



## PROGRAMMER'S NOTE

Rebecca Turner

The idea of a film program attempting to periodize the cinema created during George W. Bush's presidency started with the students involved in Stanford Cinematheque, the graduate student-led screening series on Stanford's big ugly campus. This was in the winter of 2005. It rained almost every day; we screened fourteen films in ten weeks. Before that, the idea to survey the Bush presidency happened as I watched Michael Mann's *Collateral* for the first time. Actually, it was at that moment when two coyotes stopped Jamie Foxx's taxi cab in its tracks. I've been trying to come up with the reason why that image produced this idea. When I watch this scene, I am reminded of a pain that I only ever witnessed through the eyes of a child. I remember coming home from school and walking in on my dad playing Solitaire on his desktop computer again. I remember the view of the Dairy Queen off of I-95 on the north shore of Massachusetts from the backseat of a grown-up's car. Some afternoons, my sister and I were allowed to stop for an ice cream cone. I remember the jagged cruelty of an elder millennial coworker at the grocery store I worked in, his skinny jeans clinging to his knees. His earlobes, which had been stretched out by the gauge plugs he no longer wore, flapped and bobbed when he cocked his head.

What does it mean to historicize the recent past? I have no fucking idea. I was born in 1998. I can't believe I don't remember any of it. But Katherine Franco keeps telling me I have it all figured out. My best friend's sister was born on September 11, 2001. He says it's his first memory, and nobody believes him. What does it mean to turn our sails back towards the beginnings of post-everything? At times, these films rehash the past— like *Redacted*, Brian De Palma's quasi-remake of his own *Casualties of War*. *Bamboozled*, too, rips what came before out of its amber cast and stuffs it in the mouth of Michael Rappaport. The amusement park that restages *The World* still has the Twin Towers standing. The characters seem proud of this fact. *Frownland* ignores the coming of the digital world in favor of a harrowing analog-ness. It's the too-close close ups that swallow the face, dismembering it into solitary features, or maybe it's the poor lighting of the administered World, so to speak, all fluorescent overheads or filtered through the smog of New

York, or a phone call never answered, or walking into a room you don't know how to leave and needing to throw up all of a sudden. Shiny lip gloss smeared over pale concealer. And nobody has any money.

For some, the coming of the digital era seemed like a threat. For others, the digital was an opportunity. With the cinema of the Bush years, I hope to draw near on an as-yet nameless affect that poisons the forms of these films. What is a memory with nothing inside? I wonder how it all will go.



## FURTHER VIEWING

*I.K.U.* (2000), Shu Lea Cheang // *Decasia* (2002), Bill Morrison // *The Fog of War* (2003), Errol Morris // *I Like Okinawa Sweet* (2004), Chikako Yamashiro // *Birth* (2004), Jonathan Glazer // *Chain* (2004), Jem Cohen // *A History of Violence* (2005), David Cronenberg // *Man Push Cart* (2005), Ramin Bahrani // *Inland Empire* (2006), David Lynch // *I-Be Area* (2007), Ryan Trecartin // *Lovely Andrea* (2007), Hito Steyerl // *Our Beloved Month of August* (2008), Miguel Gomes

## ***BUSH-ERA CINEMA: WHAT HAPPENED?***

A.S. Hamrah

From the stolen presidential election in 2000, through the destruction of the World Trade Center and the subsequent Global War on Terror, through the torture of prisoners by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib, and onto today, when paramilitary thugs sponsored by the federal government murder American citizens in the street, the entire twenty first century has been a series of domestic and international disasters brought on by fantasies of empire that emanated from what, during the years of George W. Bush's presidency, was officially renamed the *Homeland*. It was a term fished from the grab bag of history to describe the security state that Bush and his cabinet sought to impose on the world.

