Maybe we become New Yorkers the day we realize that New York will go on without us. To put off the inevitable, we try to fix the city in place, remember it as it was, doing to the city what we would never allow to be done to ourselves.

Colson Whitehead

As the opening credits of Spike Lee’s 2002 film 25th Hour roll, Terence Blanchard’s haunting score swells in ominous tones. Abstract images of light and darkness play across the screen and a fixed camera pointed upward captures what appears to be the sun shining in a cloudless sky. As the sky darkens, the sun transforms into a synthetic illumination: the point at which two vertical columns of light, projected by the 88 search lights that remain out of the camera’s view, converge in the night sky over Manhattan. The two towers of light, blue pillars in which dust or smoke appear to swirl, are shot from below and seem to meet in the center of the frame. It is only after several shots from this low angle and several more from inside the columns that the camera moves outward, showing the massive beams against the twinkling city skyline. The music swells and the camera moves upward and out, so that we see the now ‘legible’ memorial lights from an increasing distance: the first shot shows us the scene from New Jersey so that the Statue of Liberty and Empire State Building flank the memorial lights and a second shot appears to originate from underneath the Brooklyn Bridge so that the dark expanse of the East River shimmers in the shot’s foreground. In the final image of the sequence, the camera rests upon a panorama of Manhattan, the two columns of light just left of center. When the lamenting vocals of Blanchard’s composition reach a fever pitch, the beams suddenly collapse, fading in intensity so that they disappear vertically down the screen until all that remain are the silhouettes of the surrounding buildings, their many lights shining in the darkness of a New York night.

What is the emotion that the careful choreography of this opening montage is meant to evoke? We are seduced by the images’ beauty, surprised when the ambiguous visions are shown to belong to the Tribute In Light me-

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1 For their critical comments, generous suggestions, and unflagging support, I wish to thank Zahid Chaudhary, Anne Cheng, Emily Hyde, Zakir Paul, Moritz Schularick, and Baerbel Tischleder.

2 25th Hour, Dir. Spike Lee. Touchstone Pictures, 2002. All quotations come from my own transcription.
morial to 9/11, and haunted by the ghostly projections that fill the cityscape before disappearing in a descent that inevitably echoes the Twin Towers’ spectacular collapse. This sequence shows us an image of New York that unsettles us with its strangeness while at the same time provoking, and perhaps satisfying, certain deep longings. For this is a post-9/11 New York as we want it to be: meaningful, pristine, poetic. The screenwriter remarks that the sequence causes us to “mourn for a lost city.” Such mourning, though, is complicated by the sequence’s own images, which serve as potent evidence of a city that may be haunted, but retains a dynamism and a presence that makes it anything but lost. Nevertheless, the film’s composition indeed kindles a desire for something: a longing that is as striking and as elusive as the beams of light themselves, which replicate the towers while simultaneously emphasizing their absence.

To long for a home that no longer exists, and may have never existed at all, is to experience nostalgia, that sentiment of loss and displacement that fills us with the desire (algia) to return home (nostos). When a film or a novel contemplates the losses incurred on 9/11 in a nostalgic mode, rather than an elegiac one, it represents a specific form of mourning that mobilizes our fantasies as much as our grief; the “home” we long for is largely imagined. As Susan Stewart explains, the sadness of nostalgia “creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience” (23). This vexing, “inauthentic” character of nostalgia differentiates it from mourning. Whereas mourning is the process by which libido is withdrawn from a deceased or departed love object, nostalgia prohibits libido from genuinely attaching to or withdrawing from any specific object. Nostalgia sustains itself by seeking an imagined time and place that constitute not a lost object, but an absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire. This form of desire, without the possibility of fulfillment, also differs from melancholia, in which an individual languishes in the refusal to grieve.

