

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**Pragmatic Visionary:
The Prescriptions of American
Independent Filmmaker John Sayles**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in Media Studies

at

Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Vivienne Frances Stanley

2001

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the exploration and analysis of the style, themes and issues of American independent filmmaker John Sayles.

Up until the time of writing (2001) Sayles has made and released twelve feature length films and from this oeuvre I have chosen eight films for analysis: *Baby, It's You* (1983); *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984); *Matewan* (1987); *Eight Men Out* (1988); *City of Hope* (1991); *Passion Fish* (1992); *Lone Star* (1996); and *Limbo* (1999).

Having selected these films as the focus of my research I will then ask the following questions:

- ◆ Are there consistencies in themes, issues and characters in Sayles films?
- ◆ If the answer to the above is yes:
 - What are the salient characteristics of these consistent features?
and
 - Do the salient characteristics of these consistent features indicate a particular authorial worldview, if you will, a Sayles' Weltanschauung?

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks go to my supervisor, Dr. Brian McDonnell, for his direction and support. His unstinting good humour and assistance have been invaluable and have helped make my thesis 'experience' not only valuable, but also enjoyable.

I also wish to thank my family and friends for their understanding and encouragement during the time I have been researching this thesis. Their patience, input and support (both practical and emotional) have been greatly appreciated. Many of them now know more than they ever expected (and I suspect ever wanted to know) about John Sayles' work. For all of this I am extremely grateful.

Last, but not least, I wish to thank the person without whom this thesis would not have been possible, John Sayles. He is an extraordinary filmmaker. He is able to imbue his richly textured work with integrity and entertain at the same time, and were it not for this my task would have been an onerous one, rather than the pleasure it has been.

Preface

Why John Sayles?

In 1996 I attended the Rialto Cinema Complex in Auckland in order to view what was then John Sayles latest film, *Lone Star*. I came away determined to see the film again, fascinated by the relationships it dealt with, by its focus on the importance and burdens of history, and by the way in which it wove together what appeared, initially, to be a myriad of stories, as opposed to one. I also appreciated the number of fully fleshed-out minor characters who appeared in the film. Last, but definitely not least, I was fascinated that a movie, set on the other side of the world, viz. in Texas, was dealing with some of the same issues that we were ourselves confronting in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Sayles' name was not immediately familiar to me; it was not until later that I realised that he was the screenwriter/director/editor of another complex film that I had enjoyed immensely some years before, a movie called *Passion Fish* (1992). My interest aroused, I made a point of viewing as many of his films as possible and it was not long before I realised that I wanted to learn more about the man and his work.

As I viewed his films, I discovered that I identified with many of the personal, social and political views expressed in them and, more importantly, that I was interested in many of the questions they raised. Possibly because I was born in the same decade as Sayles (the 1950s) I felt an affinity with his apparent perspective on life and the world. Having spent some time as a counsellor, I was interested in his 'take' on personal history and his recognition that people can allow it to dominate their present and their future. I also enjoyed the fact that contrary to popular Hollywood convention, here was a director making films aimed at adults, complicated multi-perspective films, rather than ones intended for the adolescent multiplex audience. These were films for 'grown-ups'. Here was a man asking interesting and important questions: in short, making the sort of films I would love to make, had I the talent.

Unsurprisingly then, this thesis has given me the opportunity to indulge my passion for Sayles' films, whilst at the same time researching the work of a man considered by me, and many others, to be the most influential, prolific and talented independent American filmmaker of the last twenty years.

The Reluctant Auteur

Auteur theory (discussed in Chapter One): "*emphasises the director as the major creator of film art, stamping the material with his or her personal style, vision and thematic obsessions*" (McDonnell, 1998, p. 8). In its purest form it supposes that meaning/s in film can be attributed to one person, an 'artist', normally the director, rather than viewing them as originating from collaborative commercial endeavour. However John Sayles does not self-identify as an

auteur. In his book *THINKING IN PICTURES: THE MAKING OF THE FILM MATEWAN*, under the heading "Collaboration", he writes:

Now that the screenplay section is past, you'll be hearing a lot less "I" and a lot more "we". This is not the royal we or the corporate we, but the collaborative we.. No matter how centralized control is on a movie, it is always a collaboration. Each performance is a collaboration between actor, screenwriter, director, cinematographer, editor, costumer and so on (Sayles, 1987, p. 43).

I agree with the above statement, with regard to the collaborative nature of film. However, I do not believe it discounts Sayles from auteur status. Authorial influence and the intentions of filmmakers are definitely more recognisable in some films than in others. The extent to which filmmakers exercise their own personal influence, and imbue their work with their political and social beliefs also varies from director to director. It is the contention of this thesis that John Sayles is a filmmaker who, via his multiple influences as director, scriptwriter, editor (and sometimes actor and songwriter) stamps his mark emphatically on his films.

His visual style has varied markedly from film to film, due to experience gained over the years, to what individual budgets will allow, and to what Sayles sees as being appropriate for the particular story he is telling. However, I believe that thematically there is a clear and consistent worldview represented in his films. Not a director prone to revisiting a site, either geographically, or in terms of subject matter, Sayles is a man of varied interests. He moves from one type of story material to another quite different, from one different location to another, all the while presenting the audience with a coherent, consistent set of values and view of life, one that is realistic, but offers no guarantees or pat solutions, yet is not pessimistic. It is a worldview born out of the 1960s, one that is primarily optimistic, one that situates individuals within society, with a responsibility not only towards themselves but also to the wider community and the world at large. It is a worldview that acknowledges that certain groups and individuals are privileged, by the nature of their position in society, and where those who are most fortunate have a responsibility to consider the concerns and desires of the less fortunate and to redress the balance of power where possible. It is a worldview which, sadly to me, seems at odds with the direction of much of today's political spirit and the ethos of individualism.

I recognise that the notion of "Auteur" is somewhat problematic in recent theorising in Film Studies, and while it is true that historical, cultural and ideological contexts cannot, and should not, be ignored, I contend in this thesis that Sayles' thoughtful, intelligent films cannot be viewed as anything other than his own creations. By his own admission, Sayles has specific personal and/or social and political conditions he wishes the audience to understand, specific questions he wants them to ponder. I will argue that not content with purely "telling a story" that can be read in numerous ways he, more than most directors, steers the audience (some complain not always subtly) in the direction of a "preferred reading" of his films.

A man for whom the intrinsic value of the work itself, rather than the potential for financial success, is the main incentive, Sayles has carved himself a place as a leading independent filmmaker. In the main he has worked outside the Hollywood studio system, preferring to deal with the financial constraints and challenges this brings, rather than compromising in any way the integrity of 'his' story, or the way he wishes to tell it. His determination to 'do it his way' has resulted in him being prepared to accept only the 'right' type of financial backing (that which comes without any demand for directorial or editorial control). Not prepared to have anyone else interfere with the stories he is telling, he is, however, writing, adapting, or tinkering with those being told by other people. He has long been a scriptwriter and script-doctor (a scriptwriter brought in by Producers to fix, or improve, a script written by another writer) for big budget studio projects and has financed much of his own work in this way. It has only been recently that he has become part of a deal with Sony Pictures Entertainment that allows him financial support from a studio without threatening the control he insists on retaining over his films. John Sayles is therefore, I believe, a very suitable candidate for an auteurist thesis at the beginning of the 21st century.

Research Parameters

The decision as to which films to include and which to leave out was made for a number of reasons, including pragmatism and emotion. I was unable to locate video copies of *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979), *Lianna* (1982), and *Baby, It's You* (1983) in New Zealand. I was able to view *Lianna*, once only, in Australia, and courtesy of the wonderful "Dr Whats" video store in Bondi Junction I was lucky enough to be able to access one of the few copies of *Baby, It's You* available for hire. *Hombres Armados/ Men With Guns* (1997) is now available; however, that was not the case when I first began researching. I chose to exclude *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994) as it is Sayles' only children's film and as such does not in my view 'fit' readily with the remainder of his films, which are pitched at an adult audience.

Thesis Structure

This thesis comprises Five Chapters. Chapter One deals with Auteur theory, briefly outlining the history of the theory, the changes it has been through, and finally focusing on its current form. It also locates John Sayles within that tradition, via brief identification of the major themes, issues and characters running through his films. The next three chapters explore these themes, issues and characters in depth. The Second Chapter, for instance, concerns itself with History and Geography, Chapter Three focuses on Class, Community and Politics, and the Fourth Chapter deals with Relationships and what I will refer to as The Journey (that path which needs to be travelled in order for the character/s involved to learn and grow throughout the film). Chapters Two to Four not only identify common threads in the treatment of these themes and issues, but illustrate the way/s in which these consistencies contribute to the

formation of a clear worldview. Chapter Five comprises the Conclusion and as such summarises the Sayles World. Immediately following the Conclusion there is a filmography and plot synopses (for the films researched for this thesis).

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Preface	iv
Table of Contents	viii
Chapter One - The Auteur Theory	1
Chapter Two - History and Geography: How they Interact With Individuals and Communities	12
Chapter Three – Communities, Class and Work	38
Chapter Four - Relationships and Steps in the 'Life-Long Journey'	75
Chapter Five - Conclusion	107
Filmography and Plot Synopses of Films Researched for this Thesis	114
Select Bibliography	130

Chapter One

Auteur Theory

The History of the Theory

Autorenfilm/Auteur and Politique des Auteurs

The Auteur theory, as applied to film, has had a chequered history, waxing and waning in popularity and perceived relevance since the terms '*Autorenfilm*' (author's film – German) and 'Auteur' were first coined in relation to film in the first two decades of the 20th Century (Hayward, 2000, p. 19). Even then there was debate as to whether in order to be considered an Auteur, a director had merely to direct his/her films, or whether he/she had to be the originator of the screenplay also. In the main it was used to refer to those filmmakers who did both.

It was in the 1950s that the theory really took flight, with the emergence of the *politique des auteurs*, courtesy of the French journal, *Cahiers du Cinema*. The emphasis of the *politique* was on director 'as artist' by virtue of his/her control of, and expression through, *mise-en-scène*. This focus allowed those directors, who were not also the writers of their films, to become eligible for consideration as Auteurs. There were theorists, André Bazin for example, who not only disagreed with this definition, but questioned whether or not it was even the director's role to attempt to create or influence meaning. Bazin advocated the notion of director as a neutral recorder of events, as someone who rather than trying to impose his/her personality, beliefs and world-view, purely recorded in a non-judgmental, non-selective manner events occurring before him/her. He saw it as the director's responsibility to remove, as much as possible, any trace of himself/herself from the film.

Sarris, the Auteur Theory and Structuralism

Almost a decade later, American Andrew Sarris came out strongly on the side of the *politique*, taking it further with what he termed the Auteur Theory. He supported the notion that a director could take credit for the meanings associated with a film, even if he/she had not written it. Further, he proposed that the truly great Auteurs were in fact those who worked with material written by others, in an environment that was hostile to personal creativity, and who nevertheless managed to make films that clearly bore their individual 'mark'. Sarris's theory opened the way for the study of many directors so far ignored by serious researchers, directors who had worked primarily in the Hollywood system and were thus often considered as belonging more to the commercial world, than to the artistic one.

According to Andrew Sarris there are three premises to Auteur Theory. Firstly, he states that for a director to be considered truly an auteur, he, or she, must be able to withstand the close scrutiny of their technical skills, i.e. he or she must be technically competent. Secondly he says:

Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks or moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels (in Braudy and Cohen, 1999, p. 516).

Thirdly, Sarris refers to the 'internal meaning' created by the director, something which he describes as being akin to the transmission of the director's personality, his or her worldview to the film. He states that this creation of internal meaning is possible even when the ideas or themes expressed in the film may not have originated with the director.

Structuralist critics of the time challenged textual researchers to investigate the '*relationships within and between cultural objects*' (Cook and Bernink, 1999, p. 282-283), when looking for the origin of meaning in any given text. Rather than individuals being attributed with meaning creation, it was the system within which these individuals functioned which Structuralism credited with truly being

responsible for making meanings. As Foucault and Barthes heralded '*the death of the author*', arguing against the notion of individual agency, there were those who attempted to combine structuralism with auteur study. Auteur-Structuralists, such as Sarris, furthered the cause of Auteur theory, according to Hayward:

By situating the auteur as one structure among others – such as the notion of genre and the film industry producing meaning, the theory would yield to a greater flexibility (Hayward, 1999, p. 25).

Cook and Bernink (1999, p. 299) do point out, however, that although Auteur-Structuralism encouraged the notion of the director as one, rather than the only, creator of meaning, it did not give equal value to the different structures it explored, favouring the auteur above others.

Post-Structuralism

Post-Structuralism's rise in the 1970s saw this creation-of-meaning debate further expanded with the introduction of notions of audience and ideology into the equation. Post-Structuralists criticised Structuralists for ignoring the role of the viewer, believing that viewers 'decoded' texts and that they did not always arrive at the 'preferred reading'. British Cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggested that viewers might accept part, but only part, of the 'preferred reading', thus arriving at a 'negotiated reading', or they may choose an 'oppositional reading', one totally contrary to the 'preferred reading' (in Hall et al, 1980, p. 128 -138).

Auteurism Today

As is probably fitting today, in the alleged era of the Post-Modern, the Auteur Theory is best viewed in the plural, rather than as one theory . It "*is not a unified critical practice*" (Cook and Bernink, 1999, p. 313).

Whilst Structuralism and Post-Structuralism have sought to debunk the notion that one person can be considered the total creator of meaning in film, they

have not been successful in totally discrediting the value of the creative input of the director. One point on which most agree is that, in order to be effective, auteur study needs to be carried out over a body of work, rather than on an individual film-by-film basis. It is only by studying a number of films that patterns and consistencies can be recognised and evaluated, thus leading in certain cases to; *"the identification of directors as 'auteurs' "* (Cook and Bernink, 1999, p. 314).

For those interested in directorial influences, and the way in which they create meaning, there are numerous auteur hybrids that can be utilised, each offering a slightly different focus. There is also a plethora of books (some more academically focussed than others) published about the lives and times of popular directors (including Oliver Stone, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Spike Lee, and Francis Coppola). Each of these books indicates that certain directors are still, for whatever reason, deemed to be, at the very least, central to the production of meaning in some films and, as such, worthy of 'knowing'. Many of these books view their subjects romantically, elevating them to the status of omnific artist, others are a little more restrained. Frank Beaver's foreword to Jay Boyer's book on Sidney Lumet, for example, states:

A collective art, the motion picture has nevertheless allowed individual genius to flourish in all its artistic and technical areas: directing, screenwriting, cinematography, acting, editing.

He goes on to say:

Many studies are auteur-orientated and elucidate the work of individual directors whose ideas and cinematic styles make them authors of their films (Boyer, 1993, p. ix).

Beaver appears comfortable using the word 'genius', yet is also careful to locate the director within the production framework, thus acknowledging and accommodating a common criticism levelled at Auteursm.

The Auteurial 'Team' and Non-Directorial Auteurs

When attributing the making of meaning to one person, in what is clearly a group endeavour, the efforts and contributions of the remainder of the group are relegated to a secondary status. Academy Award winning scriptwriter William Goldman states that there are seven people crucial to the making of a film and its associated meanings. He names as crucial to the process: the actor, the cameraman, the director, the editor, the producer, the production designer and the writer, and that to discount any is both incorrect and insulting (Goldman, 1985, p. 101-105).

At first it appears Goldman seems to be suggesting that he is decrying the total concept of the Auteur. It soon becomes apparent, however, that his objection derives not from any desire to see influences outside the filmmaking process included in any discussion regarding meaning, but from a desire to have it recognised that meaning emanates from a group within that process, rather than just one person. When Goldman asks about the contribution of the cinematographer, or editor (1985, p. 101), he does so not to destroy the theory, but to demand their inclusion in it.

Many directors, John Sayles included, not only acknowledge but value the contribution to the creative process.

Each performance is a collaboration between actor, screenwriter, director, cinematographer, editor, costumer, and so on. The way Ingrid Bergman was dressed, made up, lit, shot and supported by background music in "Casablanca" were all integral to her performance. Nobody else could have delivered that performance quite like her, but it was the result of a collaboration (Sayles, 1987, p. 43 & 45).

It is also worth noting that amongst those who believe that is possible for one person to be responsible for the creation of meaning in a film, there is debate concerning who that person is. The term auteur has been, and still can be, used to refer to the scriptwriter, an actor (Corliss, R. in Mast et al, 1992, p. 608-613),

or the producer. In the main, however, the term and the theory are used in relation to the director.

Despite the difficulties and varieties of approach, some version of the director-as-author position remains probably the most widely shared assumption in film studies today. Most critical studies of cinema put the director at centre stage (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997, p. 39).

Auteur and Genre

Just as the theory has often not allowed for the power of the actor or the scriptwriter to contribute to the creation of meaning, it does not, as Edward Buscombe points out, tend to value the role of the expectations created by the traditions of various genres. In not doing so, it does not allow for the impact of these expectations on the creation of meaning (in Grant B.K (ed.), 1995, p. 20).

However, in his book *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz contends that auteur theory and genre study are not mutually exclusive:

These two critical methods do complement and counterbalance one another in that genre criticism treats established cinematic forms, whereas auteur criticism celebrates certain filmmakers who worked effectively within those forms (Schatz, 1981, p. 8).

The Celebrity Auteur and Commerce and Auteurism

The American film magazine *Premiere*, November 1994, contains an article by Peter Biskind entitled "AN AUTEUR IS BORN". The auteur in question is Quentin Tarantino, a director who at that time had directed only two feature length films (the first in 1992), whilst having scripted, co-scripted or acted in several others. Tarantino did not have, at the time, the history in filmmaking that normally goes hand-in-hand with consideration for auteur status. The article therefore does not have a 'body' of work to discuss, but seems not to be worried by this, describing Tarantino as "*the real thing*" and referring to the "*Quentinization of Hollywood*" (p. 96). What the subject of the article does have is a

'personality'. His unorthodox behaviour, his directness (looking, to this particular reader, more like rudeness masquerading as honesty), his underprivileged childhood, all are made much of. Quotes such as: "*THE ATTITUDE I GREW UP WITH WAS THAT EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD IS LIES*" are highlighted. Tarantino as 'bad boy' is celebrated. He is a 'star' auteur.

The article seems to suggest that any film made by him would have to be worthwhile, purely by virtue of his personality. It confirms Timothy Corrigan's assertion that some auteur study has become focussed on the personality of the director (Corrigan, 1991, p. 105).

[The auteur] *can be viewed as an expressive artist whose creative work is shaped or molded by the economics of the marketplace* (Wyatt, 1996, p. 53).

Economic realities have always, and will always, impact on filmmaking. A lack of money can be considered to impact badly on a production, limiting the use of more expensive shots (crane shots for example), restricting the number of locations used and ruling out expensive special effects. On the other hand, a restricted budget can foster creativity, necessity being the mother of invention, as per Sarris's third premise of auteur theory.

Timothy Corrigan finds auteur theory to be wanting when it comes to: "*recontextualizing* [the discussions surrounding the theory] *within industrial and commercial trajectories*" (1991, p. 103). The auteur has the potential to (as exemplified by the previous discussion on Tarantino) become a performer, their performance influencing the meanings attributed to their films, who reads them and how they are read. Their performances, if large enough and strong enough, may even allow for their films to be known and discussed, without actually being seen, for it is they that give them meaning, rather than the text they create. Thus their contribution to the making of meaning may come as much from non film-making activities, as it does from those directly involved in the filmmaking process.

Sayles as Auteur

As previously stated, John Sayles is not a filmmaker who claims auteur status, the credits of his films never heralding "A John Sayles Film". When asked about the latter, he commented during a workshop in March 1998 at Auckland University, that this is because films are a collaborative process and never the work of one person. Sayles' self-perception should not, of course however, preclude him from auteurial study. The control he exerts over his films is recognised by admirers and critics alike, as can be seen from the introduction to J. Nowitzky's 1999 review of *Limbo*:

It is well known that John Sayles demands complete control of his films. Therefore it is only fair to blame the writer-director-editor for the huge mess he has created in "Limbo".....John Sayles' tight grip on every aspect of "Limbo" equals a monstrosity of a movie (p. 1).

Whilst in no way agreeing with Jennifer Nowitzky's opinion of the film, I do agree with her when she credits this writer-director-editor with overall control and responsibility for the finished product.

The argument of this thesis will identify the way in which Sayles fulfils Sarris's three premises of an autuer, with particular emphasis on the third, the way in which Sayles' worldview is indelibly woven into the fabric of his films. It will: 1) note his technical competence and the way in which his style reflects his personal views; 2) it will identify the Sayles world, via the themes and issues that recur in his body of work; and 3) it will also discuss ideology and the way in which Sayles, not always subtly, steers viewers towards a preferred reading, not one that involves answers, but that instead focuses on encouraging specific questions.

John Sayles: Self-Identifying, Working-Class Visionary

John Sayles was born on September 28th 1950, the second son of two educators. His family moved regularly when he was a child and he was brought up in various areas of upstate New York. Although from a middle-class family,

the areas in which he lived and in which he went to public school were strongly working-class. His friends came from working-class families, many of their fathers working in local factories. When Sayles is asked which of his films contains the most autobiographical content, he is quick to reply that, although he does not consider any of his work truly autobiographical, those which are nearest his own experience are *Baby, It's You* and *City of Hope* (Smith, G. 1998. Pages 28-29), two of his most noticeably working-class films.

Sayles left his blue-collar environment to attend Williams College (Massachusetts) in 1968, but repositioned himself in a working class environment, when, having completed his degree, he worked as a hospital orderly, a meat packer and a labourer. It is apparent from his latest film, *Limbo*, that he still self-identifies as working-class some 30 years later.

Having majored in psychology at Williams College, Sayles' interest in people, in particular with the way they interact with each other, with their environment and their history, is also still evident throughout his films.

I was much more of a believer in behaviorism, in B.F. Skinner and that crowd, than I was in Freud, even though Freud was more attractive because his theories were wonderful stories. I don't believe that any social animal, including human beings, evolve/live/grow/exist outside their connections with other things. They do things in reaction to each other (Sayles in Smith (ed.), 1998, p. 74).

He [Skinner] made a special contribution by repeatedly pointing out that the social and physical conditions of our environments are critically important in determining our behaviors (Nye, 1992, p. 49).

John Sayles' films are infused with the above credo. It is a way of viewing the world in which individuals, communities and entire countries need to learn to see themselves, not in isolation, but as part of the bigger picture, part of a system in which for every action, there is a reaction. It is a credo he chooses to

explore, in the main, through the stories of working-class men and women and their communities. His characters never operate in isolation, they are always struggling to deal with what has gone before, what is occurring currently, and the physical environment that surrounds them. Sayles' characters are works in progress, and very few are happy when the viewer first meets them. Those who change and become happier by film's end, do so in reaction to external factors.

Sayles' vision, his 'ideal world', is a world in which the aforementioned "cause and effect connections" are recognised, and decisions and life choices are thus made on the basis of more than purely self-interest. It is a world where the potential repercussions of actions on others are given full and serious consideration and in which the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' work together. A world where the privileged have a responsibility to assist the less fortunate, but not the right to dictate to them in a paternalistic manner. It is a world to which knowledge holds the key, encouraging informed decision-making, as opposed to that which arises from blissful ignorance and often results in more problems than it solves.

Always the pragmatist, Sayles appears to accept the imperfections and frailties of the human condition and, via the characters he creates, he encourages individuals, groups and nations to do the best they can in the circumstances. Recently part of a fact-finding delegation that travelled to East and West Timor to investigate the refugee situation there, he wrote an article that appeared in the *Austin Chronicle*. With reference to the investigation of atrocities and to making those responsible pay for their crimes he wrote:

We should not be surprised if some of the worst perpetrators walk in this highly charged political situation. Because the process is as important as the results. Better an honest process that leaves a couple of fish unfried than an autocratic sacrifice of a few colonels to protect business as usual (2000).

This same pragmatic attitude is evident in many of the characters in his films. Wynn in *City of Hope* and Sam Deeds in *Lone Star* are but two examples of this. Sayles' vision for individuals is the same as his vision for large complex

communities, including for America itself. It is a vision that involves the recognition of the inevitability of being connected to the rest of the world and the acceptance of the responsibilities this brings, responsibilities that include considering and including others when decision-making.

Sayles makes it clear in his films (particularly in *Limbo* where he creates a community of locals disempowered by outsiders dictating to them) that he does not see these responsibilities as founded on a base of paternalism, a 'we know better than you what is good for you' attitude. Instead he desires that these responsibilities be located in a desire to work with and assist equals. He does not see individuals, or America for that matter, as functioning effectively on a 'big brother' basis, and constantly challenges the right, and ability, of individuals to make appropriate decisions that affect others' lives, without consulting them.

If there is one word which describes Sayles' beliefs, as demonstrated by his films, it is the word reconciliation: reconciliation with the past, reconciliation with the physical environment, reconciliation with different communities and social classes, and, via connection with others, reconciliation with self. This reconciliation is available to individuals, communities and entire countries. In the next three chapters, we will examine the ways in which Sayles illustrates his world, starting with his treatment of the historical and environmental factors.

Chapter Two

History and Geography: How They Interact with Individuals and Communities

Introduction

In the opening scenes of *Lone Star*, Cliff (Stephen Mendillo), a soldier stationed at the local army base, tells his friend, and fellow military man, Mikey (Stephen Lang): “*You live in a place, you should know something about it. Explore.*” This simple single line encapsulates the John Sayles attitude regarding the responsibility of the individual towards the community in which they find themselves living, an attitude which is apparent throughout his films. As he admitted to Kathy Huffines in 1987, Sayles sees, “*the political and the social in everything*” (Huffines in Carson, 1999, p. 98) and in his films the individual can never be truly divorced from his or her immediate community/ies, or the wider community.

This chapter will concentrate on the emphasis Sayles as filmmaker places on the central importance of history and geography in his films. It will make evident his belief that the past needs to inform, rather than dictate, the present, and from there the future, and will explore how geographical location, the surrounding environment, impacts on both the individual and the community.

History – Knowing Where You Came From

Eight Men Out and *Matewan* are Sayles' two ‘historical’, or period films, and are based on actual historical events which occurred in 1919 and 1920 respectively. The majority of his films, however, are contemporary, set in the time period they were made, but are, nevertheless, not without emphatic reference to history, whether it be the history of an individual character, or a group of characters, or the history of a whole community. Ethnic history and its importance is, for

instance, a feature of *Lone Star*, and personal history and its power a focus of *Limbo* and *Lone Star* and *Passion Fish*.

The potential for the past to inform (or misinform, as the case may be) the present is stressed in most of Sayles' films. He warns the viewer against the dangers of being imprisoned by the past, via characters who are captives of their personal history. Bunny (Frances McDormand), Sam Deeds' (Chris Cooper) ex-wife in *Lone Star*, is an example of this. Approximately forty years old, she lives with her father, her life in the main dictated by him. She is trapped in an extended adolescent power struggle, unable to separate herself from 'Daddy', as she still calls him. At the same time as warning that it is not productive or appropriate to live in the past, Sayles also points to the potential for historical knowledge and understanding to free both the individual and the community. *Lone Star's* ending (discussed in depth below) is a striking example of the latter.