The Hollywood cinema, long internationalized and dependent on foreign box office, reflected this. If the 1990s were a period in which problems of violence and racism could be depicted on screen, and in which there was greater acceptance of Black and Asian actors as movie stars, the first ten years of the twenty first century reversed it. Overnight, we went from difficult, knotty, and experimental work like Spike

Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) and the crowd-pleasing subtitled beauty of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) to the all-white tradition-mongering of the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* blockbusters, and to the worship of power and authority in superhero movies starring Batman and Iron Man.

This new era of intellectual property revival was by nature backward-looking and ideologically retrograde. The properties were the products of earlier decades now remade to fit into a new world order. It culminated in the unreflective worship of old TV shows: *The Dukes of Hazzard* (2005) and *Scooby-Doo* (2002), for instance, with *Charlie's Angels* (2000) poised right on the line between the 1990s and 2000s modes of big-budget American cinema, when the idea was that reboots might be sexy and fun.

While the Hollywood film studios worshipped at the altar of franchise entertainment, outside the movie theaters a discourse grew on how "quality television" on cable TV had eclipsed the cinema. New series (*The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, etc.) were seen as preferable to the stupidity of what multiplex cinema had become. Enraptured by these shows, writers about TV began to compare them to nineteenth-century novels. Clearly something was breaking down in American entertainment. Streaming television was on the horizon, the deluge of "peak TV" that would seek to wash away theatrical exhibition. But in years of Bush II, box office was still high.

But the best films of those years countered the infantilism of Hollywood. These were micro-indies that worked against the false comfort of the newly unoriginal blockbusters by burrowing into the least appealing aspects of the American character--movies like Ronald Bronstein's *Frownland* (2007) and Mary Bronstein's *Yeast* (2008) were high-water marks of that strain. At the same time, various kinds of arthouse cinema emerged overseas as a riposte to the blockbuster: the extremity of French horror and the primacy of Claire Denis inside and outside of it, Michael Haneke's bitterness, Jafar Panahi's resilience, the slow cinema of Tsai Ming-liang and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the entirety of the New Romanian Cinema. When I think of twenty first century cinema, I think of how the Romanians essentially saved it, a living testament to less being more, to a cinema of necessity in which what is called entertainment value is run over by a truck and thrown into the mud by the side of the road, left there to sputter.

## ***NYC WEIGHTS AND MEASURES***

Katherine Franco



“THE ‘NOISE’ YOU HEAR IS THE SOUND OF FREEDOM.” These words mark the entrance to a US Marine Corps Air Station in South Carolina featured in Jem Cohen’s *Chain* (2004), but they might as well be the slogan of every chopper above every American city under every police commissioner, every mayor, every president. That noise you hear—in Oakland or Minneapolis or Cohen’s Manhattan in *NYC Weights and Measures* (2005)—is the grisly din of “freedom.” But the noise above that noise: that noise is the critique provided by Cohen’s 2005 short.

Each minute of *NYC Weights and Measures* expands the category of the documentary. Cohen’s six or so minutes capture a ticker-tape parade for astronaut John Glenn shot on a hand-wound 16mm Bolex camera. The short features shots of the subway for which Cohen is known and whose sequence is so immense that I can’t help but begin to think I prefer the “short” to all cinematic forms for its distinct capacity to blow time open, like the enjambment of a line or the punctuation of a subway door. *NYC Weights and Measures* takes an informational turn wherein its credits announce that street scenes like these resulted in the confiscation of Cohen’s camera by a Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) and the FBI in 2005. Cohen was stopped while shooting from a train window in January 2005 and never got his film back. *NYC Weights and Measures* is a document of how street footage became a national security concern in the years following the Patriot Act.

That postscript offers what might be our truest—or only—form of a national cinema. I am not especially interested in reading the national question in contemporary cinema as much as the fact that we owe it to ourselves to understand the Department of Homeland Security’s rewriting of the national question in US-made documentary film since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Cohen resists a sloganeering documentary practice and in turn offers the subtler historical lesson: every document of US empire cannot help but sloganeer through its necessary record of securitization. Actually, the important thing here might be that Cohen makes politically significant documentary cinema if only because his work makes itself available to its unconscious. He, in his words, insists that “a radical approach can and maybe should

be an uncertain one.” *NYC Weights and Measures* stages what happens when the material consequences and procedures of JTTFs go toe to toe with the openness of the production process. Against Cohen’s trembling document of a city, these intelligence organizations announce that there will be no noise other than the sound of freedom installed by the state.