In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center, in which nearly 3,000 people were killed and countless millions “experienced” the events of the day via the indelible images disseminated and endlessly replayed by the media, the nostalgic desire to grieve assumed new dimensions. Much has been said about the prelapsarian fantasies generated by 9/11: the idea that New York City, or the nation at large, was a harmonious, innocent place prior to the attacks on the Twin Towers. To imagine a pre-9/11 time or place in which we were “safe” or “united” in any coherent way is to engage in the sort of nostalgia that wears a utopian face, a “face turned toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality” (Stewart 23). The ideological concep-

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3 Since 2002, a light installation projecting two beams of light into the air where the Twin Towers once stood annually commemorates the victims of the 9/11 attacks.

tion of a pre-9/11 world was, of course, mobilized for political means. But such political machinations did not invent a new sort of longing. Rather, they drew on the nostalgia that has long been cited as a foundational characteristic of New York City, one that entails a desire for a place that has disappeared or a time that is now distant. As Colson Whitehead articulates in the opening of his impressionistic ode to the city, “You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now” (3). It would seem then, that despite the countless times we have watched the signature sequence of 9/11 – the streaking planes, the smoking rubble, the death clouds attending the towers’ collapse – the imposing, stoic towers remain “more real and solid” than the vast ruins of Ground Zero. Nostalgia, then, was the dubious means by which everyone could grieve as a New Yorker. Individual longing was transformed into a collective belonging that relied on the events of 9/11 to transcend personal memories.

This collective bereavement posited a utopian past now irreparably lost and was soon augmented, if not largely replaced, by a very different type of longing. The fantasy of a pre-9/11 way of life marked by security and unity gave way to a troubling desire not to undo the attacks, but rather to relive them. The insatiable urge to replay and re-watch the towers’ destruction, the praise for the way that New York and the world came together in response to the attacks, and the first-person “where I was” convention that is used so often to narrate the events of that day demonstrate a longing for 9/11. Whether this longing arises from attempts to understand the trauma of that day or to experience something “authentic,” it is evidence of a nostalgia that posits the traumatic event – rather than the victims or the towers – as the lost, loved object. The main character of Jay McInerney’s novel *The Good Life*, for example, channels such desires into relief work:

> Her initial desire to flee the city … had partially subsided as she felt herself drawn beyond the barricades … She felt strangely at home at Bowling Green, near the epicenter of the trauma that had ruined their sleep and clouded their dreams … somehow the zone was more alive in the dark hours, the work she was doing was more urgent, the sense of isolation and containment more complete. (147)

If the impulse to be “near the epicenter” of the attacks can be understood in terms of a repetition compulsion in which the subject revives and prolongs the intensity of her initial experience, that impulse becomes even more clearly nostalgic in other attempts to relive 9/11.

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5 Then President George W. Bush drew upon the notion of a utopian future-past in several of his public speeches. In his address to a Joint Session of Congress on September 21, 2001, for example, he said of the attacks: “All of this was brought upon us in a single day – and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack” (my emphasis).

6 Svetlana Boym makes the related point: “Defeats in the past figure as prominently as victories in uniting the nation. The nation-state at best is based on the social contract that is also an emotional contract, stamped by the charisma of the past” (15).
From Peter Eisenman’s 2002 design proposal to rebuild Ground Zero with three sets of twinned towers that appear suspended in a permanent state of implosion and collapse (fig. 1) to Robert Gober’s full-room art installation, “September Twelve,” in which lithographed copies of New York Times pages from September 12, 2001 are overlaid with drawings of nude figures in various states of embrace, artists have tried to represent the event by preserving or reenacting it. Further dramatizing this notion of reenactment, on November 25, 2009, WikiLeaks released half a million US national text pager intercepts from the 24-hour period surrounding the 9/11 attacks. The messages were broadcast “live” online, synchronized to the time of day they were originally sent. Although the organizers of the broadcast claimed that they hoped “[the archive’s] entrance into the historical record will lead to a nuanced understanding of how this event led to death, opportunism, and war,” they offer no explanation of their decision to release the messages in “real time” (“Pager Intercepts”). Our desire to watch the events unfold once again, nearly a decade after their occurrence, suggests that we continue to yearn, nostalgically, for the very disaster that we claim to mourn. That yearning, as the WikiLeaks endeavor so clearly demonstrates, relies upon specific conceptions of both time and space. When we partake in 9/11 nostalgia, we attempt to revive a city and a past that now appear irreparably lost.