Period Films - Making the Past Relevant

During the late 1960's, while hitchhiking in West Virginia, Sayles met a number of miners whom he credits (*Thinking In Pictures*. 1987. Page 9) for sparking his interest in the Matewan Massacre, which took place in 1920 and on which the 1987 film, *Matewan*, was based. The political climate prevalent in the U.S. in the second decade of the 20th Century, like the 1980s when the film was made, was strongly anti-union. Although Sayles did not encounter the same, often deadly, opposition faced by the miners whose tale he was telling, he did face problems financing the venture, problems which resulted in a three year delay in the commencement of filming (Guthman in Carson, p. 91). Sayles' focus was on telling a story in which he was interested, one which he thought needed telling, as opposed to telling one which he thought would do well at the box office. As Eric Foner points out when discussing *Matewan* in *Past Imperfect*:

...the film's pleas for nonviolence, interracial harmony, and economic justice are hardly irrelevant today. It is sobering to reflect that these

ideals seem as utopian to contemporary viewers as when they were propounded by the IWW and the United Mine Workers of America nearly a century ago (in Carnes (ed.), 1995, p. 207).

Sayles uses the story of the West Virginian miners in 1920 to encourage viewers to contemplate the validity of and need for unionism in the late 1980s (Sayles in Smith G. page 123 & 124). His choice of topic is typical of his predilection for making films that challenge and stretch the viewer, films which question, oppose, or just ignore, the prevailing zeitgeist. In Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper), he offers the viewer a protagonist who is a union organiser and a Wobbly¹, a man dedicated to the protection of workers and the promotion of their interests via collective effort. He did this at a time when Reagan was president and unions were portrayed as both dangerous and outdated and their leaders as anything other than admirable. If this were not enough, Sayles also made Kenehan a pacifist, in complete contrast to John Rambo and other popular action heroes of the time, characters who were more than ready to resort to violence in the name of a good cause. As the filmmaker himself says:

I was definitely swimming against the current in the Eighties, and it was a conscious choice (in Carnes, 1995, p. 25).

That Sayles desires to question the values of the time: “*characterized by divisiveness, selfishness, and hedonism*” (Sklar, 1994, p. 342) via telling a story that not only illuminates the past, but informs the present, is obvious. The film’s final message, that of the continuing nature of workers’ struggle for an equitable deal from employers, encourages comparisons with the American union movement of the 1980s, a union movement not in danger from armed thugs, but one struggling none the less under the Reagan administration.

Joe’s death at the end of *Matewan* does not signal any resolution between the miners and the mine owners, nor does it result in the end of the fledgling union movement. Pappy’s voiceover makes it clear that the struggle carried on and that the union organiser’s death was not the definer or catalyst for the community. Joe’s story may end with his death, but the community’s continues.

Conclusions of this nature, ones lacking conventional closure, rare in Hollywood but common in Sayles' films, will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Four.

Sayles' other period film is *Eight Men Out* based on the "Black Sox Scandal", an event which took place in 1919, a year earlier than the Matewan Massacre, in the world of American baseball. On the surface, the two events appear to have little in common, other than the fact that they occurred within 12 months of each other. Sayles chooses, however, to approach them in a somewhat similar fashion. Sayles treats the ball players in Chicago and the miners in Mingo County in very much the same way. Both the players and the miners are part of small, tight, closed communities, both are exploited and undervalued by their employers, and are subject to economic and social injustice. Always interested in the different ways that people look at the world, Sayles encourages the viewer to consider the baseball scandal from multiple viewpoints.

It's pretty much always the way I've seen the world. What's my evidence for how this person thinks? Can I imagine from the evidence what must be going through his head, whether it's somebody I like or don't like? Where is this person coming from? How do they see the world? I was always fascinated with that question (Sayles in Smith, 1998, p. 23).

By ultimately making *Eight Men Out*, like *Matewan*, the story of a community rather than of just one protagonist, he portrays the situation in much of its complexity, offering the viewer multiple viewpoints. It is a morality tale, but not a simple one that purely says some people are good, and therefore do good things, and some people are bad, and do correspondingly bad things. Instead the film considers the circumstances that encourage fundamentally good human beings to do what they know is wrong. It may be set in 1919 but, in dealing with issues that are not time-specific, it challenges the viewer to consider what their own reactions might be when under financial pressure, or when they feel themselves to be an outsider, as in the case of "Shoeless" Joe Jackson (D.B. Sweeney), a simple man who feels on the outer in relation to his teammates and desperately wants to 'belong'. All this at a time, the late nineteen-eighties, when many American workers faced financial pressure, many under threat of

losing their jobs as a result of redundancies. Post-Fordism (as explained in Chapter Three) was seeing the closure of large-scale production lines and many unskilled or semi-skilled workers in America were finding themselves out of work and with little hope of finding new employment.

Eight Men Out was written by Sayles eleven years before it was made, and he was writing in the shadow of a contemporary scandal, one which he thought had similarities to the White Sox. Once again Sayles was contemplating an historical event in relation to its current relevance:

One of the things I was thinking about when I wrote it was the Watergate conspiracy. As that conspiracy became public, it always reminded me of the Black Sox. Just like those guys, they get into trouble in different depths for different reasons – sometimes because they're weak; sometimes because they're greedy, evil motherfuckers; sometimes because they just don't know it's wrong....(in Smith (ed.), 1998, p. 147).

Sayles sets the scene for the players' fall from grace and the innocence with which the sport was perceived at the time at the very beginning of the film. The visual background against which the cast's names appear is a bright blue sky with white fluffy clouds, reminiscent of innocent childhood, of days idled away lying on the grass, cloud watching. It is the perfect sky, a reminder of a simpler, 'better' time. The next scene, in which a young boy is seen running through the streets, excitedly calling to his friends to tell them he has tickets for them to go to the ball game, reinforces our sense of the pleasures and 'goodness' of youth and the 'innocence' of America's national game. Throughout the film the impact, on their young fans, of the players' decision to take the bribe is stressed.

The viewer is made painfully aware that though the owner of the team may in fact 'deserve' to be duped by his players, the repercussions of the decision do not stop with him. Sayles demands we look at the scandal from all sides. One player in particular, Buck Weaver (John Cusack), is shown to be very friendly with the young boys in his neighbourhood (talking and occasionally playing catch with them). He is shown to be well aware of the hero status he and his teammates are afforded by the children. Sayles uses Buck's relationship with

the children to emphasise the role the White Sox play in their lives and the part the scandal plays in the death of their childhood innocence. The children are forced, like the viewer, who may prefer to see the past through rose-coloured glasses, to face some unpleasant realities: people and specific periods of time are never perfect. Their heroes have feet of clay.

Unlike many Hollywood directors, Sayles favours accuracy, or at least staying true to the spirit of a story, when it comes to making films that are either based on historical events or on stories written by other writers. In none of his films, historically based or otherwise, has he found the need to provide the audience with a traditional emotionally satisfying ending. In an interview with Eric Foner he talks about the Hollywood baseball film, *The Natural* (1984), directed by Barry Levinson and based on a novel by Bernard Malamud.

In the book, you know, Bernard Malamud has the guy strike out at the end. But in the movie not only does he hit a home run, he hits lights that didn't even exist in that era, and there's a shower of sparks. I think the filmmaker said he wanted to be more in tune with the Eighties (in Carnes (ed.), 1985, p. 14-15).

Sayles has no objection to combining historical events, or amending them in order to tell his story most effectively. What does set him apart from other directors is that he will not, unlike the majority of those working in Hollywood, sacrifice their original spirit, or ultimate truth, in order: "*to be more in tune*" with the times and thus court mass audiences. As he himself says:

I'm interested in the stuff I do being seen as widely as possible – but I'm not interested enough to lie (in Carson (ed.), 1999, p. XV).

The Past-Present Continuum

None of Sayles' films other than *Matewan* and *Eight Men Out* are based on events that have actually occurred. However, his purely fictitious films are laden with historical references and stress the importance of history both to the community and to individuals. In *Passion Fish* for instance, protagonist May-

Alice (Mary McDonnell), a soap-opera actress with a seemingly sizeable popular following, has done her best to escape her personal history, eradicating her Louisiana accent and reinventing herself in New York, in the soap-opera world. It is her eventual reconnection with her roots that helps to facilitate her emotional recovery and allows her to come to terms with her accident and resulting paraplegia. When May-Alice forges a new relationship with the land of her birth, she is herself reborn.

In *Lone Star* Sayles constantly reinforces the connection between the past and the present. One of the ways in which he does this is to create a number of flashbacks, without employing fades and dissolves (the standard flashback indicators). In these scenes the past and the present appear in the same shot, as stages on the one continuum, rather than as distinctly separate. An example of this occurs early in the film, when Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) asks Hollis (Clifton James) to relate a story about his father. The scene is in a restaurant/bar and begins with a midshot of Hollis. The camera pans down Hollis's arms, to his hands, which are resting on the table, screen left of a bowl of tortillas. The pan continues, so that Hollis's hands are no longer in the shot, leaving the tortillas (now in a straw basket rather than the plastic one they were seen in earlier in the scene) centre screen, in close-up. Another hand enters the frame, this time from the right. The hand lifts the top tortilla in the bowl and removes the money concealed beneath it. The camera then slowly zooms out to a midshot of Charlie Wade (Kris Kristofferson), and pans left to end on a midshot of Buddy Deeds (Matthew McConaughey). Sayles has taken the viewer back forty odd years, without the benefit of any editing. He uses this technique several times throughout the film, visually reinforcing the way in which the past and the present are entangled for the individuals concerned and for the community as a whole.

Sayles desires that Americans know their history and understand what it means for them today. Nevertheless he does not want them to be rigidly bound by it. He wants his audience to think about the relevance of what is in the past, to decide for themselves whether it needs to be brought into the present, or carried into the future. He is an advocate of exploration, of a geographical,

historical, and cultural nature, and is critical of those who come to live in a new country or area and, ignoring local culture and history, attempt purely to impose their own culture and beliefs etc. on to their new environment.

In *Lone Star* there is a scene at the local Texan school that illustrates this desire, in which parents and teachers discuss the school curriculum. It soon becomes apparent that the different ethnic groups involved see local history very differently. Sayles seems to be suggesting that those who disregard, or undervalue, the cultures and history of other ethnic groups do so at least in part due to arrogance and ignorance. During the discussion/argument Pilar (Elizabeth Pena), Sam Deeds' teenage love, explains what she is trying to do when teaching local history to her high-school class:

Pilar: I've only been trying to get across some of the complexity of our situation down here – cultures coming together in both negative and positive ways.

Anglo Mother: If you mean like music and food and all, I have no problem with that – but when you starting changing who did what to who-

Pilar: We're not changing anything, we're presenting a more complete picture–

Anglo Mother: And that's what's got to stop!

Pilar: There's enough ignorance in the world without us encouraging it in the classroom –

Anglo Mother: Now who are you calling ignorant?

The above conversation answers this last question, even before it has been voiced. Pilar talks about diversity and complexity, a more complete picture, while the Anglo Mother makes it clear she wants only part of the picture presented. The Anglo Mother is also portrayed, via the words she uses and her tone, as aggressive and accusatory. Pilar, on the other hand, is shown to be assertive and desirous of including all parties in the history she teaches. Sayles thus makes it very clear that he does indeed consider that the Anglo Mother and some of her fellow Anglo/Texans are indeed ignorant.

Similarly, in *Limbo*, Sayles questions the ethics of those businessmen who come to live in Alaska and have no qualms appropriating the history of a traditional community to which they do not belong, and using it for their own

benefit. These businessmen are shown to have the will, and the necessary finances, to pursue their personal vision for the Alaskan town of Port Henry, without consulting the locals. It is an attitude that allows one businessman to talk enthusiastically of turning Alaska into one large theme park, a place seemingly existing only in order to provide pleasurable 'experiences' for visiting outsiders, a place where the locals are consequently objectified and relegated to becoming part of the service industry.

It is, however, probably the already mentioned *Lone Star*, more than any other Sayles movie, that emphasises most prominently the importance of personal and communal history and the potential to be either liberated or imprisoned by it. Protagonist Sheriff Sam Deeds is a character who knows what it is like to let the past spoil the present. He admits that much of his life has been ruled by his unsatisfactory history with his father when he tells his old flame Pilar:

I spent my first fifteen years trying to be just like Buddy and the next fifteen trying to give him a heart attack.

Sam Deeds needs to come to terms with his past and with who he is. He tells Pilar that he has returned home to Frontera because she is there and whilst their relationship does indeed prove crucial to his future, it is the resolution of his relationship with his dead father that indeed liberates him from the chains of the past and allows him, for the first time, to be his own man. In order to arrive at personal acceptance and to therefore have any chance at lasting happiness, Sam first has to deal with his past and the way in which it is entwined with the history of the land in which he was brought up. Being at peace with himself and looking forward to the future is only possible when he is reconciled with who he is and where he fits into the scheme of things.

Unable to understand his father's past behaviour towards him, particularly his seemingly cruel determination to keep the adolescent Sam and Pilar apart, Sam has been unable to forgive or forget. He has carried his anger and hurt around with him, fueling it and keeping it very much alive. He has lived much of his life and made most of his decisions based on his memories of his interactions with his dead father, on a history he does not fully understand. Sam is not a man

living in the present. It is only when he comes to terms with his past that he is able to give it up and base his life on what he wants, in the here and now.

For Sam, finding out, as he does late in the film, that his father was also Pilar's father, is a liberating lesson. Previously wedded to the view of his father as an ogre, a man who kept him apart from Pilar for no other reason than to assert his paternal power, Sam suddenly realises that, whether his father was 'right' or not, he acted out of the best of intentions, and that he loved both of his children. Sam thus no longer has to spend his life punishing his father and is able to get on with doing what he wants, rather than what he thinks would "*give him a heart attack*".

When, at the conclusion of the film, Sam and Pilar, decide (as Pilar puts it) to: "*Forget The Alamo*", they are agreeing to recognise the past, but not be limited by it. In taking part in this decision Sam is, for the first time, reconciled with the past and acting out of his present wants and desires rather than his historically based anger. He has become his own man, no longer a marionette-like character jumping to the strings he allows his father to pull from beyond the grave.

In choosing to have Pilar speak the words: "*Forget the Alamo*", Sayles is drawing attention to the fact that the burdens of their personal history have, for years, weighed heavily on Pilar and Sam, in much the same way as the historical legacy of the Alamo siege has weighed on the entire state of Texas. Sam and Pilar, and Texas have a lot in common. Each has a powerful, controlling past. In allowing Sam and Pilar to find a way forward into the future, once they know their past, Sayles seems to be suggesting that this is also what Texas (and by implication America) needs to be aiming for.

Sayles stresses the relevance of history in the sense of knowing who you are and how you got there. He suggests that having arrived at that place of self-knowledge and acceptance, the future is then a matter of choice. In Sam and Pilar's case, the fact that they are half-brother and sister is not shown as

standing in the way of them continuing their intimate relationship and developing it into something more permanent.

In the society in which Sam and Pilar and the majority of the viewers of the film live, their shared family history would normally preclude the continuance of a sexual relationship. However, in another example of a Sayles' decisions that flies in the face of 'accepted' morality, once they have dealt with the practical concern raised by their union (the possibility of problems with any children they might have) Sam and Pilar decide to stay together. They refuse to be bound by societal expectations and to respond in the way their history suggests they should and, therefore, are not imprisoned by it. Sam and Pilar are free to make their own decisions, free to determine their own future, as is Texas and the rest of America.

The power of history on relationships in *Lone Star*, is further illustrated via the relationship between Otis Payne (Ron Canada), an influential local African-American bar owner (known to many as the 'Mayor of Darktown'), his son Delmore Payne (Joe Morton), the recently appointed commander of the local army base, and Delmore's son Chet (Eddie Robinson). The end of Otis's marriage to Delmore's mother and Otis's subsequent absence during Delmore's childhood has resulted in another angry and hurt adult son, a son who wants to 'get back' at his father. However, unlike Sam, Delmore's father is not only alive, but he is living in Frontera, the fictitious Texan town near the Mexican border in which *Lone Star* is set. Delmore initially reacts to his father's presence by ignoring him, but before long he is forced, courtesy of the fact that many of the men and women under his command frequent Otis's bar, to acknowledge his father's existence and to confront his relationship with him. It is only when he examines his relationship with his father that Delmore is then able to think about his relationship with his own son and where it is going wrong.

History is a problem for the town of Frontera itself, as previously mentioned with reference to the high-school curriculum. For some time the minority Anglo-American portion of the population in Frontera has been in a position of power over the Mexican-American community. This is changing however and, as it

changes, the area's history is being re-examined and revised, not always to the pleasure of the Anglo-American population (hence the argument over what is being taught in the classrooms). Old alliances are being questioned, as are loyalties. New heroes are being recognised and old ones questioned. Sayles again confirms the role of history in how people see themselves, but, at the same time, warns of the dangers of being imprisoned by it. Whilst he offers an optimistic future for Sam and Pilar, I am not sure he is as confident about the future of the community as a whole. He does provide the audience with a few conciliatory characters keen on reconciling the differences in the community and creating a new, more inclusive and better Frontera, but they appear to be in the minority and, with the departure of Sam and Pilar, about to lose two of their number.

Frontera is shown as having more than its fair share of people who are locked into their history, deeply entrenched in being an Anglo-American or a Mexican-American. These citizens appear to be so interested in protecting and guarding their respective groups' identity, individuality and power, that they run the risk of becoming as adversarial as the various ethnic groups in *City Of Hope* (1991). Sayles does not comfort the viewer with examples of the community coming together to overcome their tribal interests (a topic discussed in depth in the following chapter). The absence of these scenes seems to suggest that where individuals may be capable of learning and changing, there is something in the pack mentality that often prevents, or discourages, whole communities from doing this.

In *Limbo* (1999), Sayles creates for the viewer further characters crippled by history. Noelle (Vanessa Martinez) is a young woman who has grown up moving from state to state accompanying her mother, an itinerant singer. Noelle's mother Donna de Angelo (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), thinking she is doing her daughter a favour, has initiated an elaborate game which has involved her sending presents, in Noelle's father's name, to her daughter. Rather than helping Noelle to be happy and secure in the knowledge that her father cares for her, these gifts leave her completely confused. She cannot understand why her father sends her gifts but never sees her or talks to her.

Noelle invents her own explanation, her own history, and consequently blames her father's lack of communication on her mother. She tells her mother's boyfriend, Joe Gastineau (David Strathairn), that her mother has prevented contact with her father. Thus, in trying to protect her daughter from the fact that her father has no interest in her what so ever, Donna creates a monster, a daughter who resents her. It is only when Noelle learns the painful truth about her family's past that she is able to start seeing her mother for the flawed, but loving woman she is. And from there that she is able to begin relating to her mother in a constructive way, a way not based on inaccurate history.

Sayles provides the viewer with (often detailed) information about the history of his protagonists, so that they might know them in more depth and understand what circumstances have shaped them. In *Limbo* Sayles goes to great lengths to make sure that the viewer understands the community of Port Henry and the pressures it is under, such as its changing economic base. The audience is also provided with plenty of background information regarding Joe, Donna and Noelle. Sayles sometimes fulfils both of these information-dispensing tasks in the one scene as exemplified by a scene in the bar, which shows Donna sitting, enjoying a cigarette and a drink, as she listens to the locals swapping horror stories regarding the power of the sea. In this scene Donna and the viewer learn much about the dangers that the local fishermen face on a daily basis. They also hear Joe's story, about his promising, but ill-fated, sporting career, his personal tragedy at sea and how he has been irrevocably changed by this event. It is the information that the viewer receives in this scene, the knowledge of his promising basketball career cut short by injury and the drowning of two of his friends while out on his boat only a short time later that makes Joe's constant low-key pessimism understandable and acceptable. Joe's personal history has beaten the joy of life out of him. Joe exists day-to-day; he does not plan, or commit, for he knows that fate is likely to take everything and everyone away at any time.

Similarly, knowledge of Donna's personal history allows the audience to 'cut her a little slack' when it comes to some of her less desirable child-rearing techniques. Donna is shown, for instance, on a number of occasions, to resort

to emotional blackmail when trying to get her daughter on side. This less than endearing behaviour is balanced out by the knowledge that, while she has not always made the right decisions, she has at least made them with the best of intentions. When Joe asks her how she spends her days, Donna does not just talk about the present; she also talks wistfully of the pleasure she once gained spending time with her daughter. Donna goes on to explain to Joe that her daughter no longer wants to 'do stuff' with her and her pain at this development is obvious. Donna, is thus a typical Sayles character, like Jill (Rosanna Arquette) in *Baby, It's You*, May-Alice (in the latter part of the film) and Chantelle in *Passion Fish*, Elma in *Matewan*, and Pilar in *Lone Star*, she is a woman trying her best, not always getting it right, capable of being both selfless and selfish. She is complex and very 'real', someone the viewer might be able to personally recognise and identify with, as opposed to representing a more perfect self to which the viewer might aspire to being.

Like the characters and communities in *Lone Star*, and *Passion Fish*, Joe, Donna and Noelle have to come to terms with their history and move on from it. None will ever escape from, or forget, their history, and neither does Sayles seem to suggest that they should. He advocates learning from history, as per the stories of the communities involved in the Matewan massacre and the ball players of the White Sox team. He also stresses, via *Lone Star's* Sam Deeds and *Passion Fish's* May-Alice, in particular, the dangers of trying to live in it.

Sayles thus offers several lessons for the viewers: know your history and accept there may be multiple, equally valid, versions of it; understand how your history contributes to your sense of identity and how you see others; and take with you into the future those parts of your history which strengthen you, not those that limit you. Reconcile yourself with your past.

Geography

Knowing Your Land

John Sayles is not a filmmaker who is interested in repeating subject matter. Nor does he show any desire to visit the same location twice. He is, however, interested in illustrating the ways in which individuals and communities are affected by their surroundings, in how they react in response to their geographical location. In world of John Sayles, location does matter, it moulds the individual and the community and is as much a part of each as history is.

He has chosen a wide range of locations for the setting of his films and in each he offers the viewer a slightly different America, one influenced in part by the physical surroundings. His first, *The Return Of The Secaucus Seven* was set in New England, and his second, *Lianna*, in the halls of Eastern U.S. academia. For *Baby, It's You* he moved to New Jersey, and then on to New York City for *The Brother From Another Planet*. The hills of West Virginia were the home for *Matewan*, Chicago the setting for *Eight Men Out*, and a fictitious city in New Jersey provided the location *City Of Hope*. *Passion Fish* was located in Louisiana, after which Sayles, for the first time, made a film outside the United States, when he embarked on *The Secret Of Roan Inish* in Ireland. Sayles then took the viewer to Texas for *Lone Star*, before he left the U.S.A. again to visit a fictitious region of Central America for *Men with Guns*. His latest (at the time of writing) film, *Limbo* was set in Alaska. It may not be the "36 States and the territory of Puerto Rico" that singer Donna (in *Limbo*) informs Joe she has performed in, but it is, none the less, an impressive array of locations. All of his eleven films aimed at adult audiences are, however, located in the American continent.

Formed By The Land

Each of these locations is invested with a personality by the filmmaker; each in some way influences the behaviour and outlook of its fictional inhabitants. In

Matewan Sayles emphasises the cocooning and isolating effect of the hills which surround the town and the way in which they have reared a community that is hermetically sealed off geographically, intellectually and emotionally from the rest of America. Long forced by its isolation to be resourceful, the community is fiercely self reliant; it is uneasy with, and suspicious of, outsiders. The worldview of the inhabitants is limited, both physically by the hills and metaphorically by their isolation.

Through the people of *Matewan* Sayles offers the audience characters who are used to seeking their strength from within, characters such as Elma Radnor (Mary McDonnell) who see no option but to keep going, to keep pushing themselves, knowing that help will not come from outside. As she tells Joe:

I been workin - - the day they buried my husband I started and I been workin - - it don't never stop and I'm so tired sometimes and there aint nobody.

Elma is a woman for whom the concept of the knight in shining armour, riding from over the horizon to save her, is completely foreign. She appears to know little of the outside world and, like many people, what she is unfamiliar with she is suspicious of. Kenehen's arrival in town does not fill her with hope, but with uncertainty and fear. Reflecting her suspicion of the outside world, she grudgingly accepts him as a lodger, saying:

*Five dollars a week, cash. That includes dinner and clean sheets.
Hope I'm not making a mistake.*

In *Thinking In Pictures* Sayles describes the mountains of West Virginia:

There'll be a river, usually fast running and not too wide, and on the flatland along its banks a railroad track and maybe a little town, only two or three streets deep before the land starts rising up steep all around you. You've got to look straight up to see the sky and often there's a soft mist shrouding the holler. The hills hug around you – stay inside of them for a while and a flat horizon seems cold and unwelcoming (p. 9).

The individual people of *Matewan* and the greater community reflect the topography in which they live. They are strong and practical; their focus is

inward, rather than out to the wider world. They are thus loyal to their 'own' and somewhat distrusting of outsiders. They are united as a community in a way those that live in Frontera (*Lone Star*), a desert town located in a land which is seemingly horizonless, and Hudson City (*City of Hope*) a city defined by man-made, rather than natural barriers, are not.

Environments That Poison

In *City of Hope* Sayles creates a somewhat pessimistic vision of life in a small to medium sized contemporary U.S. city. He introduces the audience to a raft of characters who are products of a divided society, one broken down into tribal groups, all of which are competing, often in potentially fatal ways. The concrete jungle in which they live seems to nurture and facilitate the cruelty and savagery with which they do battle, the competition between the various interest groups mirrored by their hostile, unaccommodating environment.

Sayles offers the viewer of this film a world that is claustrophobic, not unlike the hill-surrounded settlement in *Matewan*, but one which is influenced by very different physical features. Whereas in *Matewan* it is the hills that block out the sun, in *City of Hope* it is the buildings, the man-made jungle that does so. In *Matewan*, the obstacles created by nature affect all the characters similarly and draw them together into a tight-knit community. In *City of Hope*, Sayles offers the viewer a larger and more fragmented community, one in which some individuals and groups are financially advantaged and have access to good housing which others do not. Thus the obstacles the city faces affect groups differently and make for a more divided, rather than a tighter community.

The industry which Sayles focuses on in the film is the construction industry, an industry he shows to be thoroughly corrupt. It is an industry that none of the characters in the film, nor viewers, can ignore. The products of the industry, buildings of one form or another, are everywhere, forming a constant reminder of the corruption that is rife in Hudson City. Sayles avoids any display of the natural world; parks and lawns are nowhere to be seen and trees are rare (even the colour green is absent). Exterior scenes show characters surrounded by,

and often hemmed in by, buildings, grey or brown by day and flashing neon signage by night.

Sayles' portrayal of the hostility of the urban environment is particularly striking in the night scenes. The colour of night in *City of Hope* is red: not a warm and inviting red, but a threatening one, perhaps the reflection of the fires of Hell. Noir-like high contrast lighting confirms this as a world of secrets and shadows, a world of back-handers, where hidden dangers abound and where the inhabitants are constantly on their guard and ready to 'get the other guy' before he 'gets them'. It is a physical environment that fosters distrust and aggression.

Approximately 25 minutes into the film there is a scene demonstrating this hostile environment in which two African-American adolescent boys are stopped and interrogated by a pair of white policemen. The scene begins with a lengthy shot, initially in close-up (just under 50 seconds duration) of Reesha (Angela Bassett), screen right, the wife of African-American city alderman Wynn (Joe Morton), walking along the road with her brother Franklin. The camera tracks ahead of them, as they walk. Franklin is complaining about the uniform that he has to wear for his new job, a job that he has due to his brother-in-law's intervention. The walls and windows of the buildings behind them are visible in the background. Reesha and Franklin walk past two adolescents who are standing against a building wall and the camera zooms out slightly, focusing on the boys as Reesha and Franklin walk out of the shot, screen right. The boys are shown to walk back in the direction from which previous pair came. Now in midshot, the viewer sees more of the buildings they walk beside, as well as becoming aware that there is a verandah-type structure above the pair. The boys appear enclosed by the buildings. As they walk, they are in bright light one moment, and darkness the next, courtesy of bright streetlights and the dark alleyways they pass. It is easy to imagine someone, or something, threatening jumping out from the darkness screen right. The danger comes as the shot ends: hands enter the shot screen left, pushing the boys up against the wall. Sayles then cuts to a close-up of one of the boys, back to the camera, hands on the wall. The boy turns his head to remonstrate with the cop who has him

spread-eagled against the wall and Sayles cuts to a midshot of the officer holding him.

