacking the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and, presumably, a target in Washington D.C, like the White House, invites denial. The consequences are too disturbing. Watching a building collapse on television is not the same as seeing it from a hundred yards away. Imagining three thousand people dying in a country half way around the world is an abstraction. Seeing them incinerated from your living room window is quite another. Dropping bombs from 30,000 feet removes airplane crews from direct contact with the damage below. If images of burning houses and shattered bodies were instantly relayed back to them, it might not be so easy.

"In Memorium" attempts to disturb and reassure at the same time. Disturbance in the survivors running in the streets, cell phone messages from those who were trapped, shots of people jumping from high windows and terrified bystanders. Reassurance in the calm, confident tone of Mayor Giuliani and his aides. How fortunate we are to have such responsible and dedicated leaders! As the American flag is raised over the rubble to the strains of "God Bless America," we can still feel that all is right in the world.

In our current political climate it may be impossible for a video to give a critical, historical perspective on Sept. 11. No sound bite or archival footage can compete with the emotions evoked by the images of the collapsing towers. Reading might be more persuasive and productive because in reading one can at least take the time to reflect and reflection is essential for understanding. Television, unfortunately, is not a medium that encourages reflection. Sept. 11 has already brought about vast changes in how we conduct business in public, think in private, and look at our neighbors. If a new attack can come at any time, from anywhere, then everyone is suspect. No one can live freely for long in this kind atmosphere. The real image of Sept. 11 is fear.

Until last year, the United States was one of the few countries in the world whose territory had been spared the destructive wars of the 20th century. The protective screen has now been removed. Our political leaders would like us to believe that money, weapons, and a cloak of moral superiority will help provide security, and that history will absolve us of any wrongdoing because God is on our side.

Perhaps a film about Sept. 11 will be made, a film that forces us to look, not just at the terrifying spectacle in front of us, but back at ourselves, as individuals, and as a nation. Violent death by any means- napalm, carpet-bombing, train wrecks, hijacked airplane, or starvation-is horrible. We now know that it can happen in the United States, that we too are vulnerable. What we do with this knowledge is another matter. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that television will help us.