For the majority of individuals without connection to the dead, the injured, or the displaced, grief and nostalgia would be cathected onto the World Trade Center buildings, which were transformed so suddenly into a narrative of spectacular images. The literal “hole in the familiar” that Ground Zero created made the “home pain” of nostalgia potent and pervasive. As Andreas Huyssen remarks, “the image of the twin towers simply represented home in the metropolis. Often, you first saw them approaching New York from the

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7 Persons operating in a federal, official capacity usually carry US national text pagers. Messages in the WikiLeaks archive range from Pentagon, FBI, FEMA, and NYPD exchanges, to computers reporting faults at investment banks inside the World Trade Center. See http://911.wikileaks.org/.
air. Year after year, you saw them in the distance driving back home from the airports in Queens, Brooklyn, or New Jersey” (160). Thanks to the ubiquitous visibility of the New York skyline – in films, photographs, tourist guides and souvenir merchandise of all kinds – the Twin Towers could be missed by nostalgics of every ilk.

This conception of “home,” shaped in large part by a mode of looking that travel, tourism and media have made widely available and amenable to individual desires, was rapidly transformed into a national idea of “homeland.” Once our gaze and our longing were attached to the Twin Towers and their spectacular destruction, the nostos of the nation was not merely an Edenic pre-9/11 New York but also a place of suffering, sacrifice, and glory. It was this palimpsest of nostalgia that the Bush administration funneled into a sense of collective belonging in order to justify measures including the creation of a state of emergency, the surrender of various privacies in the name of security, as well as acts of war and incidents of torture. Donald Pease explains that “the metaphor of the homeland fostered the collective representation of a vulnerable citizenry that had become internally estranged from its ‘country of origin’ and dependent upon the protection of the state” (209). What Pease’s statement about vulnerability and estrangement makes clear is the way that the nostalgic longing for absolute presence in the face of the visceral and visible absences created on 9/11 could be appropriated and manipulated via metaphor and representation.

In sum, 9/11 nostalgia is constituted by a gaze turned toward a prelapsarian time and/or a traumatic event. Although nostalgia always depends on a directional gaze (that “face turned toward a future-past”), the monstrous visibility of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the relentless coverage by millennial media that imprinted them so thoroughly in our minds, and even the “viewing platform” erected over the mystic gulf of Ground Zero ensured that what and how we see would remain at the heart of all 9/11-inspired longings. To revisit or represent 9/11 without nostalgia, then, does not simply require an unsentimental subject who can dispense with fictions and desires. Instead, the assumption of an anti-nostalgic stance depends upon a way of looking that frees the event and its objects from a fixed position amenable to nostalgia’s insatiable yearning. Amidst the many 9/11 narratives that capitalize on that yearning and seek to set the event in a legible historical or psychic location, there exist works like Spike Lee’s film 25th Hour that direct our viewing practices so as to move us away from the fixity that nostalgia requires. Lee’s film tells a story of sustained departure, one that moves toward a vanishing point where images of home and dreams of return recede into the distance.

Returning to the cobalt columns of light rising upward in the opening of Spike Lee’s film, it becomes clear that any nostalgic longing the sequence inspires is complicated by its formal dimensions. Lee (and cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto) juxtapose the facticity of content with the subjectivity of form, highlighting the degree to which our desires are shaped by our gaze. Although the three-and-a-half-minute sequence presents the Tribute in Light
memorial in a manner that might initially be called documentary, the artistic rendering of the images moves them into the realm of fiction, without imposing a clear narrative meaning. For the first minute and a half of the sequence, the images of the lights remain so abstract that we are unable to attach to them any meaning at all. This cinematic “reveal” shows just how readily an iconic image – the memorial to the Twin Towers – can be readily disassembled into meaningless, constituent parts of light and dark. The frequent jump cuts, occurring at regular intervals of eight seconds before slowing down to linger on the broader, more panoramic shots of New York City, add controlled movement to an otherwise static object. Although the visual content and music in the sequence seem designed to arouse elegiac or nostalgic sentiment, the technique calls sufficient attention to itself so as to simultaneously disrupt that sentiment. Lee’s decision to use montage here establishes a trend that continues throughout the film: a means by which the vision of a pre-9/11 New York or a “successful” mode of mourning are interrogated and unsettled, rather than fusing into one harmonizing perspective.