The boys have been an easy capture for the cops concerned: they have no where to run, the environment in which they find themselves favours their predators. On one side of them are the police, on the other the buildings. They are disadvantaged, easier to catch, because of their physical surroundings. Too busy playing at being 'big men' and commenting on the 'tits' of the women they see as they walk along the road, they have let their guard down. They have been caught, in a physical environment in which they are vulnerable, because they have not been taking due care. Even when outside, they are hemmed in, easy prey for their enemies.

Further emphasising the claustrophobic nature of Hudson City, Sayles shoots many of the daytime scenes inside. He utilises low-key lighting to create a world of shadows, where deals are struck by men who sit at poorly-lit tables, their faces only partially visible, their intentions questionable. When he does shoot outdoors the sky is usually blocked out by the surrounding buildings and is rarely shown. Even when the sky is in evidence, it is not a bright blue sky, complete with clouds and sun, but a grey-blue sky, one that is dominated by the structures below it. By night, or by day, Hudson City is not an open and honest place. The buildings themselves are presented by Sayles as monuments to, and constant reminders of, the corruption that runs through the city. They help to hem in, and trap, the more disenfranchised citizens of the city.

Environments That Heal

In *Passion Fish* by contrast the filmmaker introduces the viewer to a benign land, one that is steeped in mystery and magic, and a land capable of healing, if not the body, then at least the human soul. Sayles clearly illustrates these potential healing powers in a night scene in which May-Alice and Chantelle (Alfre Woodard) are out on the boat of May-Alice's childhood acquaintance, Rennie (David Strathairn). Having experienced a pleasant day out on the

bayou, their return is delayed by engine problems and they journey back home in the dark.

As Rennie brings them home from the small uninhabited island of Misière, May-Alice's delight in, and response to, the waterways, bush, and animals that surround the boat cannot be missed. As in *City of Hope*, Sayles favours red in these scenes, but this time it is a red strongly infused with a golden glow. All three characters are seen reflected in the warm gold/red light, as if basking in the reflection of a warming, romantic, fire. As they glide through the waterways the spot-light on the boat illuminates sections of the water and the surrounding lush vegetation. An owl (a reminder of the wisdom of mother nature?) and an alligator are caught in the light but, bathed as they are in the golden glow, even the latter is rendered somewhat benign.

Another very different environment is shown to have similar healing qualities in a montage sequence in *Limbo* that records Joe's return to fishing for the first time in twenty-five years. His two and a half decade absence from the water follows the sinking of his own boat with tragic consequences. Not usually a fan of montage, Sayles uses it extremely effectively here. The sequence begins with a musical bridge, the opening chords of the song which Donna sings throughout the scene begins just prior to the montage's first shot commencing. Visually the scene commences with two long shots showing Joe at the helm of the Raven. Though his expression is indeterminable, he can be seen to turn his head frequently, appearing to be scouring the horizon for possible danger. Next is a midshot of Joe, initially looking tense, but then the merest glimmer of a smile briefly appears at the corners of his mouth and disappears again.

The editing of these shots involves a series of lap dissolves, with each one fading into the other, so that for a brief time the new shot appears over the previous shot, which then gently fades out. This gives the entire sequence a dream-like, spiritual feel. The midshot of Joe is initially superimposed over the earlier shot with the mountains and water in the background, thus briefly creating the impression that Joe and his environment are as one, linked physically and spiritually. The next three shots focus on the winch and the

fishing gear as the nets are being set and are followed by another shot of Joe at the wheel. The difference this time is that rather than scanning the horizon, Joe is shown to be purely focussed on the task at hand. These shots also fade into the other, as do the remaining shots in the sequence, and serve to link Joe with the fishing. Not only is he a 'natural' part of the environment, it becomes apparent that he was born to fish.

In long shot Joe is shown to move freely around the ship, working as comfortably at the net as he does at the wheel. The sequence continues with a number of midshots and close-ups of Joe. He is shown bringing the fish out of the water and towards the end of the sequence he is clearly seen smiling freely, looking more relaxed than the audience has thus far seen him. Joe thaws before the viewers' eyes, he begins to feel pleasure again, and to be at one with his world, the water, the fish and the 'rush' it all affords him. For the first time Joe appears to be connected, not only physically and emotionally to what is around him, but also within himself. It is as though he undergoes a process of emotional and physical reunification. Less compartmentalised and more at ease with himself and his surroundings, he appears for the first time to 'fit'. Joe, his image meshed with his surroundings and the job he loves, has come home. The final shot of Joe in the montage briefly merges with a midshot of Donna. Both appear briefly on the screen at the same time in midshot, Donna on screen left and Joe screen right before the shot of Joe fades out completely leaving Donna, still in midshot screen left, finishing the song she is singing in the Golden Nugget Bar. If the earlier shots have connected Joe to his surroundings and to fishing, then his sharing the screen briefly with Donna confirms the validity and 'rightness' of their relationship.

Though montage is a common editing device, it is, as previously stated, not one that Sayles often uses. In this scene however, he uses it very effectively and, combined with the lap dissolves, the viewer is left in no doubt that Joe belongs on the water, that Donna and Joe belong together, and that together, they belong in the coastal town of Port Henry. The soft transitions fulfil one of their standard functions in this scene in that they connote: "*a similarity between the*

two spaces or events – even though that similarity may not at first be apparent” (Hayward, 2000, p. 89).

Nature and Sexuality

As previously mentioned, the viewer of *Passion Fish* witnesses May-Alice's rebirth in the bayou. Her physical return to this magic land of her childhood is matched by the spiritual return of her soul to her body, along with an accompanying re-emergence of her sexuality. Prior to the commencement of the trip, May-Alice is shown to be attracted to Rennie, a man of her own age whom she knew, from a distance, as a young girl. She is, however, shown to treat her attraction as if it were still something child-like and to have no intention of acting upon it. It is only as the boat slips through the dark, yet silky waters that May-Alice appears to consider her attraction in an adult way. In the golden glow, she literally sees Rennie in a new light, one that incorporates her desire for him sexually.

May-Alice's sexual reawakening is confirmed in the next scene, a dream sequence, which involves May-Alice and Rennie embracing and kissing. The dream sequence is again an outdoor scene and May-Alice is shown to walk towards Rennie, the waterways in the background. Not only is she surrounded by nature, but May-Alice is now wearing a dress with a bold floral design. Surrounded by nature, she is part of it, no longer emotionally dead, she is a living, growing creature who flourishes in the land that surrounds her.

When May-Alice awakens from the dream she is of course still unable to walk, but she does carry with her the new-found power and sexual drive represented by her miraculous 'dream walk' towards Rennie. Prodded by both her dream, and a few none too subtle comments from Chantelle with regard to Rennie's apparent attraction to her, May-Alice not only accepts that she is sexually attracted to Rennie, but comes to consider the possibility that their mutual attraction may be physically consummated. Late in the film, when May-Alice tells Rennie that he does not need a reason to visit her at home, she is taking a

bold step. She is verbalising not only her interest in him, but also her desire to take the relationship further.

City vs Country

The response of May-Alice's African-American nurse, Chantelle, to the bayou is, however, quite different and this highlights one of the differences between the two women. Chantelle is truly a 'city girl', where as May-Alice's roots are in the bayou. Chantelle's situation is complicated by the fact that, like the alcoholic who loves alcohol but is made sick by it, the city life could prove fatal for her. Whilst the land allows May-Alice to find her true self, it offers Chantelle the opportunity to recreate herself, to become some one new.

Chantelle gets a second chance at life in Louisiana, even though she is shown to be ill at ease with the land. The first time the viewer sees her she has just arrived off the bus. Centre screen, she is seen in longshot, standing alone. The effect is to diminish her both physically and emotionally - she appears lost and intimidated in the vastness of the environment that surrounds her. During their previously mentioned boat trip Chantelle is shown to respond warily to the same surroundings that May-Alice revels in. It is obvious Chantelle will never be at one with the physical aspects of the land, at least not in the same way that May-Alice is shown to be. She does, however, come to appreciate what it offers, as is witnessed by her reaction, in the film's final scene, when she expresses her fear of the consequences of, what she presumes is, May-Alice's impending return to the city. The land is thus shown to be generous to both women, offering them both a second chance to live life.

Other Landscapes

In *Lone Star* Sayles chooses in Texas a location that is not only laden with history, but one which is physically imposing. The wide-open spaces emphasise the often-arbitrary nature of borders and boundaries. The predominantly muted colours of the desert merge and serve to hide, even if only temporarily, skeletons, both literal and figurative. Together they create and reinforce a

community that is constantly shifting, often not sure quite of the ground on which it stands. The dust, it seems, never truly settles in the land around Frontera. It is a land where the truth will not remain hidden forever and where the landscape, like the communities, is always changing.

In Alaska too Sayles finds a land that is beautiful, yet harsh and inhospitable, and people who have become tough in order to cope with what the environment deals them. These are people used to not only losing loved ones and friends to the dark waters off the coast, but also familiar with personally facing danger. They are people who have had to develop the fortitude to withstand the rain and cold and limited hours of daylight. In *Limbo* the filmmaker once more re-inforces the impact of the environment on the identity and behaviour of the individual and of the community. In a scene that takes place in the Golden Nugget bar for instance, a scene dealt with in detail in the following chapter, locals discuss the 'mishaps' experienced by visitors to the area. As the scene progresses and the stories build, one upon another, they combine to create the impression of constant danger and risk, and of a world in which there is no place for naïve outsiders. It is a physical environment in which only the physically and emotionally tough survive.

As a result, the denizens of *Limbo's* Port Henry are resourceful and sensible, because they have to be; the climate, the wildlife and the land give them no choice if they wish to survive. They are unable to escape the harsh realities of their inclement climate (these are not people who go from their centrally heated internal garages to their cars, thence to the centrally heated underground parking in the centrally heated malls). They are constantly aware of nature's potential to be cruel, as witnessed in another bar scene, in which the Golden Nugget patrons talk of their friends who have died or whose lives have been forever altered (Joe Gastineau's included) whilst out on the water. Aware that they cannot beat nature, they have to be strong in order to coexist with it.

Sayles' characters are never simple and therefore he does not create stereotypical character types, purely based on the location in which they are to be found. Joe (in *Limbo*) is a man strongly linked, whether he always likes it or

not, to the land and water around Port Henry. He is also a self-avowed small town boy (he tells Donna, upon hearing about the extent of her travels around the U.S., that he does not 'do well' in cities), but he is not an uncomplicated 'yokel'. He is an intelligent man with a wide taste in both reading and music. Like most Sayles characters he is profoundly influenced by his surroundings, but he stops short of being ruled by them.

In *Sayles on Sayles* (Smith (ed.), 1998), the filmmaker talks about how, as a university student, he would regularly set off hitch hiking across country and how, in the process, he would meet and learn about all manner of people and come to appreciate all manner of environments. It is an avid curiosity he strives to pass on to the viewers of his films. Sayles' desire for his audiences to also learn about all manner of people and all manner of environments is constantly evident. His diverse choice of locations and subject matter, as outlined here, would suggest that he still finds traversing the highways and byways of the American continent the best way to do that.

As he moves from one location to another he provides characters influenced by those diverse locations, illustrating the ways in which people and communities are, at least in part, who they are because of where they live, because of the land and structures that surround them, and the ways that they interact with them. He advocates a strong relationship with the land, again via the characters he creates, recognising that as individuals and communities cannot completely isolate themselves from one another (discussed in full in the next chapter), neither can they divorce themselves from the physical world which surrounds them.

ⁱ The Wobblies, The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), was formed in 1905 and is described by Sayles in *Thinking In Pictures* (p. 17) as: "a very home grown, American, populist, working-stiff kind of organisation". He goes on to say

: "It had little of the rarefied ideological bent and European influence of the Socialist and Communist parties of the time". The organisation was at the peak of its popularity in America prior to the end of WWI, but is still in existence and advocating: "One Big Union For All The Workers".
(<http://bari.iww.org/homesites/GHQ.html>)

Chapter Three

Communities, Class and Work

...I've always been interested in the idea of community in the United States (Sayles in Smith, 1998, p. 57).

This chapter focuses on the themes of community, class and work in the films of John Sayles. The filmmaker has a fluid definition of community, ranging from the more traditional geographically, ethnically, religious-based communities, through sporting and special, sometimes short-term, interest groups to smaller family groupings. He illuminates both the positive and negative aspects of communities, recognising their potential to include and exclude, their ability to give members strength and to dictate to them.

The world he typically offers the viewer is one populated by working-class characters, in working-class communities, struggling with working-class problems. It is a world in which work is essential, not only in order to ensure economic survival, but also as a potential means of self-expression and identity. It is a world in which individuals are inextricably linked to the community in which they live, whether they actively choose to be, or not.

At a time when the effects of class are often downplayed, and in a country that prides itself on being classless, Sayles not only illuminates the existence of class differences, he champions the causes of the working classes. In fact the majority of his protagonists are men and women who are involved in unskilled manual jobs, at a time when manual labour is becoming less common and when Post-Fordismⁱⁱ has seen many of those involved in unskilled or semi-skilled labour lose their jobs. His protagonists are more likely to be downwardly, rather than upwardly mobile. In a Hollywood that favours stories of heroes and inspirational figures, such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000. Director Steven Soderbergh.), his characters could be considered underacheivers. Today's

Hollywood favours tales of plucky individuals who can 'take on', virtually single-handedly, the evil elements in society and win, without having to seriously question society itself. Individualism is God. Sayles, on the other hand, illuminates community life and examines the ways in which the individual and the community interact. He is uninterested in making films that offer a story from one point of view only and very few of his films have individual heroes. Even the majority of his more personal films (*The Brother From Another Planet*, *Passion Fish* and *Limbo*), films which have one or two chief protagonists, have a myriad of secondary characters who are developed well beyond what is usual in Hollywood film. Each of these secondary characters offers a perspective, a way in which to view the world.

Both Sayles' strongly defined secondary characters and his central characters exist and operate in relation to a community. No man, or woman, is an island in a Sayles' film. There is no such thing as a classical hero or heroine, a character capable of single-handedly saving themselves, let alone an entire community. There are only 'ordinary' people and communities interacting with varying degrees of success. Hollywood focuses on entertaining, and on providing emotionally satisfying stories. Sayles' decision to tell the stories that he thinks are important, as opposed to those the wider audience may want to see, is, in itself, a strong political statement and runs contrary to the current action-packed block buster.

Class

The Working-Classes

Sayles' characters come from varying ethnic groups and communities, and their circumstances and backgrounds are diverse, however, they do, in the main, come from the ranks of the working-classes. They are not generally the cute poor; they do not live in blissful ignorance of their condition and their place in the world.

For all his championship of the working stiff, Sayles has never succumbed to Rockwellian fantasies of a folksy proletariat that chirps along with family and community intact while around them the middle class lies down and dies of alienation. Sayles is the Bruce Springsteen of film: his bewildered characters walk wounded or drift, trying to hold body and soul together in a netherworld of shattered relationships and endangered communities whose markers for living have all but collapsed (Taylor, 1999, p. 1).

With the exception of Jill Rosen, in *Baby It's You*, and Chantelle and May-Alice, in *Passion Fish*, Sayles' protagonists are working class through and through. From the 'Brother' (Joe Morton) and 'Sheik' (Vincent Spano) to Joe Gastineau and Donna de Angelo, none of his principal characters could be described as belonging to the upper classes, as being:

.... individuals who own and control the "means of production" (i.e. raw materials, technology and money or the resources to hire or buy labour) (Seidman, 1994, p. 39).

Sayles' characters are itinerant entertainers ('Sheik' and Donna), repairmen (the 'Brother'), miners (Danny), union organisers (Joe Kenehan), ball players (Buck Weaver etc.), construction workers (Nick), or odd-job men (Rennie and Joe Gastineau). None are shown to be upwardly mobile and, with the exception of 'Sheik', they are not desirous of being so. The painful results of 'Sheik's' unsuccessful attempt to better his place in society seem to underscore the filmmaker's belief that it is not easy to scale the class ladder.

In *Baby, It's You*, Sayles personalises class division, telling the story of a cross-class love relationship and its inevitable futility. It is a story that Sayles chooses to tell in, what is for him, an uncharacteristic way. It focuses on two main characters and does not contain the range of well-developed secondary characters that are normally a feature of his films (discussed with reference to community, later in this chapter).

'Sheik', a young man from an Italian-American working-class family, desires nothing more than to emulate the success of his longtime hero, Frank Sinatra, and 'be with' his girl Jill, a young woman from an upper middle-class family. To the cocky high-school teenager, these seemingly simple desires appear completely attainable. 'Sheik' does not initially see himself as being in any way limited by his background and lack of academic achievement. It is only when he leaves the seemingly egalitarian world of school behind; that he comes face to face with the problems that eventually ensure his relationship with Jill is doomed.

The world Sayles creates for his post high-school sweethearts is one in which class plays an enormous part, not only in their past, but also in determining what their future will be, who they can share it with and what particular communities they can be part of. It determines common, or uncommon, ground and, in the case of 'Sheik' and Jill, amounts to an insurmountable barrier.

...the class thing I was always very interested in. America doesn't like to think it has class and it does. There were such things even in high schools, there were Romeo and Juliet stories. And you just wonder how long can that last? Can it last through the whole junior year, or just one semester? When are the differences between their friends going to break up these two people? (Sayles in Smith (ed.), 1998, p. 79).

That the question is when, rather than if, Jill and 'Sheik' are going to break up is evident throughout the latter half of the film. The viewer watches the painful demise of their relationship, a decline that strongly contrasts with the bravado exhibited by both characters at the beginning of the film. The childlike innocence with which the characters initially approach their differences is established, through Sayles' manipulation of *mise-en-scène*, at the very beginning of the film. The actors' names appear in bright pink on a bright green background. These 'lollipop' colours (and the other light bright colours that Sayles uses throughout the film in association with Jill, and the part of her high-school world that has nothing to do with 'Sheik') evoke memories of childhood, of 'sugar and spice and all things nice' and provide a link to the period in which the film was set, the 1960s.

Jill's bedroom in her family home exemplifies Sayles' use of colour, with its pale green walls and pink bedspread. There are stuffed toys on the bed and a record player on a table. In a scene in which Jill stands in front of the mirror dancing and singing to the songs on the record player, Sayles clearly locates Jill as child/woman. Not yet ready to discard the toys of childhood, she sensuously moves her hips and studies her reflection the mirror, appearing to be trying on her budding sexuality, much as she would a new dress, to see if it fits.

Colour again features when Jill learns of her success in the school drama club auditions. She stands in the pale green high-school corridor, looking at the sherbet-orange notice board. Studying her name on the board, she is literally living a childhood dream, that of being a star. Her face is bathed in the reflection of lights that surround the notice board. Delighted at having been cast in the lead role, she basks in the golden glow of the lights. In choosing to light the drama notice board as if it were a billboard outside a theatre, Sayles makes a visual connection between Jill's life, as it is, and her dreams. The viewer sees her as, for the first time, she is gets a taste of her dream of being a famous actress whose name is constantly up in lights.

'Sheik's' world is coloured very differently. It is dark and shadow-laden, not full of colour and warmth and is exemplified by the bar in which he regularly frequents. Dark earthy colours abound, low-key lighting creating a world of potential hidden dangers, a world which Jill finds threatening when she and 'Sheik' go there on their first date. Sayles' *mise en scene* thus very effectively illuminates the differences between the worlds 'Sheik' and Jill inhabit.

On the surface 'Sheik' appears to be more 'wordly-wise', less vulnerable than Jill, he socialises in bars (the realm of adults rather than children), has had previous relationships and is sexually active. Jill, on the other hand, dances in front of her bedroom mirror, has stuffed toys on her bed and is a virgin. As the film progresses however, and Jill's world is shown to be crumbling, Sayles never allows the viewer to lose sight of the ways in which the advantages of Jill's social class afford her some protection. She is shown to struggle at college, no longer part of the 'in' group. Lonely and desperate to belong, she

begins smoking marijuana, drinking, at times heavily, and having sex, more out of desire to fit in, than for the pleasure she receives from these activities. Sayles shows her pain, as she strives to be accepted, but having established, in scenes early in the film, the difference between her supportive family life and 'Sheik's' troubled one (discussed further in the following chapter), he ensures that the viewer is aware that no matter how much she wants her life at college to 'work', if it does not, she still has a nice home and supportive family to return too, a strong educational base to fall back on. Sarah Lawrence, the college she is attending may be her preferred option, but it is not her only option. For 'Sheik', there are no buffers, he stands or falls on his own, he has no other options for bettering his position in life. Both characters aspire to a career in the entertainment industry and it is not long before the viewer knows who is more likely to reach their goal. Untrained, and with none of Jill's advantages, 'Sheik' is a prisoner of his class and Sayles, in a film that seems, along with *City of Hope*, his most pessimistic, offers him no means of escape.

Jill and 'Sheik's' relationship is never an easy one and the end of high-school sees it facing even bigger hurdles, as Jill goes off to college, and 'Sheik' attempts to establish a career in show business. Neither character has an easy time of it, but, by the end of the film, Jill's world seems to be expanding, albeit painfully, due to her college experiences. 'Sheik's' world seems, on the other hand, to be contracting. Rather than being on his way to a successful singing career, he is lip-synching Sinatra songs in a dingy bar to an unappreciative audience. Sayles places side by side two characters from very different backgrounds, with different friends, education levels, experiences and life expectations and, in doing so, he thus highlights the differences between them rather than minimising them. Sayles uses *Baby, It's You* to debunk the myth of the classless American society and personalises the difficulty with which the various classes travel together.

Sayles even extends his examination of class to that quintessential American icon, baseball. The central characters in *Eight Men Out*, pivotal figures in the baseball community of the time, bear no resemblance to the highly paid professional sports stars with which today's audience is familiar. They are not

portrayed as 'money hungry' men, happy to dupe their often working-class fans. The White Sox are instead shown to be working men themselves. Men who, in Marxist terms, have no real control over their labourⁱⁱⁱ. Exploited by the owner of the team, they are shown to throw the World Series for a variety of reasons, most having more to do with their exploitation by their money-hungry upper-class owner and financial survival, rather than outright greed.

Workers Divided and United

In *Baby, It's You* Sayles illustrates the ways in which truly equal relationships between people of different classes are often difficult to achieve. In *Matewan*, *Eight Men Out* and *City of Hope* he goes on to illuminate the battle lines within class groupings. *Matewan* focuses on class, not via the experiences of a young couple in love, but by concentrating on an entire community. At the core of the film is the right of all men and women to be able to work for a reasonable wage and with dignity. The miners in the Virginian hill community show no desire to work anywhere other than in the mines; they are however, tired of being owned by the miner owners who seem to care nothing for their safety. Going on strike when you are paid in company script, live in a company house and have only a company store to buy from, takes on a whole new dimension. Isolated, with families to support, no other means of income and no one outside the conflict to supply practical or financial support, the miners' plight is a particularly serious one. There are only three possible outcomes for them: they win their battle against the company and gain the concessions they want, they capitulate and accept terms from the company that are likely to be even harsher than the ones they have lived under previously, or they and their families are driven out of the hills. Taking on the company is not for the faint-hearted, and all in the community know that the consequences may be deadly.

The primary struggle in *Matewan* is that between the workers and the owners, but Sayles complicates the equation by challenging the notion that all working-class men and women naturally see themselves as belonging to the same community, based purely on their shared class experience. He offers the

audience Anglo-American/Anglo-Irish miners, many of whom have racist views that threaten to make the union they are fighting for a 'whites only' club. Joe Kenehan has to convince the local miners that the owners are the enemy, not workers from other racial and ethnic groups. He talks to the union organisers about 'Few Clothes' (James Earl Jones), an African-American miner, one of many African and Italian/Americans brought in by the company to provide 'scab' labour. 'Few Clothes', who has no desire to be a 'scab', wishes to join the union, much to the surprise and disgust of the white organisers. These men do not see 'Few Clothes' as their equal, an opinion based purely on his colour. Kenehan, though, addresses the prospective union men thus:

You think this man is your enemy? Huh? This man is a worker! Any union keeps this man out aint a union it's a goddam club! They got you fightin white against colored, native against foreign, hollow against hollow, when you know there aint but two sides in this world - - them that work and them that don't. You work, they don't. That's all you get to know about the enemy.

Sayles' inclusion of intra-class conflict not only further complicates the story, it also acts to ensure that there is some blurring of the 'goodies/baddies' line, one which up until that point had been purely based along class lines.

The Middle-Classes

Sayles' middle-class characters have a lot in common with the filmmaker himself. Like Sayles (whose parents, as noted in Chapter One, were teachers), their class identification seemingly comes not from their immediate family or their occupations but from the community in which they were brought up, from their friends and those they went to school with. In *Lone Star* Sam (a lawman) and Pilar (a teacher) are both lower middle-class characters, who show themselves to side with the working class members of their community. *Passion Fish's* Chantelle has a father who is a doctor and comes from a middle class background. She could however be said to have relinquished her middle class status, courtesy of her addiction to drugs, and the Chantelle the viewer knows is

positioned as working class. May-Alice is clearly upper middle-class and is certainly able to “*hire or buy labour*”, as displayed by her ability to hire Chantelle and her predecessors. She is however, not able to hire labour of the type that would stimulate further economic growth. She can hire a nurse to look after her, but not someone to make her additional money. She is not someone who in any way controls the aforementioned “means of production”.

Born into a privileged family, May-Alice has turned her back on the environment of her childhood. Her career has bought her additional financial security and independence. When May-Alice’s world is turned upside down after she is badly injured in a car accident, she has options open to her, hiring Chantelle for example, which would not be available to someone in a less favourable financial position. It becomes obvious that she does not ‘need’ to work in order to ensure her physical survival (finances, or the lack of them, never feature in her discussions). It is however, evident that her work has been a very important, if unhealthy, part of her life and that should she wish to return to it, she would have to do so on terms over which she would have no control. When her ex-producer arrives and offers her the opportunity to return to the television role of ‘Scarlet’, it is under circumstances which May-Alice considers so demeaning (Scarlet will become a blind paraplegic) that she does not give it serious consideration. Her character, like Sayles’ traditional working-class characters, still has many of her life choices determined by her employers. No matter how well paid she is, May-Alice is still, to all intents and purposes, a resource for the production company. In much the same way that the miners in *Matewan* and the ball players in *Eight Men Out* are primarily moneymakers for their respective owners, her function is to create greater wealth for others.

Chantelle has also known the advantages that money and position can bring. Like May-Alice, she has isolated herself from the world in which she was brought up, but, unlike her employer, this has affected her financially. Through her use of and addiction to illegal drugs, she has lost the privileges afforded to her as a member of the middle classes, and has descended to the world of the underclass. When the viewer is first introduced to her she has undergone drug

rehabilitation and, having secured herself a job as a nurse, she is embarking on a new life, one that involves a job that is at times almost servant-like.

Upper-Middle And Upper-Class Secondary Characters

Although not a focus of Sayles films, when upper-middle-class and upper-class secondary characters or their agents do appear, they are often not portrayed in a particularly flattering way. There is the exploitative owner of the White Sox in *Eight Men Out* and the seemingly inhumane mine owners in *Matewan*, who while not appearing personally in the conflict, send in the murderous Baldwin-Felts men to quash the embryonic union movement.

