



Other American Voices. First Run/Icarus Films.

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Orwellian Reversals and September 11, 2001

Filmed in the year following the events of September 11, 2001, *Other American Voices* is a documentary which seeks to question the wisdom of the Bush administration's ubiquitous War on Terror and the mainstream media's support for it. The film accomplishes this by highlighting what it presents as "other" opinions (those from the left end of the spectrum, such as MIT professor Noam Chomsky and the editor of *The Nation*, Katrina van den Heuvel). In the cause of plurality, Belz and Hollander's documentary has no unifying narration; rather, it is presented in multiple voices and with a bifurcated structure. For the most part, it proceeds as a series of interviews with progressive/left intellectuals, journalists, lawyers, and activists and is interspersed with video cuts of the clean-up of ground zero. Before engaging the major issues raised by the film, a few words on the mostly voiceless intercuts of the video of ground zero would be appropriate. Perhaps Belz and Hollander are attempting to make an explicit statement here about the differing forms of patriotism, that opposing the Bush administration's responses to these attacks is not some form of treason. (In fact, one of the only times the sounds of ground zero are allowed amplification is when the national anthem is played at a funeral service on the site.) The interviewees, for the most part, are New York-based. Yet, they can proclaim their allegiance to the goals of liberty, democracy, and freedom even though the center of their immediate lives has been disrupted by the attacks on the Twin Towers. Though it takes no great generosity to grant the interviewees this position, one has to wonder at the effectiveness of this documentary technique. Could this point be made

without the voyeuristic replay of the damage? Does this graphic interplay of images actually encourage people to get beyond the devastation, or could it simply be a way of reveling in the pain? In addition to the often scopic tone, mediocre production values, and a somewhat choppy presentation, the video does raise valuable questions about the American media's lack of criticism concerning the War on Terror and the Bush administration's continuing assault on important civil rights issues. For example, nearly all nine of the interviewees speak to the ways in which patriotism has been used as a cudgel to silence dissent. Beth Lamont of the American Humanist Association states, "If you are not waving your flag or professing your patriotism, you know, in the accepted way, you are suspect." Carmen Trotta of the Catholic Workers Party warns that an unreflective support under the aegis of patriotism could lead to fascism. Nearly all the interviewees are given the chance to proclaim their patriotism as individuals, to swear their allegiance to the liberties that the United States embodies for them. Even Katrina van den Heuvel enthusiastically describes herself as a patriot, if such a thing means you don't have to be "in synch with majority views." And that is the substance of the problem, isn't it? One might ascribe these positions, laudable as they may be, to a kind of progressive/left naivete about ideology. It's as if they think people are actually swayed by appeals to reason and rationality most of the time, let alone in the face of the traumatic events which occurred on September 11, 2001. This theme runs throughout the documentary, and is one which deserves special attention. First, the utility of patriotism as such. Perhaps the film-

makers and the interviewees truly believe that patriotism to “higher principals” (van den Heuvel calls for “justice, not vengeance”) is an effective way to counteract the “blind” and totemic national chauvinism the Bush administration and the American media have touted. Is it just possible that the reason many people went along with the bombing of Afghanistan and the subsequent war in Iraq is patriotism itself? Yes, the Bush administration is probably guilty of misleading the public. It is probably also true that the news media helped prime the public for the war by discounting certain positions while blatantly favoring others. However, is Noam Chomsky’s (one of the interviewees) proclamation that the American people simply didn’t have all the facts actually an important point here? After all, patriotism is a kind of blind allegiance. Whether the fetish object of choice is the notion of liberty or a specific region defined by national borders, it is, nonetheless, a totem, an object of devotion. In the end, perhaps it is this idea that a “measured response” was possible that provides space for patriotism to smash dissent. Maybe it is patriotism itself which deserves some investigation, not which type of patriotism one chooses. Would it have been so easy to “dupe” the American public otherwise? <p> There is also the Orwellian notion that this “blind” patriotism has enabled the Ashcroft Justice Department to engage in the “elimination of important freedoms,” as is stated by Jerry Lefcourt of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. Lefcourt rightly explains that this is in part due to the hasty passage of the USA Patriot Act, which allows law enforcement agencies to get around various Fourth

and Fifth Amendment issues of privacy and due process in the name of national security (including domestic spying, invasion of the home without the knowledge or consent of the owner, concealing the whereabouts of those detained as witnesses/suspects of a crime, secret trials, the violation of attorney-client privilege, and the use of secret evidence). He is also correct that most of these things were already being debated in Congress at the time of the attacks. Yet turning John Ashcroft into Inspector Javert only speaks to part of the story. Lefcourt is right that the Aschroft Justice Department took advantage of the situation to forward its agenda in Congress. But that doesn’t speak to the fact that much of this legislation was alive in Congress prior to Bush taking office, that some of it was even sponsored by the Clinton administration. Yes, September 11, 2001, enabled Ashcroft to have his law-and-order feast served to him on a silver platter, but blaming him seems almost as expedient. What Lefcourt and many of the other interviewees neglect is the increasing will to punish in the legal culture of the United States over the past decade. It is this, not simply the actions of the individuals of the Bush administration, which will offer a more acute understanding of patriotism as a cover for a right-wing legal agenda. For a good example of this literature, see Mike Males’s <cite>The Scapegoat Generation: America’s War on Adolescents</cite>. <p> <cite>Other American Voices</cite>, despite its flaws, does provide an avenue for certain important perspectives to be aired. However, it does fail to escape the trap of patriotism that the documentary itself seems to desire to challenge. <p>

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