The sequence as a whole seems an unsettling opening, given that 25th Hour is not a film “about” 9/11, but about a petty drug dealer interacting with his family and friends. Despite this fact, 25th Hour was heavily hyped in 2002 as the first major motion picture to candidly depict New York as it had been altered by 9/11. The story of a single day in the life of drug-dealer Monty Brogan, David Benioff’s novel on which the film is based focuses a narrow lens on the negotiations between a guilty man and the people he loves. Likewise, the original film script called for an intimate portrait of a man on his last day before beginning a seven-year sentence in a New York prison. Despite accusations of opportunism, Spike Lee maintains that he was ethically obligated to incorporate the events and aftermath of 9/11 into his film. He says of 9/11:

It’s not in the book and it wasn’t in David Benioff’s script. I mean, the script I read was done before September 11th. I just knew that we were going to do this film, that we were going to be shooting after September 11th. I just thought it would be criminal on my part not to include it. So, I didn’t think of it as such a big decision. For me the big decision was how to implement September 11th into the film. We did not want to appear like it was appended or anything like that. It had to feel organic, like it was there from the beginning. And I think we were successful in doing that (“Finest Hour”).

Lee’s comment, his desire for the devastation of 9/11 to seem “organic, like it was there from the beginning” might lead us to expect the film to offer a visual testimony of 9/11 that coalesces seamlessly with Benioff’s narrative. However, Monty’s story and that of New York City in the months after 9/11 are not brought together in a unified whole. Instead, the two stories push against one another and the meditations on the September attacks are marked by different visual and temporal styles. Because these meditations stand in striking formal contrast to the otherwise straightforward narrative of Monty’s final day before prison, 9/11 becomes, in the course of the film, an obdurate object in our field of vision. In Lee’s movie, 9/11 remains inassimi-
lable for its overwhelming facticity and form is the means by which we see that efforts to “understand” the day’s events and its aftermath via a nostalgic or nationalist narrative inevitably fail.

The second encounter with Ground Zero in the film works similarly to that staged in the opening credits. When Monty’s closest friends Jacob, a high school literature teacher and Frank, a Wall Street trader, meet after sunset at Frank’s Lower Manhattan penthouse apartment, we are presented with a lengthy, unflinching view of the “howling space” where the Twin Towers once stood (DeLillo 34). The camera places us inside with the two men for a full minute before revealing that the windows of this luxury apartment overlook Ground Zero at shockingly close proximity. The camera follows behind the shadowy figures of the two men as they approach the window and a jump cut centers the large window in the frame. While the camera steadily rises so that our gaze is directed downward, between the two men who position themselves on either side of the window, the musical motif of the opening credits returns and we are shown what lies directly below for the first time. Through the window, Ground Zero emerges like a lunar landscape: all grey and blue tones with indistinct craters and alien terrain. Illuminated by the temporary lights erected for clean-up crews and construction workers, the ruins of the World Trade Center are most striking in this part of the sequence for their sheer size – a fact which Lee chooses to emphasize by pushing his actors to the edges of the frame and allowing Ground Zero to dominate the composition. When Jacob exhales a stunned “Jesus Christ,” the camera stops moving and records, in a single take, the four-minute conversation that transpires between the two men, all the while with Ground Zero as the shot’s central focus.

What Lee gives us with this sequence is a naked view of 9/11’s physical aftermath that cannot be romanticized or interpolated into any coherent narrative – not even into that of the film itself. The barren, uncanny expanse that we see here makes it difficult to conjure up the towers that formerly stood or the image of the victims that we know died in the event that resulted in this rubble. Even the dialogue reflects only briefly, and superficially, on the site: Jacob meekly comments, “The Times says the air down here is bad,” and the conversation then quickly turns to the evening’s plans. The overwhelming facticity of Ground Zero is so thoroughly defamiliarizing here that it seems to impede grief and nostalgia, instead eliciting only the sustained, but relatively stoic shock that Jacob displays. If the presence of such destruction temporarily adds gravitas to the conversation that Frank and Jacob have about Monty’s fate in prison, the end of the sequence emphatically severs the link between the film’s narrative and the non-diegetic reality of Ground Zero. When their conversation concludes, Frank leaves his seat and the camera moves closer to the window. Suddenly, a jump cut appears to bring us “through” the window and to the beginning of a montage sequence very similar in form to the opening credits.
The montage is composed of eight rhythmically ordered shots of Ground Zero, each one present for three seconds before a jump cut proceeds to the next. The images of the towers’ exposed and deformed footprints, the debris-filled truck beds moving slowly across provisional roads, and five luminescent, neon-clad workers raking the ashen ground presumably in search of human remains are accompanied by the musical score which includes a military drum, a lamenting Irish bagpipe and the mournful tones of a song in Arabic. This ending (after the final shot of the workers, the image simply fades to black and the next sequence is a flash-back in which Monty is interrogated by the police after his initial arrest) makes this an inassimilable sequence in which the pictures of Ground Zero stand apart in non-diegetic isolation. The music accompanying the montage reinforces the resistance of 9/11 to being integrated within a single narrative or fixed by a single desire. Simultaneously war cry and dirge, the military drumbeat arouses aggression while the Irish bagpipes evoke and lament overwhelming loss. The melismatic tones of the Arabic vocals remain inscrutable: at one moment the sound seems vengeful, at the next, grief-stricken.8