In *Passion Fish* it is only when the soap-opera production company wants something from May-Alice, (namely that she return to the programme), that the audience sees one of their executives visiting her. They are not shown to visit her in hospital, nor to have any communication with her whatsoever regarding her health or rehabilitation when she returns to Louisiana. Their absence in this way certainly suggests a level of indifference with regard to her welfare, a certain heartlessness.

The larger property owners and businessmen in *Limbo* are shown to be focussed on the prospect of financial returns, rather than humanitarian or environmental issues. When a local entrepreneur discusses with a forestry executive the potential evils of logging the area to the point of total deforestation, the argument he uses has nothing to do with sustaining resources, or protecting the environment. He explains instead, that it would be bad for the tourist industry if all tourists saw were large deforested areas. He then exhorts the timber man to mill as much as he wants, but only away from the tourists' eyes.

Not only are these businessmen shown to be capable of determining the working (and therefore economic) future of many of the local inhabitants of the area, they also have the ability to determine the future of the land. They are the ones who will decide which trees get felled and where, and what land is allowed

to remain unspoiled. Much is made in the first half of the film of the effect of the changing employment situation on the largely working-class community, a community at the mercy of the vagaries of the commercial world.

Sayles has been criticised by some critics for heavy handedly imbuing his work with his leftist beliefs. In her review of *Eight Men Out*, in the Washington Post, Rita Kempley wrote:

If John Sayles were a ballplayer, they'd call him lefty - - not for his pitching arm, but for his politics. The devoutly liberal filmmaker's political point of view is certain (1988).

It is difficult to argue with this, in relation to Sayles' treatment of upper-middle-class and upper-class characters. Sayles stops short of painting them as out-and-out villains, but he certainly links the upper classes with a certain callousness, an attitude of self before others, as described above. The characters who escape this judgement, those such as May-Alice in *Passion Fish* appear, as previously stated, to be like Sayles himself, characters who are not working-class in Marxist sense, but who self identify that way, characters who see the world, at least in part, through working class eyes.

The Importance of Work

The preface to Studs Terkel's book "Working" says, "You don't make love for eight hours a day, you don't eat for eight hours a day – the only thing you do for eight hours a day is sleep and work" That's [work] a huge part of your life, and of how people, in this society anyway identify themselves, and are identified by other people (Sayles, in Smith (ed.), p. 76).

Sayles stresses the importance of work and economic realities in the lives of his working-class characters, presenting work as more than just a way to pay the bills, emphasising its potential as a way of gaining personal satisfaction and a sense of identity and self worth. His characters' jobs are not just titles that serve

to locate their position in society and are not abandoned the moment the 'action' begins.

The value Sayles places on work is exemplified in the following dialogue from *Limbo*. In the scene concerned, Donna and Joe share a table in the Golden Nugget chatting and getting to know one another. The conversation turns to her career:

Donna: *At my age....it doesn't make a whole lot of sense....my so-called career.*

Joe: *So why do you still do it?*

Donna: *Oh...Almost every night, it doesn't matter where I am, or what I'm singing...all of a sudden I'll hook into it. I'll be feeling whatever it is the song is about and I can hear it...I can feel it in my voice and I know that I am putting it across....moments of grace. You know what I am saying?*

Joe: *I do.*

Donna seems surprised when Joe responds in the affirmative, not realising that he too has experienced a job that has given him the same level of satisfaction, the same sense of worth. She goes on to tell him that because of the disadvantages of the job, she has occasionally taken on something more secure, more regular. She explains that when this happens she loses her reason for being, her sense of worth. Unable to express herself through the work she loves, Donna is diminished in her own eyes and, she suspects, in her daughter's eyes also.

Later in the film, in a scene on the deck of the boat belonging to Bobby Gastineau (Casey Siemaszko), Joe explains what fishing for a living means to him. As he describes what sounds, to Donna, like a totally unappealing lifestyle, she realises what it meant, and still means, to him. She also realises that in giving it up he has deprived himself of an important means of self-expression and identity and in doing so has thus diminished himself.

Sayles uses work as a mirror, a reflection of the well-being and self-esteem of his characters. When they are contented this is reflected in their jobs and vice

versa. The lives of Donna and Joe are, at least in part, determined, or reflected, by their respective jobs. Joe's life becomes less purposeful and directed as his career options narrow. The young Joe the audience has heard about from his brother, and some of the locals in Port Henry, was a great basketball player with a promising career ahead of him. The world appeared to be his oyster. Then, due to a knee injury, the door closed on his sporting career and Joe took to fishing. Whilst this may not have offered the same level of recognition and economic return, it was still something which had the potential to earn him a reasonable living and, more importantly, it gave him a 'buzz', a sense of purpose and self-worth, at the same time. But Joe was not a lucky man when it came to his working life (or his personal life for that matter), and he soon lost his boat and a couple of friends to the cold cruel waters off the Alaskan coast.

The pulp mill was the next step in his, seemingly, downward facing career but, by the time the audience first meets him, the mill has closed and Joe is describing himself as an ex-pulp mill worker. He is working as an odd job man, employed by two recent arrivals to the community, and whilst obviously making ends meet and not appearing unhappy or dissatisfied as such, he is not shown to really connect or get any great satisfaction from the work he is doing. His lack of connection to the work and his 'jack of all trades' existence mirrors his personal life. He is known to many people in the community, nearly all of who appear happy to talk to him or have a drink with him, but there is no one with whom he has an intimate and lasting relationship. A capable odd job man and a likeable human being, he can turn his hand to most jobs and 'get on' with most people. He is however, unable, either professionally or personally to make a deeper connection.

Joe is a local legend, the golden boy for whom everything turned bad and it while people know all 'about' him, they do not actually know the man himself. Joe is part of the community, but he operates on its periphery, not at the core. He is not a man who expects much from life. Joe's road to recovery, discussed both in the previous chapter (the montage fishing scene) and in the next chapter (in the section on relationships), is shown to rely as much on his ability to

reconnect with the work he loves, as it is on his ability to form intimate relationships.

Hello, What Do You Do?

Sayles often utilises the working environment itself to introduce the viewer to his protagonists and to their stories. The opening scenes of *Matewan* take the viewer down the mine and establish mining, and the miners' lives, as arduous, thankless and glamourless. Shortly afterwards we meet both Elma (Mary McDonnell) and Danny Radnor (Will Oldham), each while they are working.

Our first glimpse of the protagonists in *Eight Men Out* comes during a game. *City Of Hope's* establishing scenes take place on the construction site where Nick works, and the first time we meet Sam Deeds in *Lone Star* it is when he is on the job. Similarly in *Limbo*, we meet both Donna De Angelo and Joe Gastineau whilst they are in the process of earning their living.

Work is important even for Sayles' one and only extraterrestrial. The 'Brother' in *The Brother From Another Planet* finds acceptance and an identity through his labours. His superhuman powers allow him to 'heal' pin-ball machines and the like, via the laying on of hands. In joining the ranks of the employed, he is able to earn the money necessary to survive. His ability to carry out a valued job guarantees him membership of the community, it gives him a respected identity, and even his muteness is rendered somewhat irrelevant. The 'Brother' truly exemplifies the value of deeds, as opposed to the value of words.

Sayles' characters are involved in numerous and varied jobs, but the filmmaker does seem to favour certain types of manual labour. This preference for telling stories about people who work 'with their hands', rather than as part of the burgeoning service industries has been challenged by some. In his essay on *Matewan* in *PAST IMPERFECT – HISTORY ACCORDING TO THE MOVIES*, Foner questions Sayles' wisdom in choosing to question the individualism of the 1980's via a mining film:

..at a time when more Americans work in McDonald's restaurants or as secretaries than in steel mills or coal mines (in Carnes (ed.),1985, p. 207).

Sayles choice is, however, consistent with his own working experience (as noted in Chapter One) and is another example of his insistence on telling stories that he is interested in, rather than using the audience as a starting point. *Matewan* does indeed focus on muscular labour, as do many of his other films (construction work in *City of Hope*, odd-job work in both *Passion Fish* and *Limbo*, the latter of which also features fishing and cannery work, and base ball in *Eight Men Out*), all at a time when it is in decline. However, by introducing the fictitious character of Joe Kenehan, Sayles offers the audience a character whose experience of life is wider than just being down the mines. When introducing himself to Elma, Danny and Mrs. Knightes (Ida Williams), Joe Kenehan says:

Oh – mostly I worked for the railroads laying track. Kansas, Missouri – went out west for a bit, worked in a lumber camp. Little a whatever pays an honest dollar.

It is in the last sentence that Sayles makes the character more accessible and relevant for an 80's audience.

Community

In 1996 the top five grossing movies in the United States were *Independence Day*, *Twister*, *Mission Impossible*, *Jerry Maguire* and *101 Dalmations*^{iv}. In *Independence Day* the President of the USA leads the campaign that saves the world from alien invasion. In *Twister* a storm chaser follows tornadoes, constantly placing himself in dangerous situations and eventually inventing equipment that will help to map the direction of 'twisters', at the same time as saving his and his girlfriend's life. *Mission Impossible* sees star Tom Cruise carry out a series of death defying feats and defeat the 'baddies'. *Jerry Maguire* is the story of a sports agent and *101 Dalmations* is a children's story about the kidnap of said dogs by the evil Cruella de Vil. Each of these films has one or

two central characters, played by stars (actors who due to their reputations carry specific meanings to any role they play), and the secondary characters exist only to further the protagonists aims, or struggles.

In the films of John Sayles, however, community of all shapes and sizes fulfil an integral function; none of his protagonists act in isolation, none of his stories occur in a vacuum. This is in direct opposition to the contemporary Hollywood films mentioned above, in which a lone figure, a hero or heroine, or sometimes both, tell their story. In *Lone Star* (also released in 1996) for example, Sayles makes much of the changing of the political guard, in the town of Frontera, and the ways in which different sectors of the community struggle to come to terms with this shift in power. The protagonists' struggle with history is paralleled by the community's battle with the same. In *Limbo* Sayles questions what happens to a community as it moves from a production-based economy to a service-based one, where outsiders seem to be calling the shots. He focuses on the negative aspects of community in *City of Hope*, offering the viewer a corrupt community, one in which personal and tribal considerations create an adversarial environment, an environment that leads to tragedy. Even in films, such as *Passion Fish*, which focus on the stories of individual characters rather than on the stories of a larger group, the filmmaker locates those stories firmly within the community in which they occur. The characters impact upon, and are impacted by, the community in which they reside.

The Sayles protagonist is not a super hero, or super heroine. Sayles' narrative style is such that it is often not immediately clear who the chief protagonist/s are. He has the tendency to provide lengthy screen time and narrative focus to characters other than those who are central to the story, including during the establishment stages of the film. This not only emphasises the importance of the community as a whole, but also introduces the protagonist/s as being part of that community and not necessarily 'special' in their own right.

Treating Central and Secondary Characters Equally

Sayles reinforces the notion of community and stresses its importance by populating his films with numerous fully fleshed-out secondary characters and then giving them the sort of screen time that is normally, in Hollywood films, only reserved for the protagonists. The opening scenes of Hollywood films are normally spent introducing the viewer to the protagonists and to the "situation".

According to screenwriting expert Syd Field, the screenwriter has 10 pages, equaling 10 minutes screentime, in order to establish the following: (1) *who is your main character?* (2) *what is the dramatic premise – that is, what's your story about?* And (3) *what is the dramatic situation of your screenplay – the dramatic circumstances surrounding your story* (1994, p. 73). Sayles frequently does not do all three things in the allotted time. The initial scenes in *Limbo*, for example, do not clearly identify the film's protagonists. Following the opening shot of swimming salmon (detailed later in the chapter), the viewer is presented with what appears to be part of an old tourist film, and this is followed immediately by a scene at the Port Henry cannery, where the viewer meets some of the workers. Sayles then cuts to an outdoor wedding breakfast and introduces members of the wedding party, guests, entertainers and catering staff. Any of these assorted characters could develop into central characters, and some do. It is, however, initially impossible to tell who.

In not following accepted convention, Sayles challenges his audience, frustrating some by robbing them of a tool that they would normally utilise in order to 'read' the opening scenes of a film. Unable to clearly ascertain which characters are going to be expanded as the film progresses, who is important to the trajectory of the story and who is not, the viewer is forced to pay attention to all characters, to give their opening stories and perspectives equal weight. Sayles thus establishes a community.

This equality of treatment meted out to both central and secondary characters, gives the central characters when they do emerge from the crowd (rather than standing out as special from the opening scene) an 'everyman' or 'everywoman'

perspective. It is as if Sayles could have focused on any of the characters introduced, as if they all have stories and points of view worth knowing and considering. Their everyperson/ordinaryperson status is reinforced by the way in which they make their living, normally in an unglamorous job, and the already mentioned emphasis placed on work in Sayles' films.

In the filmmaker's 1987 mining film *Matewan*, the miners are on strike for much of the film, but the filmmaker clearly establishes their working and community life at the beginning of the film. As an anonymous miner sets the charge for the next 'blow', he coughs and splutters in a very unglamorous, un-Hollywood fashion. The scene is totally devoid of 'cuteness', or sex appeal, and does not offer the viewer a protagonist with whom they can immediately identify. It does however establish the 'experience' of being a miner, the 'experience' of being part of a community that is made up of miners, a community which copes with confinement, darkness, dirt, danger and death on a daily basis.

Another indication of Sayles' commitment to the secondary characters in his films is his tendency to cast the same actors in both central and secondary roles in different films. Chris Cooper's first film for Sayles was *Matewan*, in which he played the central role of Joe Kenehan. He next appeared four years later as Riggs, a secondary character in *City of Hope*, before appearing as the protagonist again in *Lone Star* in 1996. It is obvious that as far as Sayles is concerned the size of the role has little bearing on the quality of actor required and that to the filmmaker, all of his characters are important.

Sayles' uses a number of well known actors, but shies away from using stars, a practice that also adds emphasis to the 'ordinary' status of his characters. Stars tend to attract the viewers attention and, in doing so, could detract from the community Sayles works so hard to create. Those familiar with the filmmaker's work will recognise the actors he regularly uses, but this will not be the case for the more casual viewer. Even those frequently used actors do not fall into the star category and, as such, do not come to his films burdened with preconstructed "meanings".

The star is present as a production value and as a known bundle of personality traits, and therefore performs his or her star person in a movie autonomously (Maltby, 1995, p. 250).

As Sayles himself comments in *Thinking In Pictures*:

Many actors settle into one or two distinct personas at some point in their career, and you cast them precisely for that standard performance. The minute they come on the screen they carry a host of associations, a movie history with them..... That sense of movie history can be useful in genre movies and parodies ("Airplane" benefited from a number of such performances) but can get in the way if the story you're telling has more to do with the real world than with the world of movies (1987, p. 46).

It is important to note that while the above is true, there is another purely pragmatic reason Sayles does not utilise actors with star status in his films; the cost is prohibitive. Sayles' latest film *Limbo* had a US\$9 million budget (Stein. P. 90), the largest of any of his films thus far, but less than half the per film payment of Hollywood's big name stars. As it is, some of the actors who work for him do so for less than they would normally receive, James Earl Jones ('Few Clothes' Johnson in *Matewan*) being an example of this.

Sayles does write certain roles with particular actors in mind, as is the case with *Limbo* (Penella. Page 4), and he regularly casts actors with whom he is familiar in others. Working as he does with tight and limited budgets, it is imperative that he is able to ensure valuable time is not lost because an actor, or technician, is unable to do the job for which they have been hired. There is less risk involved in working with actors and crew you know well, ones you are sure can do the job required, than there is working with someone new.

Of the actors he does use regularly, his association with some, David Strathairn and Gordon Clapp for example, stretches back to his days at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Strathairn and Maggie Renzi are veterans of

seven Sayles films; Clapp, Joe Morton, Leo Burmester and Chris Cooper have each appeared in three.

Community and Narrative Structure

As previously mentioned, Sayles uses narrative structure in order to create and reinforce a sense of community by choosing to adopt an often lateral approach to story telling, rather than constantly driving the narrative forward in a straight line, one aimed clearly at the film's conclusion. He makes the following observation regarding the construction of his films:

...they often rely on the accumulated experience of the characters rather than a very, very linear plot. There is a linear plot and a bunch of subplots that run through "City Of Hope", but finally there is an accumulation of your knowledge about these people and the complexities of the situation that builds to the climax rather than discovering a body or a showdown or something like that (Edwards, 1992, p. 18).

This is also true in relation to many of Sayles' more recent films. While *Lone Star* may begin with the discovery of a body, none the less it does conform to the above. The discovery of that body sets into motion a trajectory which sees the body identified and a possible murderer being identified, with the person responsible finally being revealed just before the films conclusion. Sayles does however, develop numerous subplots: Sam and Pilar's developing romance; the illegal immigrants trying to get from Mexico to America; Delmore Payne's return to Frontera and his relationships with both his father and his son. Each of these subplots adds to the complexity and richness of the story.

In the final scene, at the long abandoned drive-in theatre, Sam and Pilar decide not to be bound by their past. This decision is made all the more significant by the viewers' knowledge, not so much of Pilar and Sam themselves, but of the community of Frontera as a whole. It is in knowing not only the history of the area, but also the way in which the personal histories of many of the individual citizens have dictated and continue to dictate their lives, that it is possible to appreciate what a bold and rare step Sam and Pilar are taking.

Sayles does the same in *Limbo*. Much of what we know about Joe Gastineau comes, not from himself, but from what others say about him. He is part of (albeit on the periphery) a community that is losing control, a community undergoing change, one which Sayles represents in all its complexity. He does this in two parallel ways.

Firstly, as in *Lone Star* and *City of Hope*, he tells, in different scenes, different people's stories, offering their differing perspectives on what is happening in the town of Port Henry. He gives us Harmon King's story, the story of a man who has been forced to sell his run down property and his boat, and who now finds himself redundant from the local fish factory. To this story he adds those of Audrey (Dawn McInturff) and Ricky (Herminio Ramos), two other locals thrown out of work by the cannery closure. Then he offers the viewer Frankie (Kathryn Grody) and Lou (Rita Taggart), a lesbian professional couple who have recently arrived in town and brought Harmon's property. For this couple the economic downturn in the area has had its 'upside' in cheap properties and a readily available workforce, etc.

To broaden the mix even further, Sayles includes the stories and perspective of an entrepreneurial businessman, as well as those of some of the ex-fishermen in the community and a local 'wide-boy' by the name of Smilin' Jack. Each one of these characters adds to the viewer's knowledge and understanding of Port Henry. As previously stated, Sayles' narrative structure is not a strictly linear one. When Sayles offers the viewer the stories of the above mentioned characters he is imbuing his narrative with depth and breadth, as opposed to purely driving it forward.

Secondly, Sayles parallels this macro structure within certain individual scenes. Several of the bar scenes in *Limbo* exemplify this, one of which we will now examine closely with regard to camera policy, in order to demonstrate how Sayles constructs the internal logic of the scene. It commences with an exterior high-angle shot of the external door to the building housing the Golden Nugget bar. Sayles cuts to the interior of the bar as a tour guide approaches the internal door to the bar itself. Looking behind her, at the tourists following, the guide

enters the bar as she instructs her band of followers about the history of the Golden Nugget. The camera tracks left: in the foreground 'locals' sit at the bar, in the background the tour guide and tourists walk across the shot, heading screen left. The camera comes to a stop on a mid two-shot of Audrey (Dawn McInturff), screen left, and Harmon King (Leo Burmester) as the two recently redundant cannery workers discuss the demise of the salmon industry.

Sayles then cuts to a midshot of the tour guide moving screen right and informing her group about the local wildlife. The camera pans right with the guide who walks in front of Smilin' Jack (Kris Kristofferson). The guide continues and walks out of shot screen right, leaving Smilin' Jack centre screen preparing to take his turn at the pool table and talking about an unnamed de Havilland pilot.

Cut back to Audrey and Harmon, another midshot of them seated at the bar.

Audrey (to Harman): *What am I going to do? Think you're the only person out of a job?*

Cut to Smilin' Jack, this time in longshot of him behind the pool table, actually making the shot.

Smilin' Jack: *Trying to impress these two girls....he's still got his wheels down...*

Cut to midshot of the barman. The camera is positioned behind and between Audrey and Harmon and the barman is talking about someone he refers to as "a big time corporate executive". The camera pans left following the barman as he moves up the bar and then cuts back to Smilin' Jack, still behind the pool table.

Smilin' Jack: *Wham those wheels dig in, he flips tail over head.*

The camera pans left and moves into a midshot as Smilin' Jack leaves the table. Cut to a longshot of the barman.

Barman: *They got heated tents, freeze dried gourmet dinners, they're wearing about \$4000 worth of gorgeous.....*

Cut to a midshot of Smilin' Jack as he is about to take another shot.

Smilin' Jack: *Smack! He's lyin' belly up in the channel..the two girls are unconscious, he's hangin' upside down, hooked in by his belt with water coming in from all sides...*

Midshot of barman, the camera then tracks down the bar, following the barman as he moves screen right.

Barman: *Two hours they lasted, two hours before the exec gets me on the radio saying...*

Cut to midshot of X Man (Dan Rinner), Smilin' Jack's opponent, behind the table, taking his shot.

X Man: *Whammo..... head into some bozo in a viper cub whose eyes are also down on the water.*

Cut to closeup of Audrey still sitting at the bar.

Audrey: *It's so cold that your spit's frozen solid before it even hits the ground and the metal on the truck has that tinny sound when you slam the doors...like the whole things going to shatter...*

Cut to a midshot of the tour guide, with the tourists standing facing her, between her and the camera. She is answering a question about whether there have been any shootings in the bar. Cut to a midshot of Smilin' Jack, standing, pool cue in hand.

Smilin' Jack: *I can't see the front of my own goddam plane, this fog's so thick...*

Cut to a close up of Harmon's hands and the drinks on the bar, the camera then pans upwards to a close up of his face.

Harmon King: *Harness a resource, my ass. A man goes out and he makes a set and he catches fish goddam! He's not a goddam farmer!!!*

Cut to closeup of Smilin' Jack, still standing with cue in hand.

Smilin' Jack: *I know there's mountains all around me.*

Cut back to Harmon, a close up of him still at the bar.

Harmon King: *The Russians, the Japanese out there, scooping up all our crab.*

Cut to the tour guide, still talking to her group about the history of the Golden Nugget. Cut to close up of Joe Gastineau, centre screen, appearing to scan the room looking for someone.

Smilin' Jack (off screen): *Hey Joe.*

The camera then cuts to a longshot of Smilin' Jack, screen left and his opponent, screen right. Smilin' Jack walks towards the camera.

Smilin' Jack: *Long time-no see.*

The scene ends here and is under 2 minutes in duration. Sayles decision to cut rapidly from one character to another mid-anecdote reinforces that it is the community that is important, the different people, their different perspectives and how they all come together to create the complex world of Port Henry. The filmmaker presents the viewer with a collage of sorts, each character and the brief snippets of the stories they tell contributing to the larger picture. Subtle camera movements are used to visually reinforce the different perspectives being offered. The close up of Audrey, when she is talking about spit freezing, starts with the camera in front of her, but ever so slightly to the left. During that shot it moves slightly, finishing directly in front of her. As the viewer watches Audrey, he or she notices the background behind Audrey changing slightly, they are offered a minor adjustment in perspective.

In the scene Sayles does not privilege one person, or group of people, nor does he favour any one story. The viewer never actually gets to hear any of the stories in full, on their own they are unimportant, they only have true meaning when they intermingle. The rapid editing in the scene serves another purpose also. It creates a sense of urgency and foreboding. The audience knows that the frantically paced editing has to slow eventually, that it cannot go on indefinitely. The stories rush at the viewer, a little disordered and out of control. Joe's arrival, his sudden inclusion in the scene (the first time viewers see Joe in the scene is in close-up, they not see him enter the bar) serves as something of a brick wall, stopping the stories dead in their tracks. Smilin' Jack not only stops telling his story, he also leaves his pool game and approaches Joe. When he says: "*Long time-no see*", he is not openly aggressive, but there is no warmth in his voice. The scene is one with which aficionados of Westerns would be familiar, for it is a version of the arrival of the gun-slinger at the saloon. The noise stops, the room seems to still, but in this case Sayles cuts abruptly to another scene, rather than having the two characters draw their guns and fire. The viewer is left in no doubt however, that 'things' are indeed not 'right' between the two men.

The Community As Healer – The Need For Connection

Just as Sayles illustrates the links between people and their physical environment and that environment's potential for healing, he also stresses the need for people to be connected to a community, or communities, in order to be fully functioning and healthy. Sayles illustrates for the filmgoer the ways in which withdrawal and isolation from community impacts detrimentally on people. He also offers up the potential for communities to be restorative. Many of his characters, such as Noelle and Joe in *Limbo* and May-Alice in *Passion Fish*, are shown to be suffering the effects of being disconnected, of often self-imposed isolation. For Sayles, having connections, both intimate ones, and ones to the wider community, are essential.

May-Alice has been living and working for years in New York. The world in which she has been immersed is a somewhat unreal one. Not surprisingly, more people know her as Scarlet, the character she plays in a daytime soap opera, than know her in real life. An early scene shows May-Alice at an airport (the antithesis of a traditional community, a place where no one settles, where people are constantly passing through - contributing nothing, a place where no one belongs). She is waiting for a flight taking her back to her childhood home in Louisiana.

Sitting in her wheel chair she is recognised by two female fans. They address her as "Scarlet" throughout their conversation and when expressing their sorrow at her injuries they do so in relation to her daytime soap opera role. The scene ends as the women walk away and May-Alice escapes public recognition courtesy of a rather large pair of sunglasses.

Not only is May-Alice shown to be withdrawing from the very public life of a soap opera star, she is shown to have, initially anyway, no desire to join the community in which she has returned to live. She keeps herself hidden in her childhood home, sending her nurse to town for any necessary shopping and filling her time watching television^v and drinking alcohol.

May-Alice's physical and emotional recovery can be measured throughout the film by her willingness to leave the sanctuary and isolation of her house and engage with the outside world, with the community to which she belongs. The end of the film sees her not only capable of connecting emotionally with others, but also participating in community life. The May-Alice who attends a community dance towards the end of the film is no longer an isolated emotional cripple, but someone who is part of life, part of her community. She is a typical Sayles' figure in that she is initially a reluctant member of a community, but eventually she becomes fully part of it, learning to embrace its restorative features.

Sayles often uses visual metaphors to depict the themes with which he deals. For example, he uses one at the beginning of *Limbo*, to establish the notions of isolation and dislocation. The film begins with a shot of a cloud-filled sky (this may not be clear to the viewer until the end of the film). The only sound is the faint drone of a plane engine. One letter of the alphabet at a time, beginning with L, the word *Limbo* slowly begins to appear on the screen. The cloudy sky disappears and viewers find themselves looking at a close-up of the water. The camera drops to below the water level and the shot is now that of a close-up of a group of salmon, tightly packed, but swimming in isolation (seemingly unaware of the existence of their close neighbours), not appearing to get anywhere. These fish serve as a metaphor for the lives and behaviour of several of the characters in the film. Like the fish, Joe, Donna and Noelle are surrounded by people, but each functions, to some degree or another, in isolation, not fully participating in or relating to the communities around them.

Later in the film Sayles repeats the metaphor in a shot in which Noelle appears to 'float', disorientated, through a group of her fellow students. Like the salmon that thrash around in the shallow water, she seems unsure of where she is heading and seems incapable of making contact with those who move in close proximity around her.