But the poetics of Cohen’s footage is hard to forget. The parade’s confetti at the outset of *NYC Weights and Measures* is so ecstatic—like snow or sex—it could make you believe in revelation despite the onslaught of flags and office windows. In a kind of satire of James Joyce’s snow that famously covers “all the living and the dead” at the end of “The Dead” in a nod at a (surely impossible) unifying national project, the majesty of Cohen’s city covered in confetti is wiped of its transcendent quality through the Bush era’s footnote at the film’s end.

I watched *NYC Weights and Measures* on my laptop in the same seat from which I heard helicopters for hours on January 5, 2024, after law enforcement officers entered and walled off People’s Park for the construction of student housing, and November 10, 2025 upon Turning Point USA’s stop at Berkeley. I had the impulse to get up and close the windows while watching, as I did in January and November, before I realized that the chopper’s meter came from Cohen’s wispy scenes of a New York winter. *NYC Weights and Measures*: it makes us sit with history through its insistence upon its record.



## **BEN RUSSELL**

In conversation with Rebecca Turner

### **What does *trypps* mean?**

I thought of it as the Old English spelling of a word that could describe voyages / journeys that were both internal and external. It eventually became the series title for a group of 7 films, only three of which were in black and white. *Black and White Trypps Number Three* - which is definitely in color - is only called that because it was written on the slate that opens the film.

### **What does *psychedelic ethnography* mean?**

There is a long history of ethnographic films trying to represent its subjects in the throes of trance / altered states - an objective vision of a subjective experience - but I was looking for an approach that could also address the creation of a third state, the trance state of cinema, in which the audience is directly implicated. Psychedelic ethnography was a way for the viewer, the subject and the author to be present at once critically and viscerally, to allow for an oscillation between regard and total immersion. This is one of the reasons why the term "trance film" is used in the end credits.

**That is a term that you were using in 2007, and you're still using to describe your work now. Or at least other people are. Do you think the**

### **meaning of the term has shifted?**

I came to understand the phrase more in terms of process than result - it was a very useful way for me to define my general approach to filmmaking, one in which I was trying to think about subject as not just the reflection presented onscreen but also as the author, audience, material, means of production and moment of projection. The "sensory ethnography" term came into play in 2009 and it's probably a more defensible term academically (especially since it springs out of academic anthropology) - whereas my phrase is a bit more bombastic and ultimately a bit sillier...

### **You often triangulate the experience of your films between the subject, the documentarian, and the audience. Does ethnography require a watcher?**

The watcher is the researcher. The watcher is the person who's doing the study of the subject and then presenting that material to an audience who absorbs it. So the distance that the audience perceives between themselves and the subject on screen isn't an actual distance. Because there is no subject on screen, but there was a subject who was being filmed in a moment, and the distance between the author and the subject is the thing that's being retransmitted to the audience. When you watch a film, you're not in the same room with the person who's on screen. Yeah, we all know this, but it works because there are moments where you forget that you're not in the same room on screen, and you experience what they're experiencing as if you were experiencing it yourself. And it's that thing that I'm interested in, the retransmission of experience. Also I think that ethnography tends to think of itself as document, as representation (or maybe just as document), whereas art, and certainly experimental cinema, is grounded more in poetry and metaphor and re-presentation.

### **How did the *Trypps* series come to exist?**

I had just finished making my first sync-sound 16mm film and felt stuck by the choices I'd made, by the limited amount of material I'd filmed, by my own inadequacies as a script-writer and a fiction filmmaker (this film was a re-enactment, of sorts). I was going to a lot of experimental noise concerts at the time and felt very excited about how different my sense of self was when I was in those spaces - and I decided to try to translate this to cinema, to make works that could be immersive, overwhelming and transformational within the set of tools that I had access to. The first two *Trypps* films were quick gestural films that I initially projected while a friend of mine was giving a live drone performance. I took

those materials and made them into silent 16mm film prints - and then I decided that I should go to the source and make a third film that used one of these concerts into the subject, that relied on my own experience as an audience member to expand the film into something beyond document.