When Lee considers the effect that 9/11 has had on Monty and his father, he also uses form in such a way that these reflections, like the opening credits and the Ground Zero sequence, stand apart from the rest of the film. However, where the previous sequences present what we might call the stark reality of New York City’s topography after the attacks, the scenes in which Monty negotiates his relationship with the city proceed along ambiguous, fantastical lines. These dream(ed) sequences call explicit attention to their construction; thereby illuminating that Monty’s desire for “home” depends upon a fiction of suture. The first of these sequences takes place when Monty visits his father’s bar, Brogan’s. The “typical” Irish pub has become an impromptu shrine to the Irish-American firefighter patrons who lost their lives in the Twin Towers. After lingering on the exterior of the bar, the camera moves inside and we are greeted by a brief montage – this time, seven shots of the different FDNY paraphernalia and mementos that decorate the bar and pay tribute to “fallen” New York firefighters. A banner that reads “Welcome Firefighters,” two stained glass windows depicting company insignias, and a cluster of photographs of the dead hung beneath a folded American flag appear in rhythmic succession before the camera cuts to Monty and his father James sitting at a table in front of an Engine 160 seal that remains visible throughout their dialogue. This blatant excess of material reminders

8 In the DVD commentary, Spike Lee says of the music, “There’s an Arabic voice here that you also heard in the opening credits. And I told Terence [Blanchard, the composer] early on that I wanted to have this voice, this hovering-over music, over New York city, and that would be the voice of how George Bush would say ‘The TalibaAnnnn. The TalibaAnnnn.’” That the voice Blanchard chose to express this sound is in fact that of Cheb Mami further supports the notion that the symbols and techniques used to represent 9/11 are overdetermined and contradictory, rather than firmly ascribed within a single narrative.
helps to sustain what Monty will later criticize as his father’s “endless grief,” but initially, they alert us to the persistent tension between Monty’s personal tragedy and that of the city.

As James reminisces about the past and his failures as a father in the midst of so many 9/11 “souvenirs,” nostalgia threatens to overwhelm both the characters. Monty’s flight from this nostalgia, into the bathroom, at first seems a complete failure: to the left of the restroom mirror hang countless firefighter patches and to the right, a postcard depicting two black silhouettes of the Twin Towers against an American flag. Next to this memento mori we can read another patch, emblazoned with the “Never Forget” slogan, an imperative that seems superfluous given the surfeit of reminders thus far. But a small scrawl on the bottom corner of the mirror catalyzes Monty and the film enters a register that transports us out of the past and into a different register where nostalgia is rebuked —

After noticing the words “fuck you” written on the mirror, Monty begins an argument with his mirror image. Using a green-screen effect that enables Monty and his reflected image to talk and move independently of one another, Lee intercuts the dialogue with images of New York that create a montage that is both a rage-filled rant against the city and an homage to its diversity, beauty, and resilience. Monty, looking at the scribble, exclaims “Yeah, fuck you, too.” His reflection, suddenly animated, replies “Fuck me? Fuck you. Fuck you and this whole city and everyone in it.” The other, “real” Monty quietly exhales “no, no, no, no, no,” but this feeble admonishment does not stop the wave of anger that the mirrored Monty has released. A tide of images rolls past, illustrating in vivid color the New Yorkers and cityscapes that Monty describes. Beginning with “the panhandlers grubbing for money” and continuing on to the “Sikhs and Pakistanis bombing down the avenues in decrepit cabs” to the “Korean grocers … still no speak-e English,” the “Russians in Brighton Beach” and the “Upper East Side wives, with their overfed faces getting pulled and lifted and stretched all tight and shiny,” Monty’s tirade seems to spare no group or borough in New York. The complex staging of the scene and its dramatic break from the visual styling of the rest of the film allow the montage to impart more meaning than merely the hate component of a “love-hate relationship” with the city of New York.9