The shot begins with Noelle walking towards the camera. The use of a telephoto lens results in Noelle being in sharp focus, whilst those around her

are less clear. The voices of those around her are also distorted, a little as if under water. Furthermore Noelle is shown to be moving in the opposite direction to the majority of the students in the corridor. Clutching her books to her chest, her posture slightly hunched, she looks around, confusion, uncertainty and fear apparent on her face. Noelle is clearly swimming against the tide and, like the salmon that Joe and Donna spend time watching on their first date, it is obvious that she is getting pretty beaten up by the experience. In this shot Sayles ensures the viewer is left in no doubt that Noelle's dislocation from the communities around her is causing her distress and that she needs to find a point of connection.

Sayles also regularly uses metonymies to tell his stories. Early in *Limbo* there are two scenes in the local salmon cannery. The cannery serves to represent the production industry as a whole in America. It closes its doors and there are rumours that it is to be shipped off, complete, to Asia. The cannery workers find themselves out of work and, like hundreds of thousands of workers across America in industries such as the automotive industry, face the prospect of being replaced by a cheaper workforce situated on the other side of the world. Through the story of the workers of the fictitious town of Port Henry, Sayles encourages viewers to consider the consequences of the disappearance of such unskilled and semi-skilled jobs on communities throughout America.

Communities That Divide - Corruption and The Negative Side Of Connection

Sayles stresses the need for connection, however as with his treatment of history (discussed in the previous chapter), he recognises and warns of the potential negative aspects of community. *City Of Hope*, like the first half of *Limbo*, is also a community based Sayles' film. It is a sprawling tale of communities in crisis, African-American, Italian-American and Irish-American communities, each fighting amongst themselves, while at the same time battling with each other. It is the story of urban corruption, of communities gone 'bad',

where membership of one group necessitates you doing everything you can to protect that group, even if that means making war with other groups. *City of Hope* is Sayles' jeremiad, his prediction of what society can become when all the negative aspects of communities prevail.

In the film Sayles goes to great lengths to illustrate the interconnectedness of society: that is the way in which the actions, or decisions, of an individual, or group, have the potential to reverberate throughout the wider community, their consequences being felt far beyond the orbit of the individual, or group, concerned. He does this first via the narrative structure, utilising an unusually large (even for him) number of characters to tell the story, each of whom carries part of the narrative jigsaw necessary to complete the big picture. He offers the viewer numerous characters who knowingly, or unknowingly, and often only briefly, interconnect and whose actions have repercussions that the individuals concerned never contemplated prior to embarking on those actions.

An example of this occurs when two adolescent African-American boys mug a jogger. The jogger goes to the police and when the boys are questioned, they lie to protect themselves. They tell the police it was the jogger who approached them and that he sexually propositioned them. At the time the boys are telling their 'story', two black community activists are also at the police station. Hearing what the boys say, they decide to take up their cause. They turn the incident into a racial one, presenting it to the wider community as an example of attempted exploitation of disempowered, working-class blacks by privileged upper middle-class whites. What starts as a self-protective lie, soon becomes a full-blown political crisis.

At one end of the spectrum, in the public arena, community leaders are forced to make their position on the issue known. At the other end of the scale, in the realm of the private, Hudson City Alderman Wynn and his wife, Reesha (who works with the victim, now an accused paedophile), debate the issue from their personal perspectives and the debate causes some friction in their relationship. Sayles clearly illustrates how, by mugging the Anglo-American jogger and then lying about it, the boys do much more than injure someone personally. The

second, and potentially larger, victim in this crime, is the ailing relationship between the African-American and Anglo-American communities in Hudson City.

Sayles stylistically reinforces the interconnected nature of society in the film via the use of lengthy and sophisticated mastershots. While he regularly utilises shots that are longer than the majority found in conventional Hollywood cinema, he takes this to a whole new dimension in *City of Hope*. Approximately twenty minutes into the film there is stylistically adventurous shot of just over three minutes duration. It begins as the car in which Nick Rinaldi (Vincent Spano) is a passenger pulls up outside his parents' home. As the shot progresses we see Nick get out of the car, enter the house and have a conversation with his sister and his mother. Other characters at the party come into shot and take over the frame, the camera abandoning Nick in their favour, and following them as they go about their business. The shot finally closes on Nick's sister and Mrs. Ramirez (Miriam Colon). All this happens without a single cut, the camera seemingly randomly choosing which characters to follow, in what is a very long take. Similar mastershots are used throughout the film and draw attention to the often hidden links between various groups in society. The fluidity of motion suggests and reinforces connection, rather than creating the sense of separateness that often accompanies the more traditional method of cutting from one scene, or part of a scene, to another.

In Hudson City, Sayles portrays a city comprising a number of communities linked by corruption, with most characters either participating in some form of corruption, dealing with the effects of it, or both. The aforementioned Wynn is an example of the latter and he eventually becomes Sayles' offering of optimism to the viewer in *City of Hope*. Initially naïve and then in danger of becoming corrupt, he finally comes to accept that accommodations and trade-offs are a necessity of political life in Hudson City. Unsure of how to handle the political storm created by the allegations of sexual impropriety against Les (the jogger), Wynn visits his mentor, a retired black mayor whom he greatly respects. The ex-mayor gives him the following advice concerning the situation, and about political problems in general: "*Make some good come out of it somehow*".

Wanting more concrete advice, Wynn presses the issue further and the following interchange takes place:

Retired Mayor : *You could say you believe them.*

Wynn: *If we want to take power, we've got to take responsibility too!*

Retired Mayor: *You're absolutely right professor.*

Wynn wants to tell the truth, that he thinks the boys are lying, and survive the political storm that will result. The retired mayor makes it clear that integrity for integrity's sake is not a luxury that Wynn can afford and that if he wishes to be a leader, he needs to concentrate on attacking what is evil (the privileged white power base) and not worry about defending his principles.

Wynn disagrees with the ex Mayor. The discussion signals the end of Wynn's naivety and, more importantly, it signals his recognition that he can no longer 'play' things completely straight and that he needs to know where his boundaries lie and never cross them. He realises that he needs to know how far he can take compromise and accommodation, what he can trade off, before he himself becomes a contributor to the corruption that is killing the city, thus adding to the problem, as opposed to solving it.

The ex-mayor's idea of community leadership involves distinguishing yourself and your community from other communities, as much as possible, rather than striving to locate areas of common interest. It is the politics of division and aggression. It is not the Sayles ideal, but he is aware that it is a dominant style of politics as he told Thulani Davis in June 1991

...in a perverted way, that's the American Dream: I'll take care of my own and fuck the rest of you. Finally though I think that leads to bigger crises (in Ryan, 1998, p. 160).

In the character of Wynn, Sayles provides the viewer an alternative to the above, for although Wynn accepts the necessity of making the necessary political accommodations in order to represent his people, he stops far short of adopting a "fuck the rest of you" attitude. In Wynn, Sayles offers hope to a city that seems otherwise to have little.

Just as *City of Hope* functions as a warning to filmgoers of the consequences of the deterioration of society into strongly entrenched adversarial tribes, the character of Asteroid (David Strathairn), a mentally ill homeless man, with a tenuous hold on reality, functions as a prophet of doom to the citizens of Hudson City. Approximately ten minutes before the conclusion of the film Asteroid is shown wandering somewhat erratically down a dark Hudson City street. As he walks he repeats the same sentence, or at least part of it: "*Why settle for less, when you can have it all?*" He addresses this question, one he has originally heard on a television advertisement, to those he passes, to everyone and no one in particular. As he repeats the question, emphasising different words each time, he seems to verbalising the spirit of the city's leaders: wealthy, and greedy, constantly wanting more for themselves and their particular communities.

At end of the film, when Nick's father (Tony Lo Bianco) calls out for help for his dying son, it is only Asteroid who hears him. In a world of his own, the ultimate isolationist, and unable to process what he hears and respond appropriately, Asteroid repeats the words: "*We need help, over here in the building*", over and over. As in the earlier scenes his cries fall on deaf ears. In making *City of Hope*, Sayles demonstrates his belief that America, unlike Asteroid, still has the ability to comprehend and take action, before it is too late. Ironically he appears to profess his optimism and hope for America via what is, on the surface, a very pessimistic film.

Communities Under Pressure and In Transition

Sayles views communities as diverse entities, some well defined and rigid, others as loose and malleable, and many under pressure and dealing with transition. His definition of a community is itself a fairly fluid one, one which includes communities which may have a limited lifespan and where prejudices and barriers to membership may be forgotten, temporarily, or permanently. When, in *Lone Star*, Anglo-American Cliff tells Mikey of the possibility he will marry African-American Priscilla (LaTanya Richardson), there is the following interplay:

Mikey: *You met her family? They gonna be cool about you being a white guy?*

Cliff: *Priscilla says they think any woman over thirty who isn't married must be a lesbian. She figures they'll be so relieved I'm a man –*

Mikey: *Always heartwarming to see a prejudice defeated by a deeper prejudice.*

The barrier Cliff faces to joining the community that is Priscilla's family is forgotten, dissolved by the family's need for Priscilla to be heterosexual. Whether or not this need is going to be strong enough to guarantee Cliff full and permanent membership to the family, the audience cannot tell. Sayles also makes it clear in this dialogue, and in a conversation that occurs in the bar in *The Brother from Another Planet* (when one of the African American patrons talks disparagingly about the diseases carried by Polynesians), that prejudice is not limited to that which is perpetrated on African-Americans by Anglo-Americans. He confirms this again in *Lone Star*, via the character of Mercedes Cruz (Miriam Colon), Pilar's mother, a woman who is so determined to insulate herself from her roots as an illegal immigrant to the United States, a 'wetback', that she throws scorn on nearly all new immigrants from Mexico, questioning their legal status, intelligence, hygiene, honesty etc.

In *Lone Star*, Sayles gives us lawmen, teachers and small time business people living in the fictitious border town of Frontera, all part of a very complicated community in transition, a community struggling with its past and its future. Focussing on the changes that have occurred over the generations, Sayles examines history, both on a personal and public level, and the ways in which these changes are accompanied by the shifts in power. As the Anglo-American community's star begins to wane, politically and culturally, in this town on the border with Mexico, that of the Mexican-Americans begins to rise.

The Port Henry community in *Limbo*, too is, as previously mentioned, another society in transition. The town's traditional industries, fish processing and timber milling, have been declining and have finally reached the point where both the mill and the fish processing plant have closed down. Along with the plants, the traditional jobs have gone. Successful outsiders, like Lou and Frankie, are buying up land and the locals are forced to look to them for employment, much

of which seems to be short term and unskilled. The natives of Port Henry can only wonder what the future might bring; they seem to be unable to create it for themselves.

Sayles offers an America that is constantly changing, one in which some shifts in power (such as those in *Frontera*) are creating more equitable communities, while others are resulting in the disempowerment of the majority (as in Port Henry). It is an America in which the more traditional production jobs are gone (goods often being made instead in foreign markets with cheap labour forces), replaced by the service industry. It is an America that sees areas outside the big cities replacing reality with fantasy, with the past becoming the future, as re-enactments and recreations of the past play a part in the tourism industry plans. Sayles uses the closure in Port Henry first of the pulp mill and then of the fish processing plant, to question the ethics of globalisation and of a free market which sees Americans losing their jobs. He does this in a film which he could have made cheaper in Canada, the physical environment being similar, but which he chose to make in America, in order to provide jobs for Americans (Molyneaux, 2000, p. 257). A man for whom the personal is the political (discussed further in Chapter V), Sayles makes his films in a way which is compatible with the values they espouse.

Political Consciousness

Matewan, on its release in 1987, offered a protagonist who contrasted strongly with the *Rambo* types so popular in Hollywood cinema in the 1980's. Like Kenehan, these characters saw a wrong or an injustice but, unlike Kenehan, they knew exactly how to right it. Their solution always involved 'justifiable' violence, always succeeded and always resulted in a marked improvement in the lives of those who had suffered due to the original injustice. The end very much justified the means and this very much reflected the political ideology of the time as businesses rationalised and times were tough for many working class citizens of America. The message was clear: the pain will be worth it in the end.

Whilst Kenehan saw the 'wrong' in what was happening to the miners in West Virginia, he had no magic sword, or gun for that matter; he could not promise, or deliver, salvation. He was not a mythical character, he could not execute feats of god-like proportions (as per many of the characters played by the like of Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Van Damme). He was able to impact on the community with his integrity and sincerity and get them to work together. If Kenehan was indeed blessed with any special power, it seems to be the ability to access the wiser, stronger and more admirable part of the community and to strengthen their dormant, fledgling class consciousness. Rather than saving the community, he encouraged the belief in power via unity, a belief so strong that it was able to survive his death and the defeat of the miners at Matewan. As Pappy tells the audience at the conclusion of the film:

"Hit's just one big Union, the whole world over," Joe Kenehan used to say, and from the day of the Matewan Massacre, that's what I preached. That was my religion.

Sayles' world is one in which people need to organise, to join together to change what is wrong, not wait for some mythical magical character or some powerful politician to change their lives for the better. In *City of Hope*, like *Matewan*, one person cannot solve the problems of the community. The African-American alderman, Wynn, realises (in keeping with Sayles predilection for ordinary men as opposed to heroes) that he alone cannot make Hudson city a better place and that he needs the weight of his community behind him, if he has any hope of effecting change. Thus he rallies the community and in the scene in which he challenges the current mayor he is not on his own, he is instead part of a group of concerned citizens.

Sayles' world is also one where national politics can be as problematic as urban politics and where boundaries such as national borders cause division and pain. Much is made, for instance, in *Lone Star* of the arbitrary nature of the border between Mexico and the United States of America and of its repercussions for the people who live on either side of that border. Mexicans are shown to be prepared, even today, to risk their lives attempting to flee their own nation in favour of America. The border is more than just a division between two

countries, it divides the 'haves' and the 'have nots', it separates off those who see themselves as having a future and those who don't. Sayles illustrates an America that jealously guards the privileges it can offer its citizens. Similarly, in *Men With Guns* Sayles challenges the way in which many people from America and other 'privileged' western nations view themselves as different to those in 'less fortunate' countries, seeing them as somehow a little less real, a little less human, a little less valuable, than they themselves are.

Conclusion

From the examples detailed in this chapter, it can thus be seen that class, work and community impact strongly on the world of John Sayles. Class affects how individuals and groups see themselves and the rest of the world and how they are, in return, themselves viewed. These perceptions result in the expansion, or restriction, of life opportunities. Sayles stops just short of suggesting these expansions and restrictions are unalterable, he does however show the obstacles that lie in the way, particularly in *Baby, It's You*.

Not only does he acknowledge the difficulty of 'upward' societal movement, but he questions its necessity. In his world it is 'okay' to be working, or lower middle-class, as testified by the fact that none of his characters, with the exception of 'Sheik' (and his desires are shown to be child-like as opposed to adult) express the desire for upward mobility. Many of Sayles' moneyed characters are shown to be insensitive, or unhappy at least (the entrepreneurs in *Limbo* being an example of the first, and Mercedes in *Lone Star* an example of the second) and some (the mine owners in *Matewan* and the owner of the White Sox) to be downright evil. Sayles not only suggests that the path to happiness, for the individual, for communities, or for America itself, does not lie in the pursuit of the almighty dollar or greater status, but he also hints that embarking on that path may result in a deteriorating social and moral conscience.

Work is, as shown, a very real factor in his films. It is more than just an indicator of wealth and position in society, to be introduced and then dropped as soon as the story proper starts. It allows his characters to pay their bills and, if they are lucky, to develop and maintain their sense of self esteem and identity. It also allows self-expression and it is important to remember that for Sayles this does not have to happen via a traditionally artistic or expressive profession, it can come from doing anything you love, as per Joe and the pleasure he gains from fishing in *Limbo*.

When it comes to community, the lesson Sayles constantly teaches is that you are part of one (or more), whether you like it or not. He encourages the constant re-evaluation of community, in much the same way as he encourages the reviewing of history. He represents community as being a two-edged sword. On one hand offering inclusion, connection and a sense of belonging and, on the other, as having the potential to control and manipulate members, whilst excluding and alienating non-members. In *City of Hope* he provides the viewer with communities 'gone wrong', ones verbally, and sometimes physically, at war with each other, communities where tribalism dictates and everything is viewed in the oppositional terms of 'us' and 'them'. Sayles' message is clear: belong and connect with the various communities that surround you, without allowing them to separate you from others and without surrendering your individual thought and decision making powers.

ⁱⁱ Fordism is defined by Anthony Giddens as: "*The system of production pioneered by Henry Ford, involving the introduction of the assembly line*" (1997, p. 590). Once thought to be the future of production in America, many industries utilising this large scale form of production closed their factories as they became uneconomic, unable to compete with goods produced under similar circumstances, but in countries with lower labour costs. These PostFordist closures were accompanied by the loss of many unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marx described two classes: “*Those who own capital – factories, machines or large sums of money – form a ruling class. The mass of the population make up a class of wage workers or working class, who do not own the means of their livelihood, but must find employment provided by the owners of capital.*” (Giddens, 1997, p. 10). The White Sox players had no real control over the terms of their employment. Unemployment was high at the time of the scandal, and they had very little bargaining power.

^{iv} As specified by IMDB, The Internet Movie Database.

^v May-Alice is not the only character in a Sayles film to choose to be have more of a relationship with her television set than she does with those around her. In *Lone Star* Bunny gets her daily dosage of excitement and emotional connection from watching football on the small screen and the tenuous link with reality which *City Of Hope's* Asteroid maintains comes via television advertisements.

Chapter Four

Relationships, and Steps in a 'Life-Long Journey'

Introduction

Many of John Sayles' films can be described in terms of the steps, or tasks, that his characters face in order to live fuller, happier lives. In *The Brother from Another Planet*, the 'Brother's' task has nothing to do with his extraterrestrial status, it is a task that all people face when they change school or job, or move to another city or country and involves him learning to become part of a new community, learning to 'belong'. The task for both Chantelle and May-Alice in *Passion Fish* is to come to terms with their lives, and the fact that they are not as they intended them to be, and learning how to make the most of what they do have. In *Lone Star*, Sam Deeds and Delmore Payne's tasks relate to needing to repair their relationships with their respective fathers and, like Joe Gastineau in *Limbo*, have to learn to 'let go' of past hurts.

This chapter focuses on the place of relationships in the films of John Sayles and on the tasks he sets for his characters. It examines relationships between individuals as well as relationships between groups and communities, paying attention to the emphasis Sayles places on these relationships. It also investigates the tasks carried out by the characters, tasks that may not be an end unto themselves, but which enable the characters concerned to live their lives more fully and with more hope and optimism. These tasks offer his characters the opportunity to deal with the obstacles they face on life's journey and reach a point of reconciliation and understanding.

Sayles' films do not preach the currently popular ethos that with a hard work and a positive attitude you can do 'anything', be 'whatever you want'. Many of

his characters are the victims of life changing events, over which they have no, or little, control. Joe Gastineau's life, for example, is forever changed when the sea claims the lives of two of his friends. May-Alice's life is destined never to be the same when she becomes a paraplegic, the result of being hit by a passing car while getting out of a taxi on her way to having her legs waxed. In both cases, no amount of self-belief and determination is going to allow these characters to achieve what they may have originally desired from life. Sayles' world is one in which accidents do happen and total control over events is not possible. It is however, not a world in which such events relieve individuals of choice, or personal responsibility, and again his characters constantly reinforce this. It is the choices they make with the 'hand' life has dealt them, the ways in which they can make the most of a bad situation, that Sayles appears most interested in.

Relationships

As in most Hollywood films, relationships play an important part in the lives of the characters in John Sayles' films. Where he deviates from the Hollywood norm, however, is in the way he treats these relationships, the actual aspects on which he focuses. Sayles does not offer 'perfect love', love which comes naturally and easily, nor does he create fairy tale 'happy-ever-after' endings (such as in *Pretty Woman* 1990, G. Marshall. Dir.) or romantically ill-fated "too intense to last" love affairs (as per L. Mandoki's 1999 *Message in a Bottle*) for his characters. Instead he offers relationships (be they intimate sexual relationships, child/parent relationships, or friendships) which have their strengths and their weaknesses, ones which require hard work to ensure their continuance and which do not bring with them any guarantees of future happiness. He deals with the minutiae of these relationships, focussing on the small and commonplace ways in which the characters relate, the ways in which their relationships are built, maintained and/or restored.

Sayles stresses the importance of relating, of being connected to others (as discussed in Chapter Three with specific regard to community membership). Dysfunctional relationships abound in his films, whether it be in the form of intergenerational relationships gone wrong ('Sheik' and his father, Mr. Capadilupo (Nick Ferrari), in *Baby, It's You*; Nick and Joe Rinaldi in *City of Hope*; Chantelle and Dr. Blades (John Henry) in *Passion Fish*; Sam and Buddy, Delmore and Otis, Delmore and Chet, Pilar and her mother Mercedes, and Pilar and her son Amado (Gonzalo Costillo) in *Lone Star*, and Noelle and Donna, Joe and 'the Old Man' in *Limbo*), or community relationships, which, due to rampant tribalism and the breakdown of communication, see cities such as Hudson City in *City of Hope* on the brink of violence. These dysfunctional relationships fulfil two roles in his films. Firstly, as in *City of Hope*, they serve as warnings of the possible repercussions of poor relationships and, secondly, as in *Lone Star* and *Limbo*, they allow the filmmaker to utilise his characters to model relationship restoration.

Fathers and Sons – Mothers and Daughters

Intergenerational relationships are often a focus of Sayles' films, particularly relationships between fathers and sons. In *Lone Star*, Sam is (as discussed in Chapter Two, with regard to personal history) a man acting out of a dysfunctional father/son relationship. He is, however, definitely not the only character in the film doing this. Delmore Payne, commander of the local army base, has never forgiven his father for leaving him and his mother, and has become a particularly involved, to the point of controlling, father to his own son. Whilst Sam's father is dead, Delmore's is very much alive and could, in fact, be said to be almost larger than life. Otis Payne's prominent position in the African-American community in Frontera, and the fact that many of the men under Delmore's command socialise at Otis's bar, mean that Delmore is forced to acknowledge Otis's existence, even though it becomes obvious that he would rather not.

Another point of difference between Sam and Delmore's unsatisfactory relationships with their respective fathers is that, as mentioned above, Delmore has a son himself, a son on whom he is inflicting the consequences of his poor relationship with his own father. Sayles' introduction of a third generation reinforces his notion that the past and the present are not separate, but merely different points on the same continuum and that the past can be carried, intentionally or unintentionally, not only into the present, but also into the future.

Delmore Payne is living proof of this. He carries his past hurts around with him and in doing so begins to destroy his future relationship with his son. His response to his own 'fatherless' history has been to become an extremely independent, self-reliant and self-motivated man who has risen up the army ranks, and who is determined to have a much more 'hands on' approach with regard to fathering his own son Chet. Delmore's relationship with Chet borders on being dictatorial. It is only after Delmore realises that his father has always loved him, and followed his life from afar, that he is able to start letting go of his past hurt and loosen his grip on his son, thus improving the quality of their relationship. When Delmore signals his desire to be less controlling of his son by telling him that he does not have to follow him into an army career, the boy is visibly relieved. For the remainder of their brief conversation Chet is clearly seen to be smiling, the first time the viewer has seen him doing this in his father's presence.

Whilst the relationships between Otis and Delmore, and Delmore and Chet are still a little delicate at the film's conclusion, they have improved noticeably and all three parties appear committed to their further betterment. Sayles shows the value he places on father/son relationships through the character of Delmore, rewarding him for coming to know and understand his own father, by allowing him to use the insight gained to be a better father himself.

Sayles seems to believe that some level of intergenerational conflict and/or resentment is almost inevitable. When Chet complains to his grandfather Otis about his father's behavior and comments that his father is still "*pissed off*" at Otis for leaving, Otis responds with: *When you're his age you'll still be pissed off*

about him. He does however, clearly indicate that these intergenerational problems need not be emotionally crippling, nor need they determine the future for either party. He also suggests that any pain experienced in the process of improving these relationships is worth it, as per the experiences of both Sam and Delmore. As previously stated, by the end of *Lone Star* Sam has come to an understanding of who Buddy was and is able to step out from under his shadow. Sam's reconciliation with his dead father, his new found understanding of Buddy, sets him free to start living life the way he really wants to, as opposed to continuing "*trying to give him [Buddy] a heart attack*". Sam's chances of finding happiness and personal satisfaction are thus increased.

In *Limbo*, Donna and Noelle are shown to also suffer from serious intergenerational communication problems, problems that seem to be threatening the very existence of their relationship. Early in the film there is a scene in which Donna is trying to appease Noelle, who is very upset that her mother has left yet another of her boyfriends. In seemingly attempting to try to defuse the situation, by getting Noelle to discuss something else, Donna speculates on which of the boys Noelle works with is the one she has previously expressed some interest in. When she identifies one particular boy as possibly being of interest to her daughter, Noelle is aghast:

Noelle: *How could you think I would think Perry is cute?*

Donna: *I don't know...I don't know. You're a high-school kid, what do I know what you like?*

Noelle: *Right....you don't.*

Donna's initial question appears specific to Noelle's taste in men, Noelle's final reply suggests she is being less specific. Noelle seems to be telling Donna that she knows nothing at all about her. Noelle's tone throughout the conversation is accusatory, also seeming to be suggesting that, in her opinion, this state of affairs is all her mother's fault. It becomes apparent as their argument escalates that Noelle is very unhappy and that she blames her mother unreservedly for her misery.

Later in the film Donna, somewhat wistfully, tells Joe about what she sees as Noelle's almost fanatical desire for independence. She continues by saying that whilst the two of them used to do a lot together this is no longer the case. These scenes, combined with those that expose Noelle's tentative attempts at self-mutilation indicate to the viewer that Noelle is more than simply your typical unhappy teenager and that there are serious problems in the relationship between mother and daughter. The shot in which Noelle uses a knife to slice gill-like cuts in her upper arm, is another example of Sayles use of visual metaphor. Drowning in her misery, Noelle is a fish out of water and, in accordance with this, she is marking herself appropriately.

Noelle and Donna's relationship is such that it would not be difficult for those viewers familiar with *Lone Star* to imagine it heading in the same direction as Sam and Buddy's, if their problems remain unresolved. Just prior to the end of the film Donna and Noelle are, however, shown to be making distinct moves towards reconciliation. Having waited several weeks to be rescued from the island on which they are stranded, Donna, Joe and Noelle hear an approaching plane and run to the water's edge as the biplane lands. Joe wades into the water to talk to the pilot and Donna and Noelle stand together, still on dry land. In her excitement and relief Donna hugs Noelle, who uncharacteristically shows no sign of pulling away from her mother's embrace. As Smokin' Joe (the pilot) takes off, promising to return to rescue the trio, Noelle and Donna are shown in midshot. Noelle, still encircled in Donna's arms, is shown to be leaning into her mother's body. Both Donna and Noelle are tentatively smiling and appear to be gaining comfort and strength from each other. They are learning to pull together, as opposed to in opposite directions, something that Sayles obviously approves of and which he rewards by allowing the two to achieve a level of intimacy and mutual support previously unseen in the film. As in *Matewan*, but on a more personal level, Sayles uses his characters to stress the benefits of co-operation, of working together, rather than of trying to stand alone.