#### **How did it end?**

When I finished *Trypps #7 (Badlands)* and then the honorary *Trypps* film *River Rites*, I felt like I had made a complete series of works that brought us back to where it started - that the internal world of Ruth on acid was possibly the abstract world that exists in *Black and White Trypps Number One*. In a formal sense, I also felt like I really understood how the long single 16mm take could function and what I could do with it - and I wanted to move onto other questions and subjects, to be less gestural.

#### **What was it like to be a working artist in the US in 2007?**

Given the history of experimental filmmaking in the USA, I never expected to be able to make a living as an artist so my notion of being a “working artist” had everything to do with production and exhibition and nothing to do with income. I started teaching when I was still in graduate school and was lucky to have started screening my films at international film festivals as early as 2001, so being a working artist meant teaching as an adjunct, going to every film screening I could, traveling to whichever festival would pay for my flight, running a screening series in order to show the works that I wanted to see / felt were important and using my school breaks to tour with my films in the USA and Europe.

It’s funny to think about this film in terms of Bush, because I have to say, I’ve never thought about this film in that context. I don’t know that the conditions of filmmaking were any different under Obama or Clinton or Trump. I don’t think that being a working artist has ever really been a different kind of dynamic in the United States, because arts funding hasn’t really existed since the 80s. You just kind of make stuff. You make things with what you have available.

#### **Where did you live?**

I had just moved back to Chicago to start my first full-time teaching position at the University of Illinois in Chicago. When I shot *Black and White Trypps Number Three*, I was still living in Providence, Rhode

Island and teaching at Emerson College, the Museum School of Fine Arts and Brown University - all at once!

#### **What was the process for shooting *Black and White Trypps Number Three*?**

Lightning Bolt was from Providence so I already knew the Brians and had seen them perform live a bunch of times already. I knew exactly what I wanted - not to make a concert film but rather a portrait of the audience - and the fact that they played on the ground was important to the way I’d film as it would allow me to be at the same level as their audience. I had one 10:00 roll of 16mm film so I asked if I shoot two songs during their concert; I borrowed an Aaton from Brown and taped a flashlight to it, gave Brian Chippendale a slate and asked him to clap it about halfway through the show so that the audience would already be sweaty and lost in the scene. I put my camera on a tripod behind the bass amp where I could see parts of Brian Gibson’s guitar and started filming; I knew that I wanted to shoot in slow-motion as well, so after the first 4:00 minute sync shot, I changed the camera speed and became a bit more selective with where my camera was pointed. When I got the footage back from the lab and saw it projected for the first time, I was amazed at how much it looked like a Movie and how close it was to what I’d wanted / imagined / prepared for - and how what was really great about the material was everything that the world produced in the moment - the slack jaw, the clap, the sweat, the present.

#### **When did you leave the United States?**

I quit my teaching job in 2011 in order to try making a living at being an artist full-time in Europe; I moved to Paris and lived there for a few years, came back to LA in 2014 and then moved to Marseille in 2019.

#### **How do you see *Black and White Trypps Number Three* now?**

It’s amazing how it has shifted into a document of a moment in time - a present before cell-phone cameras, before COVID, before now. This always happens to films but you can never anticipate the future lives they’ll have.

#### **What is your favorite part?**

The flare-out to white when the camera roll runs out! It’s a moment when we can feel our pupils dilate as we are all returned to the cinema, to ourselves, when the time of the film has stopped being our time and now only exists in the past.