The mirror allows, for this short span in the film, Monty to be literally split in two – one self displaces his guilt and anger onto the city through vehement disavowal, and another accepts that guilt in the scene’s final lines. For at the end of the sequence, the “real” Monty admonishes his reflection: “No. Fuck you, Montgomery Brogan. You had it all, and you threw it away, you dumb fuck!”

9 In the interview cited earlier, Spike Lee says of his relationship to New York, “Well, I think that anyone who lives in New York, who’s lived here, who’s spent any time here, knows that it’s basically a love-hate relationship, you might say.” It would appear that the extra-diegetic montage is one tactic that Lee turns to in order to express this “love-hate relationship.” Another example of this is Radio Raheem’s monologue, “The Story of Love and Hate” delivered in Do the Right Thing.
But even this disavowal is vexed, for the sequence clearly creates an intentional dissonance for the viewer. Different camera stocks produce the saturated, beautiful images of New York’s inhabitants, and this diverse terrain is juxtaposed with the sound of Monty’s curses as well as dark, tightly constrained shots of his mirror image delivering these words. The epithet itself, of course, expresses competing emotions, as “fuck you” conveys both the desire to violate and destroy as well as the desire to merge and possess. Monty’s tirade is an extended exercise in disidentification – a shoring up of the self, of what he calls his authentic “Irish ass” against the panoply of others who he feels unrightfully populate and threaten his imagined New York. But the fact that these “others” arise only when Monty examines himself in the mirror remind us that “the Chelsea boys,” “the Uptown brothers” and the “Bensonhurst Italians” are projections: although they are “real” in the visual lexicon of the film, they are figuratively contained within Monty.10 The structure of the sequence therefore mandates that any emotion directed “outward” at the city is literally reflected back onto the film’s protagonist. Moreover, the positioning of the camera in the restroom disorients us, so that even the viewer’s gaze is radically unfixed by the conclusion of the montage. When we look straight on at Monty’s reflection, it is as if we have assumed Monty’s place at the sink and the face that delivers the monologue must therefore be a reflection of our own. But the darkness that surrounds Monty and the narrow focus of these shots offer no clues as to which Monty we are, in fact, seeing. Alternating between shots that put us in Monty’s place and those that confuse us as to what that place is, the sequence deprives us of any easy point of identification.

Although the scene reaches its emotional climax when Monty directly addresses, for the first time in the film, the events of 9/11, Lee uses form to suggest that this outburst remains insufficient and incomplete. Monty calls out “Fuck Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and backward-ass, cave-dwelling fundamentalist assholes everywhere. On the names of innocent thousands murdered, I pray you spend the rest of eternity with your whores roasting in a jet-fuel fire in hell. You towel-headed camel jockeys can kiss my royal Irish ass!” It is during these enraged racist remarks that for the first and only time in the entire film, Lee incorporates images from the news media; rather than original montage images, we see familiar clips of Osama bin Laden and shots of a newspaper’s front page that declares bin Laden “Wanted Dead or Alive.” These stock images give us the impression that we have reached a limit to Monty’s visual imaginary – the facticity of 9/11 demands a non-diegetic encounter with “reality” that the film stages with these citational clips. However, while these images may not be fully assimilated into a uniform piece, Lee does re-territorialize them via context and editing. The four cuts that offer different views of the newspaper, for instance – at varying distances

10 The point that disidentification may be manufactured in the subconscious and the perception of difference therefore rooted within the recognition of similarity, has been argued in various contexts (e.g. by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble, Anne Cheng in The Melancholy of Race, and Diana Fuss in Identification Papers).
and focused on different elements of the front page – defamiliarize the well-known image. Amalgamated with the Technicolor, idiosyncratic tableaux of Monty’s imagined New York, the newsreels and newspaper become subjective artifacts. Like the news media that loses its objective status, the idea of his hometown that Monty constructs and for which he longs is shown to be a fantasy projection.