Several scenes later, when Noelle finishes 'reading' the last entry from the diary^{vi} she has found in the abandoned hut in which they are sheltering, Donna

expresses her love for and dedication to her daughter, indirectly but still clearly, by passing criticism on the mother featured in the diary:

Donna: *She left her daughter. I would never do that, no matter what.*

Donna and Noelle are both working to heal the rift that has separated them. The only time Sayles actually offers the viewer an intergenerational relationship with no, or very little chance, of reconciliation is in *Baby, It's You*. 'Sheik's' relationship with his father is one of mutual contempt and there appears no will for, or possibility of change. The following interchange takes place as 'Sheik' prepares to go out on his first date with Jill. 'Sheik's' father is sitting on the couch, barely able to pull his eyes away from the television, but he does however notice the new jacket his son is wearing:

Mr. Capadilupo: *Where'd ya get the money from? If I find out you're makin' money the way I think you're makin' money, I'll rip your lungs out.*

'Sheik': *Isn't that a bit over your head (referring to the cop show his father is watching on TV)*

Mr. Capadilupo: *One of these days you're going to find yourself flat on your arse, spread out on the sidewalk.*

'Sheik': *As long as I don't end up like you*

'Sheik' departs, saying goodbye to his mother only. Later in the film, when life is not going the way he wants it to, 'Sheik' berates himself by likening himself to his father. Not only is Mr. Capadilupo detested by his son, he is the scale by which 'Sheik' measures failure. As previously stated, Sayles is, in the main, optimistic about the potential for family reconciliation, however he makes it clear in *Baby, It's You*, that 'blood' is not enough; without the will and the work, it cannot not happen. 'Sheik' and his father function as another of Sayles' cautionary tales.

Romantic Relationships

Like his intergenerational relationships, the intimate relationships experienced by Sayles' characters are as complex as the characters themselves. Love and relationships are never presented as panaceas for life's ills. In his 1982 film

Lianna, Sayles tells the story of an unhappily married woman who leaves her husband for another woman with whom she falls in love. Lianna is initially sorely disillusioned when she realises that falling in love does not fix her life, but she does pick herself up and continue on the path to autonomous adulthood.

The ability to love and be loved, as opposed to purely being 'in love', is however clearly shown to be valued by Sayles. In *Passion Fish* both Chantelle and May-Alice's emotional recovery is, at least in part, signalled by their willingness to attempt intimacy, their willingness to risk 'loving'. When May-Alice tells Rennie, the man she is sexually attracted to, that he is welcome to visit her anytime, she is confirming not only her availability and interest in him, but also her change in attitude. The May-Alice who arrived in Louisiana was an emotional recluse, someone who had given up hope, someone who wanted to distance herself from others and to dull the pain of living. The May-Alice who propositions Rennie is a woman planning a future, a woman with hopes and dreams, a woman reaching out, wanting to relate on an intimate level.

Limbo's Joe Gastineau is a character somewhat akin to May-Alice. He does not face her physical disabilities, but he is another person whose main motivation in life, when we first meet him, is to minimise his pain. He too has withdrawn, not into his house, as May-Alice initially does, but into himself. His chief task in *Limbo* seems to be to learn to take risks again, to allow himself to have expectations and desires. As a man who has experienced the helplessness of being unable to save the lives of friends, as a man who survived when others did not, Joe knows not only the pain associated with loss, but also survivor guilt. His way of dealing with that pain appears to have been to distance himself from others, to insulate himself from the risk of further loss. Over time insulation has become isolation and Joe has joined the ranks of the emotionally impaired. Joe functions on the periphery of the community in which he lives. He lives alone and has no particularly close friends. Joe's only relative is a half-brother Bobby who, until he suddenly turns up in Port Henry, Joe has had not seen for years. Much of what not only the viewer, but also Donna (the woman with whom Joe eventually becomes involved), learns about him comes not from the character himself, but from the things others say about him. Unable to talk about the fears

that restrict his life, Joe has 'shut-down' emotionally and is only half-alive, he is unable to reach out and make contact with others on any more than a superficial level.

The viewer knows that Joe is healing when he risks allowing himself to care for Donna and Noelle and commits himself to them. The very fact that he is eventually prepared to do this, to risk the pain and uncertainty that can accompany intimacy, after all that has happened to him, again underscores the importance Sayles places on relationships and relating. Sayles is constantly telling viewers, via characters such as Joe, that relationships and intimacy are important and that the risks involved are real, but worth taking. A life lived in emotional isolation, is a life wasted in the world of John Sayles.

The final scene in *Limbo* sees Donna and Joe standing in family-like formation, with Noelle between them, a visual declaration of their new found unity. The shot clearly suggests that they have each overcome their barriers to intimacy and are ready to face the future as part of a stronger, combined unit. That Sayles chooses to end the film before the audience knows whether or not the trio will be saved, confirms that, for him, the real challenge in this film is the attainment of emotional well being and connection, rather than the issue of physical survival. Seen in this light, the ending is thus a promising and positive one.

In *Lone Star*, the final scene takes place with Sam and Pilar, sitting on the bonnet of Sam's car at the site of the drive-in movie theatre they frequented as adolescents. Throughout much of the scene they are shown in midshot, framed by trees and bushes. It is a greener background than usual (many of the exterior shots in the film up until this point have emphasised the desert), and suggests new life and growth. The background in these midshots could be seen as foreshadowing the new life on which Pilar and Sam are about to depart. The penultimate shot is a longshot of the old movie screen from behind Sam and Pilar, who are screen right. They appear to be staring at the blank screen which functions as metaphor for their future, as yet undrawn, waiting for them to start from scratch and make it what they will. Having accepted their past, but not

been dictated to by it, they are free to create their own life story. Sayles again offers a relationship that may carry with it no guarantees, but which is, by the end of the film, full of promise.

The closing scenes of *Passion Fish* are also optimistic. The producer of May-Alice's television soap has just left, having invited her to return to the show. The final scene begins with May-Alice sitting in her chair at the end of the pier. Chantelle walks up behind her and stops, commenting:

Chantelle: *Guess he's not staying for dinner.*

May-Alice: *Help me on board, okay? I want to go out.*

This brief interchange reinforces the changes in May-Alice. No longer desiring isolation above all else, she is ready to engage with the world, with the physical environment as well as the people around her, and, having become reconciled with her physical limitations, she is able to ask for help when she needs it.

Sayles seems more positive about the possibility of individual reconciliation and accommodation than he does about communities renegotiating their relationships on a healthier basis. Sam and Pilar reconcile their past with their future, but the community of Frontera does not seem to be able to do so (as discussed in the previous chapter). In *Limbo*, while Donna and Joe and Noelle are seen to pull together, Sayles gives no indicators that the community of Port Henry will do so.

Sayles is always aware of power in relationships, whether it be between individuals or groups and appears to consciously reject relationships glorifying or valorising relationships in which the power base is not equal. While the desirability of being connected to others is something Sayles stresses in his films, he does not suggest that any relationship is better than no relationship at all. It is important to note that, as is probably fitting for a psychology major, Sayles appears to distinguish between making a connection and being codependent ('needing' or being dependent on someone else in order to achieve happiness and satisfaction). In *Lianna* Sayles offers a protagonist who borders on the latter. Married, with two children, Lianna feels as if the support she offers her husband Dick emotionally and career-wise is strictly a one-way

street. No longer in love with her philandering husband, she finds herself strongly attracted to Ruth, her college night-class lecturer.

Leaving Dick, a man who has to a greater or lesser extent controlled her life, in part to 'find herself', she actively pursues a relationship with Ruth. In becoming involved with a woman who is quite a bit older than herself and who (like Dick) is better educated and well established in an academic career, Lianna seems to be in danger of merely replacing one dominant, experienced partner with another. She might want a life of her own and be conscious of feeling smothered by her unfulfilling role as Dick's wife but, rather than looking for true independence, she looks to replace her somewhat malevolent master for a more benign and exciting one. When she realises that her new love is not going to be her salvation Lianna admits to Ruth (Jane Halleran):

I thought when I found somebody, everything would be alright.

In *Lianna* Sayles offers the viewer a woman who may well be a wife and mother, but who is not a self-sufficient, fully-functioning adult and who is therefore not ready for an adult partnership. By the end of the film Lianna is on her own. She has retrieved her friendship with Sandy, a long-term friend who has for most of their friendship known Lianna as a married heterosexual woman. Their friendship is one based on equality of power. Lianna has no one to tell her what to do anymore, she is learning that with independence, comes responsibility and self determination.

Even in films such as *Limbo*, in which Joe may be seen to be 'saved' by the changes that come about in him, in part due to his relationship with Donna, the salvation is by no means one-sided and neither partner is in a position of power over the other. Donna is a woman who freely admits to having a history of bad relationships. Unlike Joe, who avoids risk, Donna seems not to see it, plunging, with what seems like reckless haste, into one unsuitable relationship after another. During a conversation with Joe she inquires as to why he is not married. He responds cagily, noting it is probably for the same reason she isn't, to which she replies:

Because all men are bastards?

Donna is a woman scarred and made cynical by her bad choices when it comes to men, but one who does not seem to have learnt from her experiences. Just before she and Joe make love for the first time Donna admits that if she has actually met someone decent in Joe, it is what she refers to as a 'fluke'. Accidental or not, her relationship with Joe offers her the hope of breaking a thoroughly self-destructive pattern.

At the conclusion of a very different film, the 1990 Hollywood film *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall Dir. 1990) the central characters promise to "save" each other. According to Harvey Greenburg, in his article 'Re-screwed: *Pretty Woman's* Co-opted Feminism" (1991), the equality of meaning of those promises seem rather questionable, based on what practical contribution each character brings to the relationship. Sayles avoids valorising unequal relationships, and Greenburg's complaints regarding the inequalities between the protagonists in *Pretty Woman* (one a kind-hearted hooker and the other a multi-millionaire) could not be leveled at Joe and Donna in relation to what they offer each other, either emotionally and practically. Their relationship, like that of Sam and Pilar in *Lone Star*, truly appears to be a meeting of equals, something which seems to appeal greatly to John Sayles.

Traditional power inequalities in intimate relationships are not reinforced in Sayles' films. There is no pattern of his male characters being stronger emotionally, or financially, than their female counterparts. Even in his early B grade films written for Roger Corman etc, there is evidence of Sayles' rejection of Hollywood conventions, courtesy of his slightly subversive presentation of relationships. The central male character in *Alligator* (Lewis Teague Dir.1980) is Det. David Madison (Robert Forster), a police officer. The central female character, the woman with whom he becomes involved in what eventually develops into a committed relationship, is Marisa Kendall (Robin Riker), a scientist. David is approaching middle age, he is a hard-working, under appreciated and, presumably, underpaid working class man who is somewhat the worse for wear (balding, very cynical etc.). Marisa on the other hand has a doctorate, has written a book and is respected as a world authority in her field. She is also quite a bit younger than David. On the surface this is not a meeting

of equals, but as the story progresses and the characters work together they demonstrate the equality of their commitment to their jobs, to society and to each other. Whilst their union does not fit the classic Hollywood mould, in that David earns less than Marisa and has less professional status, they are shown to indeed be well suited according to Sayles criteria, in that they share the same values and level of commitment. Both are shown to put what is right before their own interest, each one, at some stage, risking their job in the process.

It is however, not only in regard to issues of power in relationships that Sayles 'bucks' Hollywood convention, he also deglamorises sexual activity. As Eric Foner says in his interview with the filmmaker:

In Matewan and your other films, if I'm not mistaken, you abjure not only Hollywood money and Hollywood control but also Hollywood techniques of, you might say, melodrama - I mean the usual ways in which films hook people. There's no sex in Matewan, no affair between Joe Kenehan and some woman in the town-

He goes on to say:

You know if Matewan has been made in Hollywood, there would have been (in Carnes, 1995, p. 13 & 14).

Sayles does not ignore sex in the intimate relationships of his characters, but does not use it as a way of capturing an audience. When he does incorporate a sex scene, or sex scenes, in one of his films he does so in a very down-to-earth way, as opposed to glamorising it. The everyman/everywoman nature of his characters (discussed previously) reinforces this. In keeping with his already mentioned desire to have his films relate to the lives of his viewers, the sexual experiences of his characters (such as when Reesha gets cramp while she and Wynn are making love in *City of Hope*) are commonplace ones. He does not undervalue these experiences in any way, but neither does he offer the viewer characters with 'super bodies', involved in marathon sex sessions, in exotic locations. When *City of Hope's* Nick and Angela first try to make love, it is in her apartment and they are interrupted by the cries of her physically handicapped child who has just woken up and needs attention. The child's cries not only disturb the couple, but remind the viewer of the 'other' side of sex. It reminds

them of children and responsibilities, some not easy to bear. In Sayles' world there is definitely love, sexual attraction and excitement, but there are also repercussions and responsibilities. Having 'hooked' (to use Foner's term) the *City of Hope* audience, via soft lighting and close ups of the extremely attractive young couple, Sayles uses the child's cry to 'slap' the viewer with a little reality. Had this film been a Hollywood production, the child would not have been severely physically handicapped and would have either slept through the night, or been staying over at the grandparents, thus allowing this physically attractive couple to make love for the viewers' pleasure.

Sayles' refusal to 'use' sex is obviously not based in a conservative moral viewpoint. In *Passion Fish* he clearly links May-Alice's recovery with her sexual desire for Rennie, a married man with several children. Sayles celebrates her desire by associating it with her recovery. In a conventional Hollywood film May-Alice would have been more likely to be attracted to, and find happiness with an 'available' man, one who could guarantee her future happiness. The filmmaker does not, however, find it necessary to provide the viewer a gender reversed *Coming Home* (1978. Hal Ashby Dir.). In that film a paraplegic Vietnam veteran (Jon Voight) falls in love with a woman (Jane Fonda) he meets while in hospital. The film is remembered for a number of reasons, its performances (both Fonda and Voight won Academy Awards) being one, and an explicit sex scene between the protagonists, an able-bodied woman and a disabled man, being another.

When 'Sheik' and Jill have sex in *Baby, It's You*, it is a depressing scene, not one intended to titillate the viewer. Instead Sayles uses their cold and unromantic physical union to further illustrate the fact that their relationship is not going to work. The scene takes place in 'Sheik's' rather grim and sterile one-room apartment (off white walls). Outside the window there is a red and blue neon sign, the light from which filters into the room when 'Sheik' turns out the lamp. The room is impersonal, like a very cheap motel and the light from the sign adds to the 'seediness' of the environment. It is an ironic sight, coming as it does just after a scene in which 'Sheik' has been telling Jill about how their future is going to be. His last words, just before Sayles cuts to 'Sheik's' room

are: "*Nothing but the best*". As the viewer takes in the apartment, Sayles ensures they cannot fail to notice just how far away it is from being the best.

Jill and 'Sheik' have sex, but the experience is shown to give Jill no pleasure. She lies eyes closed, teeth gritted, appearing to wish to be anywhere else other than where she is. Sayles offers the viewer sex that is very sad. Not only does it not deepen the connection between the characters in any way, it actually confirms that their relationship is doomed. Sayles cuts from the bed to the window, neon light streaming in from screen right. He pans right to a close-up of Jill with tears in her eyes. This shot is diametrically opposed to the one described in Chapter Three in which Jill basks in the warmth of the drama club notice board lights. In that shot Jill is shown to be eagerly looking forward to her future, whereas as she sits by apartment window her face is bathed in a cold blue light and she is getting ready to say goodbye to a part of her past. Sayles thus uses sex in this scene to signal an 'ending', and the associated loss and grief, again not common in Hollywood film.

Sayles does treat some relationships more romantically, in the conventional sense. In *Lone Star*, for example, there is a scene in which Pilar and Sam dance in Pilar's mother's diner. Utilising the flashback technique discussed in Chapter Two, Sayles offers the viewer Pilar and Sam as teenagers, as well as middle-aged adults, dancing in the same place and to the same music. He thus suggests (in what could be considered a very traditional way) that, as far as their love is concerned, time has stood still for the couple and he confirms the 'rightness' of their relationship.

Sayles' handling of the developing relationship between Donna and Joe in *Limbo* provides another example of this. He builds their relationship slowly, but effectively, culminating in the montage scene of Joe out fishing and Donna singing in the Golden Nugget (discussed in detail in Chapter One). When they are alone in his home, I suspect the majority of viewers are well and truly '*hooked*' into their relationship. Having achieved this, Sayles then does the unsuspected, in terms of Hollywood convention, and cuts from their embrace to

a post-intercourse scene. The effect of this is not prudish. What it does is to reinforce that Joe and Donna's union is not only about sex and that, for these two characters the most exciting and important thing is that they are relating emotionally. For Joe in particular, this level of emotional intimacy is an indicator that he is back on life's 'journey'.

Over and over it is apparent in John Sayles' films that he does not see mankind/womankind as functioning successfully as solitary beings. To be successful his characters all need to learn to react and relate to their surroundings; to the events, topography and people who surround them. Healthy relationships, whether they be between parents and children, between lovers, friends, communities, or countries are seldom easy, but Sayles constantly reinforces for viewer that they are important, and are worth working at and taking risks for.

Steps in the 'Life-Long Journey'

Many people, myself included, visualise life as a 'journey'. The term is often used in counselling, as are others such as path, road, direction etc., all of which encourage clients to look at their lives in concrete terms. This visual interpretation of life seems particularly appropriate when studying the films of John Sayles, as the typical Sayles' character (when the viewer first meets him or her) is very much a 'work in progress', striving to find their path through life, without the benefit of a map. In each of his films Sayles presents his characters and communities with a task, or a step, if you will, which they need to make before the film's end to ensure they are on the road to a more productive and contented life.

The characters who populate his films are, unsurprisingly, battlers: people who, in the main, do what they do for reasons the audience can understand and with which they can empathise, if not necessarily always approve of. They are

people, such as Sam Deeds in *Lone Star*, who are not living to their full potential and who are not living satisfying, rewarding lives. They are people who need to learn lessons in order to enable them, not to live a perfect life (an oxymoron in a Sayles film), but to move forward in their life 'journey' and get as much as possible from that 'journey' while, in turn, offering the most to those close to them and/or their community.

His male protagonists are therefore not heroes the likes of whom are usually played by Jean Claude Van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or even Mel Gibson. Likewise, his female characters are not world-beaters, they not even the 'movers and shakers' of their particular community. They are, with the exception of the 'Brother' in *The Brother from Another Planet*, 'ordinary' people dealing with very 'ordinary' problems such as unemployment, the changing nature of their communities (discussed fully in Chapter Three), and relationships etc.

Reconciliation - Reclaiming Peace and Hope

Sayles' characters have to make peace with those around them and reconcile themselves with life, even though it may not be what they had initially intended. In *Lone Star*, as previously discussed, both Sam and Delmore need to reconcile with their respective fathers in order to stop living in the past and reclaim their lives and hopes for the future.

Sam is the local sheriff, a job that those familiar with the Western may associate with danger and an overdose of testosterone, and which would normally result, in a more conventional film, in him being involved in both dangerous and daring activities. However, unlike the sheriffs of the traditional western, or the modern versions of the genre, he is not preoccupied with locking up villains or shooting them. He may be investigating a murder, but never once in that investigation is he put in a dangerous or glamorous situation, one in which he would get to play the hero. The time that has elapsed since the murder ensures his inquiries are not frantic, there is no need to ensure the killer is caught before he, or she, strikes again. Throughout the course of the inquiries the impetus for their

continuance comes from Sam himself and not from the community. Sam spends the entire film talking, in the main, pleasantly to people. Even his interviews with possible accessories to the crime are carried out in public places with no suggestion, on Sam's part anyway, of intimidation or threat. Sam's real challenge, the viewer soon realises, the task he needs to complete in order to move forward, is not to bring a killer to justice, but to come to terms with his relationship with his dead father.

For much of the film Sam is what Sayles refers to as "*other directed*". The rationale for much of his behaviour throughout the film is based in the past, in his unsatisfactory and unresolved relationship with his father Buddy. He makes his decisions, not based on what he himself wants or thinks, but out of his longstanding anger at Buddy. Sam's insistence on finding out the truth about his father's involvement in the death of Charlie Wade often seems to have more to do with his desire to diminish his father, to punish him, by ruining his reputation, than it does with seeking justice. When Sam questions Hollis (Clifton James) about Buddy's relationship with Charlie Wade and his possible involvement in his death the following is said:

Sam Deeds: *People have worked this whole big thing up around my father. If it's built on a crime, they deserve to know. Now I know why you might want to believe he couldn't do it –*

Hollis: *And I understand why you might want to think he could.*

Hollis's reply makes clear his suspicions regarding Sam's obvious enthusiasm and vigour for investigating his father's possible involvement in the murder. It seems that the locals not only suspect Sam of being his father's inferior, but also of being jealous of, and resentful towards him.

It is only when Sam is able to look at things through his father's eyes, to get a different perspective on what has happened, that he is able to see Buddy as a man who, in the main, and even if he was wrong, did what he thought best. His realisation that Buddy was an ordinary man, not a saint, nor the devil incarnate allows Sam to forgive him for his very human weaknesses and get on with his own life.

Sam faces, and indeed completes, several tasks. Sam comes to terms with who his father was, accepts the differences between them, stops competing with him and starts living for himself, in the here and now. The truth allows him to posthumously reconstruct his relationship with his dead father in order to become his own man. No longer is he the son of a dictatorial ogre, forced at every turn to battle against him. He is instead the son of a flawed, but not evil man, a man who loved his legitimate son and illegitimate daughter and whose secrets and fears kept the two apart. Accepting this, Sam is able to let go of the negative aspects of his history and create a new future with Pilar.

Characters such as Sam Deeds are very 'ordinary', very 'human', in comparison to the often 'larger than life' characters found in many more conventional Hollywood films. In David O. Russell's 1999 film *Three Kings*, for example, Archie Gates the chief protagonist and bad-boy hero (George Clooney) gets to blow up trucks, buildings and the "baddies" when saving a large number of men, women and children, all Iraqi refugees of Saddam Hussein. He is shot at and beaten up and has to keep out of the reach of those who want to catch him and kill him and his men. He also gets to recover gold stolen by the Iraqi armed forces (whilst keeping some for himself and his friends) and escape being charged and court-martialed by the US military. All in all, an eventful few days.

Sayles' film *Limbo* was also released in 1999. In it Joe Gastineau too gets shot at and has to try to keep away from 'bad guys' who are intent on killing him and his companions, but it is there that the similarity ends. Whilst Archie blasts his way through his dangerous situation, for much of the time with a certain 'boys-own' sense of joy, Joe does not have weapons with which to fight back. He is shown to be weighed down by, rather than gain pleasure from, the dangers that face them. At no point does Joe spend time working out how to trap, fight, or kill those who are after them. His total focus is on evading capture, he shows no interest in launching either a pre-emptive or reactive strike. Archie is concerned with victory, glory and the potential for personal gain, whereas Joe is focussed on survival and nothing more.

Archie is a character whose past we know little about: he is an action man, good looking and sure of himself, he is the mischievous hero, dressed in that symbol of power, an army uniform. Joe is also pleasant looking, in a more understated, low-key fashion, his clothes and hair are neither fashion nor power statements. His gait is, as previously mentioned, slightly restricted, as a result of past injury and his movements, at times, reflect his uncertainty. He has skills that enable Donna, Noelle and himself to survive on the island, and performs these particular skills competently and with the confidence of a man who truly knows what he is doing. Unfortunately this confidence does not extend to the rest of his life, and he is anything but sure of himself as a person. Joe is a complex man, wracked by an underlying sense of guilt and impotence.

Joe's very human limitations are brought home in a scene that begins with a dream. Sayles deals with the scene in such a way as to both refute and confirm the views of those, such as Pauline Kael, who have accused Sayles of being "a *novelist in filmmaker's clothing*" (in Adams, S. Page 1). The director introduces the scene in such a way as to encourage the viewer to experience a little of Joe's confusion and disorientation, his feelings of what the is going on here? The scene begins with an unusually long blackout, lasting approximately four seconds, and the first time I viewed the film I found myself shifting in my seat and experiencing some anxiety. Was something wrong with the film? What was going on? My feelings appeared to mirror, albeit in a very minor way, the disorientation and anxiety of the inebriated Joe, as he suddenly finds himself in the cold, black water.

Joe relives, via the dream, the moment when he realises his boat has sunk and his shipmates have gone down with it. Joe's vulnerability, his powerlessness, is driven home as he dives desperately back down into the watery depths, trying to save them. Already aware, via a conversation between Noelle and one of her fellow workers and a scene in the Golden Nugget, that Joe's two companions drowned that night, the audience realises Joe is now literally reliving his worst nightmare and being forced to come face to face with his powerlessness. Then, in the unlikely event that the viewer has missed the point, Sayles, in a move of which I am sure Kael would not have approved, has Donna ask the by now

awake Joe what's wrong. He responds with "*You can't save everyone*". Joe's task involves him coming to terms with those four words, accepting that love and powerlessness, and the potential for loss, can, but do not automatically, go together.

If the limitations of the human condition, as personalised in Joe, are clearly outlined, so are the possibilities. In taking a risk in his relationship with Donna he gets to fulfil one of the basic and rewarding tasks of life, the achievement of intimacy, a task which at, some time or another, is faced by many of those watching the film.

Like Sayles' male characters, his female protagonists do not get to solve the problems of the world or save great numbers of people. Having become a paraplegic, May-Alice in *Passion Fish* does not 'do' a Christopher Reeve and become a celebrity spokesperson and inspiration for the disabled community. Her task is not to champion a cause, but to learn to live again, to become a human being capable of relating to others, one who belongs to and contributes to the community to which she belongs, rather than being totally inwardly focussed.

This is a task that Sayles in no way minimalises, as shown by his presentation of May-Alice as a complicated woman, with a long history of being self-protective and self-focussed. Initially he offers us little to like about May-Alice: her cutting humour may amuse the viewer, but her anger and propensity to cruelty is never far away and it is difficult to warm to her. Gradually, often by providing the audience with information regarding May-Alice's past, Sayles allows the viewer to see behind her anger and thus gain some understanding of this woman who was obviously unhappy long before her accident.

Sayles introduces the *Passion Fish* viewer to the somewhat eccentric Reeves (Leo Burmester), May-Alice's charming, but discontented uncle and uses his character to give the viewer more insight, and potentially more compassion for, May-Alice. Reeves' character appears to have three main functions. He is both charming and languid and he adds to the oppressive, yet sensuous feel of May-

Alice's childhood home. He is also an information giver, Sayles utilising him as a window into May-Alice's childhood and pre-soap opera life. Whilst talking to Chantelle, Reeves tells of his brother and sister-in-law, May-Alice's father and mother. The impression he gives is of a romantic rather than practical couple. He talks of his brother's admiration for Ernest Hemingway (whom he refers to in a somewhat affected manner as Mr Hemingway) and his resulting determination to fly everywhere, whether it be to go fishing or hunting, a determination which eventually cost him his life and that of his wife. When Chantelle questions whether May-Alice's mother always accompanied her husband, Reeves replies: "*Whither thou goest, I shall go*".

He hints at a family where the parents love each other and their lifestyle with an intensity that may exclude their only child. Later, when talking to his niece, he makes his most insightful and damning statement:

I always wanted you to be the one who went away, became famous and was always happy.

The implication is clear: the rest of the family never went far from home, at least not for long, they were not famous and, most significantly, they were not particularly happy, in Reeves' opinion anyway.

Finally, Reeves is the person May-Alice is on the way to becoming. No longer with the energy to be angry, he can muster only cynicism and sadness. Reduced to "*real estate*", he seeks comfort from a bottle, alcohol having become his anaesthetic of choice, protecting him from the pains of daily life. In order for May-Alice to 'move on' with her life (and not emulate her uncle's relationship with 'the bottle') she needs to come to terms with her accident. She then needs to realise that she does have a future, even if it is very different to the one she envisaged when she first left Louisiana as a young woman. The need to say goodbye to unfulfilled/unfulfillable dreams and get on with life, 'as it is', is something most people have to confront at some stage in their lives.