## ***FROWNLAND***

Paul Grimstad

We shot *Frownland* over five or six years. It was quite sporadic and did not see the light of day (i.e. projected in front of strange audiences in strange little theaters in NYC) until four or five years after all the footage was in the can. What comes to mind before any general historical label such as “Bush years” was being poor, adrift, jobless (aside from a few bookstore gigs), not in great physical or mental health, wincing at ATM displays of checking account balances, and obsessively writing and recording music on an eight track cassette machine in a dusty room in Brooklyn (the glorious, MIDI-equipped Tascam 688 if you’re interested). It was only later that we (or at least I) fell into a protracted, traumatized numbness at the spectacle of those two commercial airliners slamming into the World Trade Center on a sparkling, cloudless Manhattan morning. I watched that happen live on a TV in the studio apartment of a girlfriend in Morningside Heights on the Upper West Side. You could smell the burning metal all the way up on 110th and Amsterdam. In the months after 9/11, you’d look up and see a jet, no doubt on a routine flight path into LaGuardia or JFK, and have about ten seconds of being totally convinced that this one was going to hit another building. If the fear and numbness of those days seeped into *Frownland*, it was certainly not by design. The world of the Brooklyn apartment on which much of the agon between Keith and Charles is (loosely) based was light years from any kind of political reality— a hermetically sealed microcosm of records, DVDs books and invented bits we would replay over and over, day after day, to keep each other amused in this weird state. If you’ve ever seen the movie *Withnail and I*, you can get a sense of what the texture of daily life was like. And yet we shot the dramatized version of that life in the post-9/11 malaise. I think the real irony is that while the US public was subjected to the curious spectacle of Colin Powell selling that “yellowcake” Uranium line which became the justification for invading Iraq, and that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, etc, etc—all lingo that strikes me as of the period—it did not remotely affect

the world we had locked ourselves into. In my case this world involved acting, collaborating on the strangely vehement harangues Charles unleashed on Keith, composing the film’s score and finally scraping around in search of a grad school stipend (I got an email telling me that Brown had admitted me to their PhD program in literature during a *Frownland* shoot in Abingdon Square in the West Village; I ended up, after a visit to Providence, preferring to stay in New York and opted for NYU). In retrospect, it all feels like larval training for immersive writing/composing/teaching/acting as a protective buffer in a world that seemed (and seems increasingly) incomprehensible and out of control. This is a pattern which I still, for better or worse, follow to this day.



## ***BUSH'S BLACK NEOCONSERVATIVES: BAMBOOZLED & AMERICAN MINSTRELSY***

Kyéra Sterling

Midway through *Bamboozled* (2000), Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) is gifted a minstrel “piggy bank” by his assistant Sloan Hopkins (Jada Pinkett-Smith). The figurine – a ceramic of caricatured black personhood – serves as coin bank and carnivalesque spectacle: a coin deposited into the outstretched hand mechanizes the figurine so that the minstrel rolls its eyes into vacant sockets of gauche ecstasy. It’s both a harbinger and symbol of Delacroix’s bind: suffocated by the indefatigable appetite whiteness maintains for blackness in a losing race of assimilationist self-interest.

Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* is hideous and caustic to any audience. There is physical horror in the multiplying live-studio-audience of *Mantan: The New Millenium Minstrel Show* which incrementally turns into a sea of white and black onlookers donning blackface and rabid for the shuck-and-jive of Manray (Mantan played by Savion Glover) and Womack (Sleep ‘n Eat played by Tommy Davidson), two street-performers who agree to the minstrel production to buck their financial straits. The film is a vertical food-chain of black exploitation that positions the entire pyramid of self-serving assimilation in service of the Continental Network System (CNS). Helmed by a brutish white executive (Michael Rapaport) who seemingly loves the n-word more than he does his two biracial daughters, CNS represents Lee’s own entrenchment in the gatekept pastures of media conglomerates that mine blackness for profit while manufacturing racial perception through a conditional apparatus of patronage.