Elements of this montage reappear at the film’s conclusion, once again generating visual and emotional dissonance. Monty, bloodied from the beating that he has willingly received at his best friend’s hands in the hopes that disfigurement will protect him in prison, leans his head against the passenger side window of his father’s car as they begin their journey to the jail. The camera cuts from Monty gazing out the window to what, ostensibly, he sees on the other side of the glass. The faces that Monty imagined earlier, of the Korean grocers, the Pakistani taxi driver, and the African-American basketball players stare back in silence, following the movement of the car with their eyes and smiling cryptic, ambiguous smiles. Their appearance suggest that Monty’s projections mourn his departure, and that Monty is at last able to see beauty in what he previously despised. But these visions with their mysterious expressions make it impossible to tell whether these “other” New Yorkers sympathize with Monty, mock him, or fail to see him at all. If Monty conjures up these images – the symbols of a collective and a home that has never existed in the particular way he imagines – his nostalgic longings are thwarted by the ambivalence of their gaze. The projections have been granted the power to look back, and the indecipherable expressions on their faces as the camera pans from right to left refuse to satisfy the nostalgic desire for comfort or clarity.

The directional gaze is complicated even by a small gesture Monty makes to inscribe himself onto the world before his departure. When the car stops at a traffic light next to a New York City bus, a boy from inside looks out, waves to Monty and traces his name “Tom” into the condensation on the bus’s window. The boy has written his name so that it appears legible from the inside but backwards to the camera positioned outside the bus: “moT.” Monty responds by writing his own name onto the window of his father’s car, tracing the letters backwards so that they are properly intelligible to an outside observer. The similarity of the two names, the collapse of inside and outside, and the game that is played with direction highlight the tenuous spatial and temporal constructions on which the film’s legibility depends. In another desperate gesture, Monty’s father offers his son the chance to flee from his prison sentence: “Give me the word, and I’ll take a left turn […] Take the GW Bridge and go west.” Although Monty declines the offer, he leans back with his eyes closed and listens to his father describe the simple, happy life that Monty could lead if he were to escape New York and start anew in small-town America. This new life is depicted in a gorgeous dream sequence, featuring panoramic shots of the changing landscape, tender moments shared between father and son during the journey, and even an undeniably over-the-top image of the biracial family Monty has created, standing in front of
a white picket fence. Even if the dream sequence is clearly intended as an impossible fiction, we are left to wonder whose dream this is: is it Monty who dreams of this happy ending while he sleeps or does he visualize the images while his father narrates? Or is this James’ dream, which he uses to sustain himself in the face of his son’s figurative death? If the dream is not entirely attributable to either James of Monty, it is because the dream is also a national one – an “American dream” that posits a future-past in which Monty departs New York in order to return to “a simpler place and time.”

Although the dream sequence depicts moments of intimacy between the two men, and later between Monty and his girlfriend, it is a fantasy largely composed from stock images of American idealism: the road trip, the sublime desert, and the frontier as a locus for rebirth. It is an utterly conflicted dream: a dream of escape that never moves beyond the predetermined limits of our nation and its already written-narratives. The dream and its inherent nostalgia are quickly undermined – revealed to be an implausible fantasy once Lee returns us to the car as it exits the highway toward the prison. The very last image of the film is Monty, who lies still with his eyes closed as his father concludes his tale of “the life that came so close to never happening,” a line he repeats in an incantatory fashion while the car rolls past the George Washington Bridge. The dream deferred, we nonetheless remain in a somnambulist’s haze. What is left, in the absence of the American dream is the refusal to awaken and another, less idealistic departure.11 Because the desires for home have been formally deconstructed and exposed as composite, untenable fictions, the film positions us so that we can find little comfort in personal or national nostalgia. We end 25th Hour like Monty: leaving the city, turned away from the aftermath of 9/11, with our eyes closed to the possibility of false desires.

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11 As Cathy Caruth points out in Unclaimed Experience, leave-taking enables us to see the way that we are implicated in each other’s traumas; we might say that this sequence not only binds the narrative of Monty’s trauma with that caused by 9/11, but also forces a flight on the part of the viewer – a movement between the film’s diegesis and our own history.
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