Neither gender gets to defuse bombs, bring the 'baddies' to justice, singularly represent 'their people' or defend the innocent. Their tasks are often lacking actual physical danger, appear to be less difficult and, on the surface, less

demanding than those dealt with by many of the heroes and heroines of the big screen. Their tasks are of the type with which viewers will be personally familiar, either having experienced them themselves, or having watched their friends or family members attempting to grapple with them.

Relating and Reacting to the External – Being ‘Of’ the World

Also like the viewers of his films, the men and women who populate the films of John Sayles are trying to get by in a world that is not in any way extraordinary, but is none the less very complex, a world in which they are always acting in relation to others. No man, nor woman for that matter, is an Island, instead they are inexorably linked to the community and physical conditions that surround them. These characters are trying to live the best they know how and are strongly influenced by those physically and/or emotionally close to them, their actual surroundings and their past.

Sayles writes of this:

Scott Fitzgerald said, “Character is action”, in terms of drama. Well, to me, it’s interaction. That’s why my fiction doesn’t have much internal monologue. It’s about people seeing things and reacting to each other (in Smith (ed), 1998, p. 74).

When Joe returns to Port Henry, after ‘finding himself’ again while out fishing, and he and Donna make love it is not presented as purely a natural progression, but also a predictable one. One might not normally associate a fishing scene with romance, however the combined effect of this montage sequence, along with the accompanying song, is to link Joe and Donna, to suggest that Joe, having spent his days at sea, is ready to spend his nights with Donna. The reborn Joe has a little more to offer in a relationship and appears to be tentatively moving towards truly connecting with another human being. The nature of their post-coital conversation suggests that this is more than purely

physical attraction or a one-night stand for both Joe and Donna, and that Joe is travelling away from his state of isolation.

May-Alice's journey in *Passion Fish* also involves her rediscovering herself and coming to terms with who she is, as well as with her limitations (her problem drinking and her paralysis). It is only when she is well into that journey that she is able to look forward to a new life. This new life may, on one hand, be restricted by her physical condition, but will, on the other, be liberated, purely by the fact that she will be being authentic, true to her roots.

What May-Alice might have lost physically, she has gained spiritually, for the May-Alice who lived in New York was an unhappy woman. In one of the film's first scenes May-Alice is watching herself on television from her hospital. She is extremely angry, not over her injury, but over the fact that her 'close up' has been given to another actor. Like some of the soap-opera's fans May-Alice seems unable to clearly differentiate between her real life and the life of the television character she plays. May-Alice's withdrawal into the world of soap opera increases, rather than decreases, when she returns home to Louisiana. Hiding away in the womb-like atmosphere of her parents' home she prefers the characters she finds on the small screen, because they expect and ask nothing of her, rather than people she may meet in real life.

It soon becomes clear that May-Alice has not been a contented woman for a long time and that her accident cannot be totally blamed for her being unhappy, angry and bordering on objectionable. In his unauthorised biography of John Sayles, Gerry Molyneaux comments of May-Alice:

She also shows that like men, women can really, as Sayles says, "fuck up" and "fuck people up" (2000, p. 199).

May-Alice's 'way of being' well and truly predates her accident. At the beginning of the film she is unwell in both body and soul. She does her very best to be unpleasant to those around her in the hospital and on her return to Louisiana she is shown to have no desire to make anyone's life, other than her own, easy. When the viewer last sees her, her spine may not have healed, and nor is it

going to, but her spirit is intact and she is at one with herself and ready to connect with others, in ways which will be of benefit both to her and the people with whom she is interacting.

Connecting with others is, as previously mentioned, never a problem for Donna in *Limbo*, it is the quality of those connections that are, in her case, questionable. Donna is a woman who appears only too happy to take risks, often ill-advised ones. Noelle's comments about her mother's past boyfriends make it obvious to the viewer that Donna has a propensity for risk taking, particularly when it comes to throwing herself whole-heartedly, and often prematurely, into very risky relationships with unsuitable men. Donna's indiscretions have not only affected her, they have impacted negatively on her daughter, something which she does not seem to stop and consider. Donna has been something of a loose cannon and has damaged those in her path, or trying to travel with her.

The task for Donna appears to be to acknowledge the existence of risk, something she is very reluctant to do, even when she, Noelle and Joe are in a blatantly dangerous situation. Once she has given up her somewhat desperate 'Pollyanna' routine and accepted the existence of risk, her next step seems to involve learning to evaluate it and finally, deciding if she is going to take it. Along with this acknowledgement of risk and the decisions she is free to make, comes the need for her to recognise her ability to 'get it right', particularly when it comes to choosing and trusting men.

Whilst Joe starts out doing everything he can to avoid risk, and Donna seems to seek it out, Noelle has it thrust upon her. Noelle wants a stable life, yet she is constantly exposed to risk due to her mother's choices. Stability in relationships seems unattainable to Noelle, both as far as her mother's turbulent romantic liaisons are concerned and on a more personal level with her peers. Having moved so often, and having become jaundiced beyond her years regarding relationships, Noelle seems not to be able to instigate or maintain friendships with her peers. In a scene discussed previously, Noelle is seen to almost float along the high-school corridor, very much like the salmon seen at the very

beginning of the film, in close physical proximity to her fellow students, but with no connection to them whatsoever. The scene emphasises Noelle's isolation.

Like Joe, Noelle has had hope knocked out of her. She expects very little from other people, or from life in general. Her flirtation with self-mutilation strongly suggests that her indifference to life has advanced further than Joe's, despite the fact that she is less than half his age. In order for Noelle to find the strength to continue her journey through life the task she needs to master is to learn to operate from a place of optimism, a place of trust, where it is possible to put her faith in others, as opposed to being rooted in fatalism and mistrust. In the final scenes of the film (discussed in depth earlier in this chapter) Noelle begins to place her trust in both her mother and Joe and is therefore shown to be taking those steps.

Task Completion and Narrative Structure

Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink sum up the classic narrative structure as follows:

Finally, the classic narrative may be defined by the high degree of closure which typically marks its resolution. The ideal classic narrative is a story with a beginning, a middle and an end (in that order), in which every one of the questions raised in the course of the story is answered by the time the narration is complete (see Barthes, 1975) (Cook and Bernink, 1999, p. 40).

As in life, but in direct opposition to the above, the tasks set by Sayles for his characters, the problems they face and the questions they are asked to consider, are rarely completed by the end of the film and, if they are, they lead purely to the next stage of the journey, rather than to any final destination. Sayles often chooses to leave his characters just as they are on the threshold of something new, before they have had the opportunity to master it, or even experience it fully. The conclusions of his films often raise more questions than they answer.

At the conclusion of *Lianna*, for example, the protagonist has left her husband and children, split up with her new lover and is, for what appears to be the first time in her life, contemplating life on her own. When the viewer last sees her, Lianna is not secure in her single status, confident of what the world offers her. She is, instead, unsure of herself and of what the future holds. *Lianna* ends at the site it began, with Lianna at the children's playground talking to her friend Sandy, trying to piece together a life for herself.

In *Matewan* also, Joe's death at the end of the film does not signal any resolution between the miners and the mine owners, nor does it result in the miner's giving up the fight. Pappy's voice-over makes it clear that the struggle carried on, much the same as it may have done had Joe lived. Joe's death may signal the end of his particular journey, but it is not the definer or a catalyst for the community. It may be the end of his story, but the community's continues.

Sayles himself acknowledges the rareness of such endings and explains his motives for *Matewan*'s conclusion:

I wanted a cyclical structure to be contained within the dovetailing actions leading to the shoot-out. If all the movie is about is who got shot and who didn't, the history ends there – it doesn't inform anything we do today. But people still go underground to mine coal, people with power still pit races and ethnic groups against each other to keep them from taking control of their own lives, religion is still used for oppression as often for liberation.

He goes on to say:

Cyclical life, a sense of continuity, good and bad, is the opposite of the favored Hollywood ending of ultimate triumph (Rocky at center ring, wrapped in the American flag) (Sayles, 1987, p. 127).

The circumstances of Joe's death are somewhat 'unheroic' in the traditional sense; he does not even get to die with a gun in his hand, fighting for what he believes. The viewer does not even get to see him being shot. It is only after the gunfire has stopped that Danny and Elma Radnor find him lying dying. As Gerry Molyneaux points out:

The movie's pacifist hero was a resolute double loser who couldn't or wouldn't do "what a man's gotta do" (2000, p. 147).

Joe dies as he lives, an unarmed pacifist. Sayles does not allow Joe to be forced by circumstances to take up arms at the last minute; he does not have to compromise himself for the good of others, for the community, or to ensure his own survival. Neither does Sayles valorise Kenehan's death by dwelling on it. The scene in which his body is found begins with a longshot of Elma, screen right. The camera pans left, following Elma as she moves slowly in that direction, and her son Danny comes into shot, standing in the background. Finally the camera comes to rest with Joe lying in the foreground, screen left Danny in the background and Elma on her knees sobbing, still screen right. Sayles holds this shot for approximately 16 seconds. The only sound comes from the distraught Elma, focussing the viewers' attention on her even though she is not screen centre. Sayles then cuts to an extreme close-up on Danny. Although Joe and Elma are no longer in the frame, Elma's cries are still clearly heard. Pappy's aforementioned voice-over begins. In choosing to immediately move the focus away from Joe and the end of his life, rather than concentrating on it, by, for example showing his funeral, Sayles again reinforces that it is the movement, the community, rather than the individual that is important.

It is only toward the end of Pappy's voice-over that the audience becomes aware that Pappy is in fact Danny many years on. Sayles' decision to have Danny as a young man in extreme close-up at the same time as the viewer is listening to Pappy (Danny as an old man) works to bring the past and the present together. It reinforces the above-mentioned cyclical nature of life and stresses the continuation of the movement.

In *Passion Fish* Sayles does focus on his central protagonists at the end of the film, which sees May-Alice and Chantelle returning to the land of the emotionally functioning at the end of the film, but like *Matewan*, it does not tie up all the loose ends. Both women have tackled their demons and reached the point where they are ready to fully engage again with the world. Sayles does not however suggest that this is the end of May-Alice's and Chantelle's stories, or

that they have in any way arrived in the land of 'happy ever after'. Whilst he offers the viewer no hint as to exactly what the world will in fact offer these two, he does strongly suggest, via the romantic relationships the two are developing,^{vii} that their future will not necessarily follow a smooth and uneventful path. Having seen May-Alice and Chantelle grow in self-awareness, strength and determination throughout the film, the viewer can however, feel very confident that the pair will deal, head on, with whatever confronts them. Whilst *Matewan* encourages viewers to consider the ongoing nature and relevance of labour relations, in *Passion Fish* Sayles asks the viewer to consider where they are in their own lives, whether they are hiding away, or participating fully in life.

Sam and Pilar also face an uncertain future at the end of *Lone Star*. Whilst they have decided to: "*forget the Alamo*" and continue their intimate relationship, there are many decisions they still have to make. They have made what Sayles refers to as an "*individual accommodation*" (in Smith, (ed.) p. 73), a decision which sees them refusing to be bound by the rules of society and which will result in them being ostracised from that society. It would appear that they will not be able to stay in Frontera, for whilst they can choose to ignore their past, the rest of the community, starting with Pilar's mother, Mercedes Cruz, is very unlikely to do so. Having 'found themselves' in the community and land of their birth, they will be forced to leave it in order to create a future for themselves. Again Sayles offers the viewer a conclusion that poses many questions. Where will Sam and Pilar go and how will they adapt to living outside the community in which they have both been brought up? Will Pilar's children become aware of Sam and Pilar's blood relationship and, if so, how will this be explained to them?

Lone Star's Pilar and Sam do however, confirm the value of commitment and love, when they agree to turn their backs on life, as they have up until then known it, in order to maintain their relationship. The message seems clear, a good relationship is worth a lot and, in Sam and Pilar's case, it is worth giving up a lot for. Interestingly, it is both characters that have to make sacrifices to ensure the relationship works. It is not a case of the 'little woman' giving up everything to be with her man, or vice versa.

However when it comes to unanswered questions, to the previously mentioned: “*Cyclical life, a sense of continuity, good and bad*”, it would be hard (if numerous reviewers are to be believed) to go past the controversial ending of Sayles’ latest film, *Limbo*. This has been described variously as “likely to alienate some viewers” (Dwyer, 1999, p. 2), “ambiguous, unfulfilling and just downright awful” (Nowitzky, 1999, p. 1), and as “a stroke of genius” (Blackwelder, 1999, p. 3). The *Collins Concise Dictionary* offers several definitions for the word ‘limbo’, one of which is: *an unknown intermediate condition between two extremes*” (Gordon (ed.), 1982, p.652). The poster used in New Zealand to promote the film offers another definition: *A condition of unknowable outcome*. Both definitions certainly describe the situation in which the protagonists find themselves at the conclusion of the film of the same name. Joe, Donna and Noelle stand together on the foreshore (Noelle is in the centre, Joe is screen left and Donna screen right – both Donna and Joe have their arms around Noelle) waiting for one of two fates: salvation or elimination. Life or death, this is surely the ultimate in extremes. The viewer knows that the trio have, at least in part, overcome their emotional baggage and made a firm commitment to one another via the previous scene in which the following conversation has taken place between Donna and Joe:

Donna: *If...when we get back I still have some dates up north. I'd only be gone for a –*

Joe: *She could stay with me.....and so could you.*

Donna: *You're not sick of us?*

Joe: *You're not sick of me?*

Donna: *There's nobody in the world I'd rather be stuck in desperate circumstances with. We should take our time with the furniture moving part. You know she pretends not to, but she gets her hopes up for me and then when it doesn't work out.*

Joe: *I'll take care of it.*

In this scene Donna acknowledges not only her love for Joe, but also that she is aware of what she has put her daughter through. Joe for his part, in promising to take care of things, puts his survivor guilt and helplessness behind him. If the viewer is prepared to accept that Sayles’ tasks for these characters culminate in them needing to form a cohesive committed unit, then at this point the viewer

has the satisfaction of seeing the task completed. If, on the other hand, the viewer desires more conventional closure, as per Hollywood conventions, then they may be very frustrated by the very final scene which does not show where this will new found commitment will lead the trio, or whether or not they even have a future to face.

The fade to white at the very end of the film also returns the viewer to the beginning of the film, to the previously described opening shot of the film. Sayles has stated that if he had ended *Matewan* on the shoot-out, the important thing for the viewer would have been who lived and who died, it would have detracted from the cyclic nature of the story and life. Similarly in *Limbo* had he chosen to offer the viewer conventional closure, they would have come away, possibly satisfied, in the knowledge that the trio had perished, or survived. By ending the film in the same place as it begins, Sayles again flies in the face of the classic narrative structure's need for a "high degree of closure". In doing so he seems to be telling his audience that in film, as in life, it is not important where, or how, you 'end up', it is how you live your life, how you travel the journey that is of most relevance. At the end of *Limbo*, Donna, Joe and Noelle have accomplished a number of tasks that are going to enable them to travel their respective journeys, however short or long they may be, less alone and with more hope.

The unconventional and often open ended way in which Sayles chooses to finish his stories and leave his characters suggests something of his worldview and his desires as a filmmaker. He asks questions in his films, but does not provide all the answers. He offers the potential of happiness, not the guarantee, he encourages full participation in relationships, both intimate and community based, but the encouragement comes with no promises. His characters may find love, but it is never presented as an all-conquering state, capable of ensuring that the characters live out the rest of their lives in a fairy-tale existence.

Sayles' world is one in which full participation increases the likelihood of success but in no way guarantees it. It is in fact a world that seems to come

with only one guarantee, the guarantee that non-participation, or half-hearted participation, will result in failure and dissatisfaction. It is a world in which relationships are challenging, but offer the prospect of rewards. It is a world which moves in cycles and in which there are many lessons to be learnt in order for individuals and communities to be able to travel life's journey in both as satisfying and productive way as possible.

^{vi} Noelle has kept the diary to herself since finding it and has been reading from it nightly to Donna and Joe. It is not until she has been doing this for some time, that Donna discovers the diary is virtually empty and that much of the story has not come from the words of the original owner, but from Noelle herself.

^{vii} May-Alice is attracted to a man who is married, has 5 children and whose life history bears very little relation to hers. Faced with all of the possible complications that could arise, she still decides to pursue a relationship with him. Chantelle's choice, in the intimate relationship stakes, does not promise to be any easier. Her attraction to, and involvement with Sugar, a man who has been married to, and fathered children by, a number of women, promises excitement, but not necessarily reliability.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In Chapter One Andrew Sarris's requirement that a director be technically competent in order to be considered an auteur was noted. It is this area that some critics see John Sayles as being at his weakest:

Perhaps the most damning criticism of Sayles' oeuvre came from Pauline Kael, who accused him, essentially, of being a novelist in filmmaker's clothing. "Sayles gains nothing from using film as his medium", she concluded (in Adams, 1999, p. 1).

Sayles himself confirms that style is not his primary focus:

My main interest is making films about people. I'm not interested in cinematic art (in Leong, 1999, p. 1).

The discussion in Chapters Two to Four confirms Sayles' above statement and, simultaneously, refutes Pauline Kael's. Sayles' effective manipulation of mise en scène, as detailed particularly in relation to *Baby, It's You* and *Matewan*, his adventurous use of mastershots in *City of Hope* and his challenging and unorthodox flashbacks in *Lone Star*, all prove his ability to tell his stories visually. The important difference between Sayles and many current Hollywood directors is that he focuses on the people and communities and uses these techniques to reinforce their stories. He is not interested in using them for their own sake (even if he were in the position financially to do so).

Economic restraints have been a reality for Sayles since he personally bankrolled his first film (*The Return of the Secaucus Seven*) with \$US40,000 in 1979 (Smith, 1998, p. 50). As previously mentioned, his not being able to find the right money (money that comes without demands for editorial control) has

led to many of his projects being shelved for years. Sayles' determination to make his films, his way, is well known throughout the movie industry (Stein H. in *Premiere*. 1999. Page 92).

Sayles' reputation, both in the industry and in the wider community, is located in his films and the way he finances and makes them. He is not what Timothy Corrigan refers to as a personality auteur (discussed in Chapter One). He guards his private life carefully, rather than using it to sell his films. Even in *Sayles on Sayles* (Smith (ed), 1998) he divulges little personal information and that which he does give relates directly to his filmmaking motivation. The numerous interviews he gives concern his films, they do not touch on his personal life or relationships. Sayles' focus is clearly on his films, on the stories they tell, the people and communities they offer up to the viewer, people and communities not often seen in Hollywood film.

One of the things that I think is useful about making a small movie is that film can provide a voice for people who are not being heard and not being seen on the big screen. Let's try and get them up there, even if it's in a stunted non-Hollywood movie (Sayles in Carnes, 1995, p. 24).

John Sayles spends his career not only promoting unheard and unseen people, but also giving voice to unpopular or 'out of favour' ideals and standards. He constantly swims against the tide and questions the popular ethos of the times. Whether it is by making *Matewan*, a film about unionism at a time when, under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, unions in America were 'taking a beating'; or by constantly focusing on communities at a time when the individual is king, he continually challenges the 'norm'.

Sayles strives to provide a place on screen for those who are not normally seen there, and he does so in such a way as to offer a platform for more than one normally-silent voice at a time. In *Matewan*, for example, it is not enough that he introduces pro-union characters of Anglo-American descent. He also gives voice to the experiences of the African-American and Italian-American miners, experiences made different by issues of ethnicity and racism.

His films are complex, multi-character, multi-issue works and demand the viewers' full attention. Even for the purposes of this thesis, their complexity proved challenging, with issues and themes often so tightly entwined that they were difficult to clearly separate. Thus issues, such as dysfunctional relationships dealt with in Chapter Two from the perspective of personal history, resurface in Chapter Four, to be discussed with reference to relationships.

Sayles' typical narrative structure (discussed in Chapters Three and Four), the way in which he links his characters and stories, reflects his worldview. Interweaving numerous subplots, as in *Lone Star* and *City of Hope*, he reinforces his personal belief in a world in which people are inextricably linked: to the past, to the land, to the communities around them and finally to the wider community. Even in *The Brother From Another Planet*, the first of Sayles' films researched for this thesis, it is not the extraterrestrial powers of the 'Brother' that is of most importance. Instead it is his ability to make connections with others: both the intimate relationship he forms with Malverne Davis (Dee Dee Bridgewater), and his acceptance into the African-American community that lead him to a certain degree of contentment.

In *Matewan* Sayles stresses the connections between the land and the inhabitants of the small town and the ways in which the former leaves its mark on the personalities of the latter. He also focuses on the miners themselves and their need to acknowledge their common bond, that of being exploited workers, rather than looking only at the differences between them originating from their differing ethnicity.

In *Eight Men Out*, Sayles again focuses on the vulnerability of workers and on the tendency for those in power to exploit those who are not. He uses the film to question morality, to ask whether it is reasonable to cheat when you in turn have been cheated? Sayles looks at the factors that led to the scandal and to its repercussions, again highlighting the connected nature of society. For the second time, *Matewan* being the first, he uses an actual historical event to encourage debate concerning contemporary issues.

Sayles issues his strongest warning as to the possible repercussions of ignoring the interconnected nature of society in *City of Hope*. Throughout the film characters act, in the main, out of their own best interests or those of the individual groups to which they belong. Though Sayles shows Hudson City to be divided by tribalism, small private decisions made by members of one group are shown to reverberate throughout the entire community. In this film Sayles warns viewers: Ignore the wider community at your own peril!

In *Passion Fish* Sayles tells a more personal story than had been on offer in his previous three films. The film has two central characters on which he focuses. Both are women in emotional pain, women who have withdrawn from society. However, once again Sayles stresses the need for connection to the physical environment, other individuals and the community, linking the recovery of the women to their ability to make these connections.

Sayles moves to Texas for *Lone Star*, providing the viewer with another divided community, one that has the potential to become as adversarial as Hudson City in *City of Hope*. In *Frontera* the battle for power and resources is being fought out against a historical background. As the various ethnic groups strive to have their version of community history legitimised, the central characters deal with their personal histories and attempt to recreate their lives.

Limbo again sees Sayles dealing with issues relating to personal history and community. In *Port Henry* he offers the audience another community undergoing change, but this time the change is being brought about by changing market forces and industry closures etc. In this film Sayles examines what happens to a community when its traditional methods of employment are withdrawn and when affluent outsiders bring not only their money, but also their personal vision (a vision which may not be shared by the local community) to the area.

Sayles' fascination with, and his belief in, community is obvious. It is always to the fore in his work, which is rare in conventional Hollywood film. In choosing to tell his stories through a community, utilising a multi-perspective approach, he

offers a sociological analysis of the communities involved, considering issues such as ethnicity and class. His narrative style mirrors this, the plot seldom moving forward along a single straight line. This style is Sayles' signature and, as such, meets Sarris's previously quoted requirement that: "*The way a film moves or looks should have some relationship with the way a director thinks and feels*". Sayles thinks about differing perspectives, he feels for the community and often privileges depth, over forward movement, as in the scene in the Golden Nugget Bar (described in Chapter Four), in which various characters are used to provide a broader vision of life in Port Henry. It is an approach which provides the depth and complexity previously mentioned, and that, as also already mentioned, ensures that those in the community whose voices are not usually heard (such as the cannery workers in *Limbo* made redundant by the factory's closure), get to share their world view. This emphasis on the community and on interdependence and responsibility has earned him something of a reputation, the value associated with that reputation varying according to the political beliefs of the viewer. Sayles' films often engender strong responses, either positive or negative and he and his work has been described variously as:

... the most courageous and decent storyteller working in American films today (Maslin in n.b. interview, 1998, p. 1).

...the Ralph Nader of filmmaking, an ideological pragmatist whose conscientious, cheaply made films play like a stack of dogeared Consumer Reports (Kempley in n.b interview, 1998. P. 1).

In the world of independent film, John Sayles is the closest thing to a patron Saint (Adams, 1999, p. 1).

...like a top-of-the-range Volvo: reliability with air conditioning and electric windows (Nathan, 1999 p. 1).

His preachiness can be stultifying, and in strenuously bypassing some clichés, he often backs into others (Atkinson, 1999, p. 1)

For Sayles the personal is very much the political but he denies trying to lead audiences to a conclusion of his choice:

You load the dice, more or less, but one thing I definitely do in my movies is allow people to draw their own conclusions (Sayles in Carnes, 1995, p.28).

I would have to disagree with the above remark, for, whilst I personally agree with his politics, it is impossible to watch many Sayles films without registering the 'point', 'view', or 'question' he is stressing. In *Eight Men Out* for example, Sayles repeatedly shows scenes in which the owner of the team and the gamblers are shown to act dishonestly and without honour. In showing this over and over again, he does more than just suggest that the ball players are themselves victims, he shouts it from the rooftops. In *Limbo*, Sayles' sympathy for his working-class characters is again evident. These people are shown to be suffering. On the other hand Sayles shows the developers as prospering and happy, with more to celebrate than the wedding of one of their daughters. That Sayles is shepherding the viewer towards empathising with the unemployed citizens of Port Henry is 'unmissable'. Sayles may not be able to guarantee the viewers' reading of his films, but as the above illustrates he does attempt to shepherd them to his 'preferred reading'. Sayles stops short of painting all working-class characters as intrinsically good. He does create some that are racist (a barman in *Limbo*, the miners in *Matewan*), dishonest (the ball players in *Eight Men Out*) or violent (the muggers in *City of Hope*). In the main, however, Sayles' working-class characters are portrayed as decent, hardworking, caring and considerate. On the other hand, in none of the films researched for this thesis does he provide the viewer a fundamentally good, self-identifying upper middle-class, or upper-class character. The miner owners in *Matewan*, the owner of the Red Sox in *Eight Men Out*, the politicians in *City of Hope*, the restaurant owner in *Lone Star*, the entrepreneurial businessmen in *Limbo*, are all shown to be obsessively self-interested. None are shown to be concerned for the welfare of the community as a whole. Sayles is unashamedly an advocate of the working-class 'stiff'.

That there are consistencies in the themes and issues John Sayles deals with and in the characters he offers his viewer, as per Sarris's third requirement for auteur status, is evident in Chapters Two to Four of this thesis. The world he offers his viewers is an interconnected one: with individuals, communities and countries all impacting on each other. It is a world in which the past and the present are often hard to separate, a world in which actions result in reactions.

Sayles challenges the viewer to consider the political implications of their own private actions. In *City of Hope* he asks viewers to consider whether, in trying to better themselves, they are acting at the expense of others. The viewer of *Lone Star* is asked to think about whether the way in which they see themselves and celebrate their cultural past impinges on the power of others to do the same. Through the fishermen and cannery workers of Port Henry, he invites the viewer to consider the impact of purchasing cheap imported goods, rather than buying American and protecting the jobs of American workers. Sayles questions the ways in which people, specifically Americans, choose to live their lives, he does not provide answers.

This auteur's "ideal" world would seem to be one in which questions are constantly being asked and values constantly questioned. It is a world where all voices are heard, and all perspectives considered, whether they belong to the powerful or the disenfranchised: a world in which those with power no longer tell those without (be they individuals or countries) how they will live, what their futures will be. It is a world in which the advantaged have a responsibility to assist and consult with the less advantaged, but not a right to dictate to them. It is not a perfect world, but it is one in which the best possible outcome for all concerned is the goal. Surely a vision worth aspiring to.