The conceit that *Mantan: The New Millenium Minstrel Show*, meant to expose the network’s racism, instead becomes a national hit urges intramural scrutiny of permutational minstrelsy. The racial-turncoats of *Bamboozled* recall Toni Morrison’s 1998 knighting of Bill Clinton as the first black President of the United States. “Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness,” urges Morrison, “single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-

loving boy from Arkansas.”<sup>1</sup> Even the esteemed (first) (black) Nobel laureate is not exempt from using the cache of black life as fodder for the American machine despite Clinton’s 1996 rollback of social welfare programs through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (which halved the number of families receiving cash assistance between 1994 and 2000 under the guise of promoting “self-sufficiency”).<sup>2</sup>

The pageantry of “black representation”, never exclusive to political party or institutional sector, would continue into a new millennium of neoliberal expansion as Colin Powell became the first confirmed appointee of President-elect George W. Bush. When the Secretary of State, who once told a reporter that “any good subordinate accommodates himself to the wishes of his superior,”<sup>3</sup> was forced to eat his rationalization of the 2001 invasion of Iraq his resignation cleared the way for his successor. Condoleezza Rice, who defected from the Democrats in ’82, became a show-horse for the Republicans who could now posture the post-Rodney King America as one where anti-black racism was merely “residual”<sup>4</sup> as a rising tide of black (neo)conservatives pulled the trigger for a hawkish US war machine hungry for oil.

*Bamboozled* – contending with the ways blackface(s) authenticate/s white power – turns surface racial optics of the early 2000s into a mockery of lose-lose spectacle. Indeed, one might find continuum in the minstrel piggy bank gifted to Delacroix and the Chevron oil tanker named after Condoleezza Rice<sup>5</sup> – both symbolic of the ways Americans are hoodwinked, led amok, and bamboozled.

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1 Morrison, Toni. 1998. “On the First Black President.” *The New Yorker*, September 28, 1998.

2 “Poverty in America: Beyond Welfare Reform.” n.d. *Population Bulletin* 2, vol. 57, 2002 June 25

3 Slevin, Peter. 2021. “How Colin Powell Saw His Role -- and that of Another Famous Non-Quitter.” *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2021.

4 Balz, Dan. 2000. “The Republicans Showcase a Rising Star.” *The Washington Post*, July 31, 2000.

5 Marinucci, Carla. “Chevron Redubs Ship Named for Bush Aide / Condoleezza Rice Drew Too Much Attention.” *SFGate.com*, May 5, 2001.

***IT'S LIBERALISM'S WORLD WE'RE ALL JUST  
LIVING IN IT: THE WORLD***

Delaney Chieyen Holton



*“Are we dead?” / “No, this is just the beginning.”*

Released in 2004, Jia Zhangke’s *The World* emerges from a moment shaped by China’s entry into the WTO in 2001 and the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. These years were defined by growth in foreign direct investment, export manufacturing, and urban development that funneled migrant labor into Chinese cities. Alongside this economic restructuring came the rise of the Chinese data economy, shifting censorship practices, and flashpoints like the SARS crisis. These economic, technological, and regulatory forces structure both *The World’s* production and the lives of its characters, young migrants working as performers and security guards at Beijing World Park. In November 2003, the Film Administration Bureau held a conference at the Beijing Film Academy announcing an embrace of filmmaking as a creative industry rather than solely a channel of political communication, making *The World* Jia’s first film produced with advance state approval. *The World* was also the first of his films to be written on a computer—the

director typed the script on a laptop he lost while traveling in Belgium and later had to re-write it from scratch, a small marker of the digital infrastructures and circulatory conditions increasingly embedded in cultural production in the early 2000s.

