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Film Review

Spike Lee: *25th Hour* (2002)

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So far, very few American directors have tried to find an aesthetic response to September 11. Sean Penn`s name and his contribution to the international collection of short films entitled*11´09´´01 – September 11* (see pages 97-104 in this issue) come to mind almost immediately. Less people, however, tend to relate Spike Lee`s film *25th Hour* (USA 2002) to the date, although the film is a prolific commentary on America *after* the events.

Monty Brogan has 24 hours to say good-bye to his life; he has been sentenced to seven years of imprisonment. We see him walking around the streets of New York (accompanied by his dog), visiting friends and places. Edward Norton, probably the most versatile American actor of his generation, portrays Brogan with the sadness of a human being who knows that his life is coming to an end (he has no illusions about the destructive consequences of his imprisonment). Every encounter and every minute seem to be of special importance.

A series of flashbacks reveal why Monty has to go to jail. One day the FBI did a search in his apartment and found a plastic bag full of white powder in his leather sofa. It emerges that Monty's exquisite furniture, his fabulous limousine and his designer clothes have all been purchased by dirty money from drug trafficking. They come from those forlorn junkies that approach him on his way through New York. Monty is a guilty person who has to bid farewell to a reckless mode of existence.

It is interesting to see how the director links his story with the events of September 11. First of all, there are a number of explicit references. The film is dedicated to the firemen of*Brandbrigade Rescue 5*; it commemorates the destruction of the twin towers in its initial image of two columns of light while the soundtrack (with its strong Celtic elements), once again tries to remind us of the (mostly Irish) firemen who lost their lives.

The whole atmosphere of the film, however, conveys an intense feeling of loss and melancholy, an elegiac mood reminiscent of the works of Sam Mendes. This quality becomes especially obvious in the film's silent scenes: When we see Monty sitting on a bench looking at the Hudson, for example, or when we watch him walking through the park where he met his girlfriend for the first time. In another scene at Monty's farewell party his friends just stare into their glasses, full of sorrow. These are quiet, meditative moments full of intensity. In this manner, the film seems to succeed in capturing the atmosphere in New York after the traumatic events of September 11, at least according to several American critics. It depicts New York in a transitory state of bidding farewell.

This is especially obvious in the film's key scene, when Brogan's friends, teacher Jacob (Philipp Seymor Hoffman) and stockbroker Frank Slaughtery (Barry Pepper), meet in Frank's apartment. When they look out of the window, the camera focuses on the remains of

the World Trade Center. “It’s all over,” says Slaughtery, thus referring to the mount of rubble below him and to Monty’s future simultaneously. It is at this specific point in the film that story and history meet on a common *Ground Zero*.

Simultaneously, however, the film conveys the hope of a new beginning by ending on a note of optimism. In a surprising U-turn between dream and reality the film allows its central character a new start in an American small town: It comes out that the 25th hour is the final moment of anagnorisis when Monty accepts his guilt and decides to give up his previous mode of existence.

The movie’s one and only flaw is the sentimental soundtrack which tends to diminish the impact of almost every scene. Apart from that, *25th Hour* is Spike Lee’s most relevant work in quite a long time.