A tourist destination of miniaturized national heritage sites, the park serves as a paradigmatic space within which to stage the drama of globalization. Workers don costumes to perform a pastiche of various national cultures, while their class status forecloses their own mobility. The contradictions between the park's surficial aesthetics and their sustaining labor are announced from the film's title sequence: the glamorous Eiffel Tower looms as an elderly gleaner hauls a sack of refuse through the foreground. Reminiscent of Weng Fen's contemporaneous *On the Wall* photographs, the image captures the uneven development produced by the period's economic liberalization. Yet, despite the park's obvious artificiality, there is nothing unreal about the lives that traffic through it. Workers live and love within the park's bounds, while social transgressions persist alongside tentative transnational solidarities. For them, the park is not a zone of exception external to a more authentically globalized world, but a condensation of the conditions of their present. That Jia drew inspiration from Zhao Tao's experience performing at a similar theme park in Shenzhen adds yet another layer to the film's hyperreal assemblage. As the second half of the film accumulates injuries, betrayals, and deaths with grim inevitability, *The World* lays bare development's cruel optimism, figuring globalization as an expansion of extractive inequities. Lim Giong's chilling electronic score identifies the aesthetic homogenization that lubricates global mobility, as its relentless tonal consistency, even amid devastating loss, produces a synthetic continuity congruent with capital's indifference.

Jia's digital animation sequences, triggered by cell phone notifications, momentarily suspend the film's grim realism by visualizing interiorized desires for mobility. These brief eruptions of color and effusive sentiment within the film's otherwise austere visual range complicate the location of freedom. In the end, it is also a text message that leads Tao into her final flight. After the quiet revelation of an affair, Tao escapes into oblivion by poisoning herself and Taisheng with carbon monoxide. When neighbors rush them outside, I almost expect Tao to open her eyes, to make death another elsewhere in the series of costumes she adopts as a performer. Instead, Tao's darkness marks the end of the film and the threshold back into our own lives, where we trade one liberal realism for another.



## *COLLATERAL*

Kola Heyward-Rotimi

An all-gray man supposedly named Vincent (played by Tom Cruise) sits in the backseat of a taxi, taps away at an eReader, and explains to his driver why he hates Los Angeles: “Too sprawled out, disconnected... 17 million people. If this were a country it’d be the fifth biggest economy in the world, and nobody knows each other.” This is the psychogeography of Michael Mann’s *Collateral*: LA is a knot of busy, active terrain, and it is decidedly inhuman. At the time, *Collateral* was Mann’s most ambitious foray into digital cinematography, and he renders this lonely Los Angeles through oceans of black night occasionally split by spears of orange, silver streets. That silver, especially, is condensed for us by Vincent. At first, his fully gray hair seems like an odd costuming decision, as if it was an attempt to age Cruise up. As Vincent interacts with the slickness of Mann’s digital LA, the thinned color palette treats his hair and suit like the silver lights, and he’s rendered as a transitory element. Vincent is metallic.

Nobody knows each other. Nobody knows Vincent, either, a name that is most certainly part of a fake identity that Cruise plays with perfect pitch. Over the course of the night, Vincent chats up his taxi driver Max (Jamie Foxx), murders people, and provides life advice. It takes a corpse falling on his taxi for Max to realize that Vincent is in town to blow a bunch of random people’s brains out, and he’s been chosen as the getaway driver. It’s understandable how Max found himself in this situation—there weren’t any immediate red flags. Like some of the other memorable characters of his career, Cruise nails the cadence of the charismatic sociopath. Vincent is a great conversationalist and gracious in all facets of life until it’s time to inflict violence.

By the end of the film, Vincent becomes the urban legend that he shares with Max in their first encounter, a corpse slumped dead in a metro car that everyone mistakes for a sleeping man, a person to avoid and ignore, abandoned to travel the train in cycles. The general arc of the film bends towards materializing this moment, the harshest example of urban isolation. Vincent’s death is what allows Max and his new lawyer (girl?)friend, Annie (Jada Pinkett-Smith), to escape from becoming the mercenary’s final targets.

The climactic scene of Max killing Vincent isn’t the most morally complicated—Vincent was killing whoever he liked left and right across the movie’s whole runtime, and had held Max hostage in his own vehicle—but it is the unfortunate symmetry of the urban legend Vincent told in the back of Max’s taxi with the actual corpse Vincent becomes at the end of *Collateral* that makes it seem like the villain still won. Vincent was right. He should have left LA, it sucks. We never got to know him.



## ***FROM THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: MIRA NAIR'S 9/11 FILM WE COULDN'T GET THE RIGHTS TO***

Carlos Valladares

Some works are not “good” but historically necessary. Smoothness is artificially prized in this country, and so we shirk or have to apologize for raising up work where things might be a bit off; Oscar Micheaux comes to mind, or Ed Wood. It’s hard not to think of Micheaux for me when I watch something like Mira Nair’s contribution to one of the more unusual omnibus films, *11’09’01*, otherwise known as September 11 (2002). Made a year after the Twin Towers attack and collapse, eleven directors were gathered to produce a film about September 11, 2001; the only stipulation was that it had to be 11 minutes, 9 seconds, and 1 frame: 11/09/01, as the French write dates. This horribly cutesy, horribly banal idea turned out to be, all things considered, better than it had any right to be. This isn’t thanks to the usual suspects of middlebrow garbage: Iñarrítu’s “Mexico” section, Claude Lelouch’s “France” section, Amos Gitai’s “Israel” section, and Sean Penn’s “USA” section, who churn out the omnibus’s worse, most sentimentalized entries. Rather, it’s due to the masters of either subtle allegory (21-year-old Samara Makhmalbaf’s “Iran” section and 74-year-old Shohei Imamura’s “Japan” section, the master’s last film, are the clear standouts of the entire project) or direct confrontation, namely Ken Loach’s Chilean refugee in London writing a letter to American friends reminding them of “the first 9/11”; the U.S.-backed Chilean coup that ousted the democratically elected socialist Salvador Allende and installed a terrorist right-wing military state for more than two decades. And, of course, Mira Nair’s segment, “India,” but set in NYC.

Nair’s short is grounded in the true story of Mohammad Salman Hamdani, a twenty-three-year-old Pakistani-American emergency

medical technician and NYPD cadet from Queens who, on the morning of September 11 2001, selflessly ran toward the World Trade Center to assist in rescue efforts. He never returned. In the chaotic weeks after the attacks, Hamdani’s family—especially his mother, Talat—faced not only the anguish of his disappearance but also the vitriol of baseless suspicion: federal law enforcement and the press (including the New York Post, #1 in the Zohran Mamdani Stan Club) circulated his image as a possible accomplice, and flyers reportedly labeled him “wanted” by a terrorist task force despite no credible evidence. Talat, who had emigrated to the United States decades earlier, consistently affirmed her son’s lifelong pride in his American identity and his humanitarian impulse to help others, even as she contended with both grief and the broader climate of suspicion toward Muslim Americans. Months later, when his remains were identified near the North Tower, the narrative shifted toward recognition of his sacrifice; Nair, however, does not let one mother’s melancholic relief that her son has been (posthumously) accounted for guide her film’s ultimate point. The film ends with images of Muslims in prayer on the street, as well as images of the funeral, where the son’s coffin is draped, in a mingling of sincerity and irony, with an American flag.

Nair’s short film is not one of her major films. The acting possesses a Micheauxian woodenness, the film moves like it was culled from outtakes featuring LAW AND ORDER guest stars, and the lines hit us with thundering obviousness. On the other hand, watching the film with the hindsight of twenty-five years constitutes a great shock. No one, but no one in the U.S. cultural mainstream, was acknowledging these brute truths: Islamophobia, the deleterious effects of rah-rah U.S. patriotism at the expense of a larger humanity, and (this is a real shock) Israeli war crimes, which serve as background noise to the mother’s worrying. If anybody was actively critiquing American “Why us, why U.S.?” naïveté in the wake of the attacks, as Robert Altman did in *Vanity Fair* or Susan Sontag in the pages of the *New Yorker*, they were pilloried by mainstream press and politicians. Nair, like her fellow *September 11* filmmaker Ken Loach and her husband Mahmood Mamdani (viz., his landmark 2003 book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*), courted possible objection for complicating the post-9/11 landscape. But she weathered any controversy and still managed to pull no punches. Nair’s didacticism becomes a valid response to other segments’ mealy-mouthed desire to not step on toes and stay within the bounds of safe comfort. She goes further where others would stumble.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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