Filmography and Plot Synopses of Films Researched for this Thesis

As Director

The Return of the Secaucus Seven

1980

Production Company: Salisipuedes Productions

Producers: Jeffrey Nelson, William Aydelott

Unit Manager: Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Austin DeBesche

Director/Screenplay/Editor: John Sayles

Music Director: Mason Daring

With: Bruce MacDonald (Mike Donnelly), Adam Lefevre (JT), Gordon Clapp (Chip Hollister), Karen Trott (Maura Tolliver), David Straithairn (Ron Desjardins), Marisa Smith (Carol), Carolyn Brooks (Meg), Nancy Mette (Lee), Brian Johnston (Norman), Ernie Bashaw (officer), Jessica MacDonald (Stacey), Jeffrey Nelson (man), Maggie Renzi (Kate), Maggie Cousineau (Frances), Jean Passanante (Irene Rosenblum), Mark Arnott (Jeff), John Sayles (Howie), Amy Schewel (Lacey Summers)

Lianna

1983

Production Company: Winwood Company

Producers: Jeffrey Nelson, Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Austin DeBesche

Director/Screenplay/Editor: John Sayles

Art Director: Jeanne McDonnell

Music: Mason Daring

With: Linda Griffiths (Lianna), Jane Hallaren (Ruth), Jon De Vries (Dick), Jo Henderson (Sandy), Jessica Wight McDonald (Theda), Jesse Solomon (Spencer), John Sayles (Jerry), Stephen Mendillo (Bob), Betsy Julia Robinson (Cindy), Nancy Mette (Kim), Maggie Renzi (Sheila), Madelyn Coleman (Mrs Hennessy).

Baby, It's You

1983

Production Company: Double Pay Productions and Paramount Pictures Corporation

Producers: Griffin Dunne and Amy Robinson

Director/ Screenplay: John Sayles

Original Story: Amy Robinson

Cinematography: Michael Ballhaus

Production Design: Jeffrey Townsend

Editing: Sonya Polonsky

With: Rosanna Arquette (Jill Rosen), Vincent Spano ('Sheik' Capadilupo), Joanna Merlin (Mrs. Rosen), Jack Davidson (Dr. Rosen), Nick Ferrari (Mr. Capadilupo).

Jill Rosen (Rosanna Arquette) and Albert Capadilupo, a.k.a. 'Sheik' (Vincent Spano) meet and fall in love in high school. He is from an uneducated, working class, Italian family; she is from an upper middle-class Jewish family; one which greatly values a good education and the acquisition of qualifications.

Their relationship is never without its challenges, originating in the main from their different social positions and ways of seeing the world, but the excitement of their relationship initially outweighs the obstacles. 'Sheik' offers Jill (very much a child/woman) the excitement and danger of playing at being 'grown up' and, at the same time, a way of rebelling against her safe, but boring family. Jill offers 'Sheik' a touch of class and refinement, plus association with a society that is far away from the world of his father, a man he sees as a loser.

Together they stand out in the High School environment; they are a couple who are noticed and commented on, something which appeals to them both. Wanting to leave his poor background behind him, 'Sheik' sees his future as being in the entertainment industry as a singer in the mould of Frank Sinatra. 'Sheik' does not actually attend many classes at high school and has no intention, or desire to go to college. Jill also sees her future in the entertainment industry, but it is there the similarity ends. She is an enthusiastic student, college playing an important part in her plans to become an actress.

The class differences in their lives become more and more evident as Jill settles into college and 'Sheik' takes on a number of dead-end jobs. 'Sheik's' dreams of being just like Frank Sinatra amount to nothing and he ends up instead lip-syncing lounge songs in a less than glamorous bar in Miami Beach.

The cracks between them widen and, following a verbally violent confrontation in Jill's college dormitory, Jill and 'Sheik' both finally admit what Jill certainly has known for a while, that their relationship does not have a future. They want different things and love is not enough to bridge the gap between their vastly different, class conscious, worlds.

The Brother from Another Planet
1984

Production Company: A-Train Films

Released by: Cinecom International Films

Producers: Peggy Rajski and Maggie Renzie

Director/Screenplay/Editing: John Sayles

Cinematography: Ernest Dickerson

Production Designer: Nora Chavooshian

Music: Mason Daring

With: Joe Morton (The 'Brother'), Tom Wright (Sam Prescott), Caroline Aaron (Randy Sue Carter), Herbert Newsome (Little Earl), Dee Dee Bridgewater (Malverne Davis), Daryl Edwards (Fly), Leonard Jackson (Smokey), Bill Cobbs

(Walter), Steve James (Odell), Edward Baran (Mr. Vance), John Sayles and David Strathairn (Men in Black)

An alien slave on the run crash-lands his spaceship in New York Harbour. Other than having 3 toes, each complete with a large claw-like nail, the black slave (Joe Morton) is humanoid in appearance. Hunted by extraterrestrial bounty hunters, the 'Brother' settles in Harlem and tries to integrate into the African American community.

Throughout the film the 'Brother' is mute. He is, however, able not only to hear and understand those talking to him, but also hear voices from the past. He can also 'communicate' with machinery, fixing faults in pinball machines etc, by the 'laying on of hands'. His healing touch extends to healing both his own and others' wounds, and he is able to remove his eyes and utilise them as cameras to record events occurring in his absence.

In addition to these skills, the 'Brother' is equipped with 'human' emotions and it is not long before he falls in lust/love and begins forming emotional bonds with some of the inhabitants of Harlem. He is, however, disturbed by much of the world he sees around him, particularly the human cost of the trade in illegal drugs in the African American community.

The 'Brother' deals with these new experiences, eliminating a major player in the drug trade in the process, at the same time as he tries to avoid being recaptured by the bounty hunters (David Strathairn and John Sayles).

Finally his hunters track him down and, for the first time, it becomes evident that he is not the first alien slave to find refuge in New York. The 'Brother' is saved by his fellow escapees and looks set to spend the rest of his days, not entirely unhappily, in Harlem.

Matewan

1987

Production Company: Red Dog Films, Cinecom Entertainment Group, Film Gallery

Producers: Peggy Rajski and Maggie Renzie

Executive Producers: Amir Malin, Mark Balsam, Jerry Silva

Director/Screenplay: John Sayles

Cinematography: Haskell Wexler

Production Design: Nora Chavooshian

Costumes: Cynthia Flynt

Editing: Sonya Polonsky

Music: Mason Daring

With: Chris Cooper (Joe Kenehan), Mary McDonnell (Elma Radnor), Will Oldham (Danny Radnor), David Strathairn (Sid Hatfield), Ken Jenkins (Sephus), Kevin Tighe (Hickey), Gordon Clapp (Griggs), James Earl Jones ('Few Clothes' Johnson), Bob Gunton (C. E. Lively), Jace Alexander (Hillard Elkins), Joe Grifasi (Fausto), Nancy Mette (Bridey Mae), John Sayles (preacher).

Based on the historical 1920 Matewan, West Virginia massacre, *Matewan* is a pro-union mining film. The miners in Matewan, tired of having their whole lives controlled by the mine owners, tired of having the rules of their employment changed at the economically driven whim of the same people, desire to form a union in order to protect themselves. Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper) is a union man, a former Wobbly, who arrives in town to help the mineworkers organise.

The relationship between the local miners and Kenehan is not always an easy one, with Kenehan demanding that the union be an inclusive organisation, open to one and all, at a time when the local miners are quite happy to discriminate against African Americans and foreign miners.

Staying at the local boarding house, Kenehan develops a friendship with Elma Radnor (Mary McDonnell), the woman running the boarding house, and her son Danny (Will Oldham). Danny is only fourteen and already working in the mines, as well as developing something of a reputation for his preaching. Threatened by the unrest in the area, the Company brings in agents whose job it is to intimidate the workers into complying with the Company's demands. The agents also take up residence at Elma Radnor's boarding house. They first try to destabilise the embryonic union movement by destroying Kenehan's reputation in the eyes of the miners. But for the intervention of the young Danny, it appears that they would have succeeded in their efforts to discredit Kenehan. Danny recognises the actions and intentions of the agents and uses his position as a preacher to thwart them.

The Baldwin-Felts agents are hired guns, not in the least averse to the use of violence. Joe Kenehan, on the other hand, is a pacifist and is determined to deal with the escalating tensions nonviolently. He convinces the miners that resorting to violence will only give the state and/or the federal government an excuse to enter the conflict on the side of the Company. It is only after a friend of Danny's, another young miner, has his throat slit that the conflict climaxes in a major gun battle.

The unarmed Kenehan, true to his beliefs to the end, is shot and killed and the cause of the union appears to be no further forward. The union message however, lives on through Danny and others like him who never give up the struggle.

Eight Men Out

1988

Production Company: Orion Pictures Corporation

Producers: Sarah Pillsbury and Midge Sanford

Executive Producers: Barbara Boyle, Jerry Offsay

Director/Screenplay: John Sayles

Based on the Novel by: Elliot Asinof

Cinematography: Robert Richardson

Production Design: Nora Chavooshian

Editing: John Tontori

Music: Mason Daring

With: John Cusack (Buck Weaver), Charlie Sheen (Hap Felsch), D. B. Sweeney ("Shoeless" Joe Jackson), Jace Alexander (Dickie Kerr), Gordon Clapp (Ray Schalk), Don Harvey (Swede Risberg), Bill Irwin (Eddie Collins), Perry Lang (Fred McMullin), James Read ("Lefty" Williams), Michael Rooker (Chick Gandil), David Strathairn (Eddie Cicotte), John Mahoney ((Kid Gleason), James Desmond (Smitty), John Sayles (Ring Lardner), Studs Terkel (Hugh Fullerton).

For various reasons, financial ones being the most dominant, eight members of the 1919 Chicago White Sox become involved in a scheme to 'throw' the World Series and let an inferior team, the Cincinnati Reds, win the tournament. Many of the players have been involved with the game for years, contributing considerably to the wealth of the owners and those who gamble on the outcome of the games, whilst seeing very little financial reward themselves. Some are on the verge of retirement and are facing an uncertain future, not only for themselves, but also for their young families.

The resulting fallout from their shock loss is enormous, the baseball community is furious, as are the White Sox army of loyal fans. Investigations by a group of sportswriters result in a grand jury being called to decide whether the result was 'genuine' or 'fixed'. Two players confess to their involvement in fixing the game, but their confessions disappear prior to their presentation to the jury. The eight players are tried together, as one, even though there is a marked difference in their levels of involvement in the scam. There are those who have actively advocated the plan, and encouraged others to become involved, to those who have been aware of it, not participated, but not reported it to the appropriate authorities either.

The players are found not guilty and just when it appears they are going to go unpunished the commissioner of baseball intervenes, banning all eight players indefinitely, giving no consideration either to their motives or level of involvement. Their careers over, their reputations in tatters, they are doomed to go down in history, not as the White Sox, but as the Black Sox.

City Of Hope

1991

Production Company: Esperanza Inc.

Released by: Samuel Goldwyn Company

Producers: Sarah Green and Maggie Renzi

Executive Producers: John Sloss and Harold Welb

Director/Screenplay: John Sayles

Cinematography: Robert Richardson

Production Design: Dan Bishop and Dianna Freas

Music: Mason Daring

With: Vincent Spano (Nick Rinaldi), Joe Morton (Wynn), Tony Lo Bianco (Joe Rinaldi), Barbara Williams (Angela), Chris Cooper (Riggs), Charlie Yanko (Stavros), Angela Bassett (Reesha), Jace Alexander (Bobby), Todd Graff (Zip), Scott Tiler (Vinnie), John Sayles (Carl), Bill Raymond (Les), Maggie Renzi (Connie), Tom Wright (Malik), Frankie Faison (Levonne), David Strathairn (Asteroid), Anthony John Denison (Rizzo)

A multi-character drama set in a fictitious small to medium-sized American city, *City of Hope* is a panoramic contemporary portrayal of urban decay and decline, and ethnic tribalism.

To the surprise of those around him, Nick Rinaldi (Vincent Spano) quits his construction job. It is a job that, due to a hefty dose of nepotism and his father's position in the building industry, requires him to do no real work. Nick's resignation deprives him of the opportunity to be paid for doing very little.

The nepotism and corruption that sees Nick being given, in the first place, the job from which he resigns, is endemic throughout the corridors and alley ways of power in Hudson City, both commercially and politically. Amongst those vying for their share of power is Carl (played by John Sayles himself), Wynn (Joe Morton) and Joe Rinaldi (Tony Lo Bianco). Carl, a garage owner, supplements his income selling stolen goods. Wynn is an African American politician who is initially determined to play everything straight, but who eventually realises that he lives in a world where the 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' code of practice applies. Wynn faces the challenge of learning to compromise without abandoning his principles, and along with them the things that really matter.

Joe, Nick's father, is a building contractor involved in corruption and shady business deals, a man who, as the film progresses, finds himself less in control of his life and those aforementioned business deals. Nick blames his father for the death of his only brother in Vietnam and is contemptuous of the business and political world in which his father operates. No angel himself, and burdened by gambling debts, Nick's plans for financial and personal freedom see him become involved in a robbery that goes wrong.

In an attempt to save his son, Joe does a deal with the devil, personified in the mayor of Hudson City, and agrees to burn down some slum apartments he owns. The apartments are on the site of a proposed highly lucrative development, a development which has been stalled by the very existence of these apartments. Unfortunately Joe's accommodation leads only to disaster, a young mother and child being killed in the fire. His capitulation to the mayor also proves to be a futile attempt to save his son. Unbeknownst to Joe, Nick faces another threat, this one coming from the ex-husband of his new girlfriend. A corrupt policeman, he is determined to get back with his wife and sees Nick as 'getting in the way'. Aware that Nick has previously been wanted for questioning in relation to the robbery he pursues Nick and shoots him, mortally wounding him.

Nick lies dying, his father beside him but unable to save him. Joe is a broken man, his corrupt business dealings have given him a more economically comfortable life than he may otherwise have had, but have ultimately cost him the lives of his two sons.

Passion Fish

1992

Production Company: Atchafalaya

Released by: Miramax

Producers: Sarah Green and Maggie Renzi

Executive Producer: John Sloss

Director/Screenplay/Editor: John Sayles

Cinematography: Roger Deakins

Production Design: Dan Bishop and Dianna Freas

Music: Mason Daring

With: Mary McDonnell (May-Alice), Alfre Woodard (Chantelle), David Strathairn (Rennie), Vondie Curtis-Hall (Sugar), Leo Burmester (Reeves), Nora Dunn (Ti-Marie), Mary Portser (Precious), Angela Bassett (Dawn/Rhonda), Sheila Kelley (Kim), Nancy Mette (Nina)

Paralysed from the waist down following a freak car accident in New York, May-Alice Culhane (Mary McDonnell), a successful soap-opera actress, returns to her childhood home in the bayou country of Louisiana. Having eagerly escaped the area as a young woman, she returns, not actively seeking a new life, but in 'shut down' mode, intent on hiding away from any sort of life.

May-Alice employs and dismisses a series of nurse aides, many of who seem as, if not more so, emotionally disabled than May-Alice herself. Finally she hires Chantelle, an African American woman who, unbeknownst to May-Alice, is a recovering addict. Chantelle has her problems, but she differs from the previous nurse aids in that she is a woman attempting to deal with her difficulties, rather than a woman controlled by them.

Determined to utilise the anaesthetic properties of alcohol to their fullest, May-Alice has no desire to take part in life. Her attitude clashes with that of Chantelle, who is fighting, from the first time the viewer sees her, to regain her life. The differences between the two women come to a head and Chantelle expresses her willingness to stay only if she can do her job, a job which involves her actively facilitating May-Alice's physical and emotional recovery.

Both women find themselves, albeit somewhat reluctantly, attracted to local men. May-Alice's attraction is to Rennie (David Strathairn), someone she knew as a child and Chantelle's is to a sweet talking local blacksmith by the name of Sugar (Vondie Curtis-Hall). These attractions are both potentially problematic. Rennie is married with children and Sugar, whilst currently unattached, has a number of children by a series of ex-partners. Neither relationship seems destined to travel an easy, smooth path or to have a fairy tale ending, but each encourages the women to 'feel' again.

Both women have to come to terms with their past, and with their limitations, and learn to get on with the process of living. They eventually arrive at the point where they realise they have much to offer each other and that in turn, life still has much to offer them. The future each faces is not what either women originally had planned, but is, nonetheless, laden with potential and worthy of embracing.

The Secret of Roan Inish

1994

Production Company: Skerry Movies Corp., Jones Entertainment Group

Executive Producers: John Sloss, Peter Newman, Glenn R. Jones

Producers: Sarah Green, Maggie Renzi

Based on the novel *Secret of the Ron Mor Skerry* by Rosalie K. Fry

Cinematography: Haskell Wexler

Director/Editor: John Sayles

Music: Mason Daring

Production Designer: Adrian Smith

With: Jeni Courtney (Fiona Coneelly), Mick Lally, (Hugh), Eileen Colgan (Tess), John Lynch (Tadhg Coneelly), Richard Sheridan (Cousin Eamon), Cillian Byrne (Jamie), Pat Howey (priest), Dave Duffy (Jim Coneelly), Declan Hannigan (oldest brother), Gerard Rooney (Liam Coneelly), Susan Lynch (sylvie).

Lone Star

1996

Production Company: Rio Dulce/Castle Rock Entertainment

Producers: R. Paul Miller and Maggie Renzi

Executive Producer: John Sloss

Cinematography: Stuart Dryburgh (NZ)

Director/Screenplay/Editor: John Sayles

Production Design: Dan Bishop

Costumes: Shay Cunliffe

Music: Mason Daring

With: Chris Cooper (Sam Deed), Elizabeth Pena (Pilar Cruz), Joe Morton (Delmore "Del" Payne), Mathew McConaughey (Buddy Deeds), Kris Kristofferson (Charlie Wade), Clifton James (Mayor Hollis Pogue), Frances McDormand (Bunny), Miriam Colon (Mercedes Cruz), Jesse Borrego (Danny), Tony Plana (Ray), Stephen Mendillo (Cliff), La Tanya Richardson (Priscilla Worth), Stephen J. Lang (Mikey), Ron Canada (Otis Payne)

Two years after his return to his childhood home in Texas, the discovery of a skeleton in the desert forces Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) to investigate, not only the identity and death of the deceased, but also his own past, in particular his troubled relationship with his dead father. Also a sheriff of Rio County, Buddy Deeds is revered in death as he was in life by the local community, but reviled by his son Sam, who sees him as a heartless and unscrupulous autocrat; a man who for no reason separated Sam and his first and only true love, Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Pena, with the young Pilar, seen in flash back, played by Vanessa Martinez).

The body is soon identified as being that of Charlie Wade, the sheriff who held office prior to Buddy Deeds and who left town suddenly and under mysterious circumstances, after a very public argument with Buddy. Sam immediately suspects his father to have been the murderer and is determined to solve the crime, even if he soils his father's reputation in the process. Sam learns that not only did his father not murder Charlie, but comes to understand him and his motivation. During the investigation Sam discovers that his father had an affair

with Pilar's mother and that Pilar is, in fact, his half sister. For the first time, his father's opposition to Sam's relationship with Pilar is no longer unfathomable.

Knowing the truth, Sam decides, as far as the murder is concerned anyway, that it is better to let sleeping dogs lie. He does however choose to confront the truth about his resurrected relationship with Pilar. He tells her what he has discovered, namely that they share the same father. Together they decide that 'knowing' their past, that they are half-brother and sister, does not have to 'dictate' their future and they determine to stay together.

Several strong subplots run throughout the film. Delmore Payne, like Sam Deeds, is another native of Frontera returning to the town after a long absence. He also has a troublesome relationship not only with his father, a prominent citizen in the town's African-American community, but also with his teenage son. As well as his personal problems, Delmore, as the commander of the local American Army Base that is facing impending closure, faces numerous professional challenges.

The town of Frontera itself is also not without problems as its Anglo-American, Mexican-American, and African-American communities, struggle to come to terms with their past and their future, as the balance of power in the area shifts from the hands of the Anglo-Americans to those of the Mexican-Americans.

Men With Guns/ Hombres Armados

1997

Production Company: Anarchists' Convention Productions/Lexington Road Pictures/Clear Blue Sky Productions

Executive Producers: Jody Patton, Lou Gonda, John Sloss

Producers: R. Paul Miller, Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Slawomir Idziak

Director/Screenplay/Editor: John Sayles

Music: Mason Daring

Production Design: Felipe Fernandez del Paso

With: Federico Luppi (Dr Fuentes), Damian Delgado (soldier, Domingo), Dan Rivera Gonzalez (boy, Conejo), Tania Cruz (mute girl, Graciela), Damian Alcazar (priest, Padre Portillo), Mandy Patinkin (Andrew), Kathryn Janis Grody (Harriet), Iguandili Lopez (mother), Nandi Luna Ramirez (daughter), Rafael de Quevedo (general), Carmen Madrid (Angela), Esteban Soberanes (Raul), Ivan Arango (Cienfuegos), Lizzie Curry Martinez (Montoya), Roberto Sosa (Bravo), Maggie Renzi, Shari Gray (tourists), Paco Mauri (captain), David Villalpando, Raul Sanchez (gum people).

Limbo

1999

Production Company: Columbia Pictures, Green/Renzi Productions

Released by: Sony Pictures Entertainment

Producers: Sarah Green and Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Haskell Wexler

Director/Screenplay/Editor: John Sayles

Production Design: Gemma Jackson

Art Direction: Keith Neely

Costumes: Shay Cunliffe

Music: Mason Daring

With: Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio (Donna de Angelo), David Strathairn (Joe Gastineau), Vanessa Martinez (Noelle de Angelo), Casey Siemazsko (Bobby), Kris Kristofferson (Smilin' Jack), Michael Laskin (Allbright), Leo Burmeister (Harmon King), Kathryn Grody (Frankie), Rita Taggart (Lou)

Joe Gastineau (David Strathairn) and Donna De Angelo (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) meet and become 'involved' when Donna, a singer who goes wherever the work is, comes to the small Coastal Alaskan town in which Joe has lived for most of his 40 years. These two world-weary individuals begin slowly and warily to negotiate the road toward intimacy and trust.

When Joe's brother suddenly and surprisingly sails into town, Joe and Donna, and her daughter Noelle, join him on his boat for a pleasant couple of days on the water. Unbeknownst to Joe, Bobby has found himself on the wrong side of a failed drug deal and is in big trouble. Bobby fears for his life and those fears come true when his boat is boarded by hitmen. Joe, Donna and Noelle escape with their lives but Bobby is not so fortunate.

Having dived off the boat and swum for their lives to a nearby island, the trio are now faced with trying to make their already fragile relationships work, whilst at the same time surviving in a physically hostile environment. Adding to their problems is the constant threat that Bobby's killers may return to finish the job.

When, after a couple of ill-equipped, extremely difficult but, at times, enlightening weeks on the island the possibility of rescue presents itself. It comes via Smilin' Jack (Kris Kristofferson), a man who has a reason to dislike Joe, a man who may be more than happy to hand them over to the drug dealers' hitmen, who are still keen to find them. Desperate to get off the island, and with no other options for escape, the trio stand united, having resolved many of their relationship issues, as they watch Smilin' Jack land his biplane. Together they face an uncertain future.

Screenplays

Piranha

1978

Production Company: Piranha Productions/New World Pictures

Executive Producers: Roger Corman, Jeff Schechtman

Producers: Jon Davison, Chako Van Leeuwen

Director: Joe Dante

Screenplay: John Sayles

Original Story: Richard Robinson, John Sayles

Cinematography: Jamie Anderson

Editors: Mark Goldblatt, Joe Dante

Art Directors: Bill Mellin, Kerry Mellin

Music: Pino Donaggio

Makeup: Rob Bottin

With: Bradford Dillman (Paul Grogan), Heather Menzies (Maggie McKeown), Keving McCarthy (Dr. Robert Hoak), Keenan Wynn (Jack), Dick Miller (Buck Gardner), Barbara Steele (Dr. Mengers).

The Lady in Red (aka *Guns, Sin and Bathtub Gin*)

1979

Production Company: New World Pictures

Producer: Julie Corman

Co-producer: Steven Kovacs

Director: Lewis Teague

Screenplay: John Sayles

Cinematography: Daniel Lacambre

Editors: Larry Bock, Ron Medico, Lewis Teague

Production Designer: Jac McAnelly

Music: James Horner

With: Pamela Sue Martin (Polly Franklin), Robert Conrad (John Dillinger), Louise Fletcher (Anna Sage), Robert Hgan (Jake Langle), Laurie Heineman (Rose Shimkus), Glen Withrow (Eddie), Rod Gist (Pinetop), Peter Hobbs (Pops Geissler), Christopher Lloyd (Frognose), Dick Miller (Patrick), Nancy Anne Parsons (Tiny Alice), Alan Vint (Melvin Purvis).

Battle Beyond the Stars

1980

Production Company: New World Pictures

Executive Producer: Roger Corman

Producers: Ed Carlin

Associate Producer: Mary Ann Fisher

Director: Jimmy Teru Murakami

Screenplay: John Sayles

Original Story: John Sayles, Anne Dyer

Cinematography: Daniel Lacambre

Additional Photography: James Cameron

Editors: Allan Holzman, Robert J. Kizer

Art Directors: James Cameron, Charles Breen

Miniature Design/Construction: James Cameron

Music: James Horner

With: Richard Thomas (Shad), Darlanne Fluegel (Nanelia), Robert Vaughn (Gelt), John Saxon (Sador), George Peppard (Cowboy), Cybil Danning (St Exmin), Sam Jaffe (Dr Hephaestus), Morgan Woodward (Cayman), Steve Davis (Quopeg), Earl Boen, John McGowans (Nester # 1 and Nester # 2)

Alligator

1980

Production Company: Alligator Associates, Group 1 Productions

Executive Producer: Robert S. Bremson

Producer: Brandon Chase

Associate Producer: Tom Jacobson

Director: Lewis Teague

Screenplay: John Sayles

Original Story: John Sayles, Frank Ray Perilli

Cinematography: Joe Mangine

Editors: Larry Bock, Ronald Medico

Art Director: Michael Erler

Music: Craig Hundley

With: Robert Forster (David Madison), Dean Jagger (Slade), Perry Lang (Kelly), Bert Braverman (Newspaper Reporter), Robin Riker (Marisa), Henry Silva (Colonel Brock), Michael Gazzo (Chief of Police), Jack Carter (Mayor)

The Howling

1980

Production company: Avco Embassy Pictures, International Film Investors, Westcom Productions

Executive Producer: Steven A. Lane

Producers: Michael Finnell, Jack Conrad

Associate Producer: Rob Bottin

Director: Joe Dante

Screenplay: John Sayles, Terence H. Winkless

Original Novel: Gary Brandner

Cinematography: John Hora

Editors: Mark Goldblatt, Joe Dante

Art Director: Robert A. Burns

Music: Pino Donaggio

Special Makeup: Rob Bottin

With: Dee Wallace (Karen White), Patrick McNee (Dr. George Waggner), Dennis Dugan ((Chris), Christopher Stone (William [Bill] Neill), Belinda Balaski (Terry Fisher), Kevin McCarthy (Fred Francis).

The Challenge

1982

Production Company: CBS Theatrical Films

Executive Producer: Lyle Poncher

Producers: Robert L. Rosen, Ron Beckman

Director: John Frankenheimer

Screenplay: John Sayles, Ivan Moffat

Cinematography: Kozo Okazaki

Editor: Jack Wheeler

Production Designer: Yoshiyuki Oshida

Music: Jerry Goldsmith

Martial Art Co-ordinator: Steven Seagal

With: Scott Glenn (Rick), Toshiro Mifune (Toru Yoshida), Donna Kei Benz (Akiko), Atsuo Nakamura (Hideo), Calvin Jung (Ando), Clyde Kusatsu (Go), Sab Shimono (Toshio)

***Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (aka *Trumps*)**

1982

Production Company: Ordinary Lives Inc.

Producer: Mirra Bank

Directors: Ellen Hovde (*Virginia's Story*), Mirra Bank and Ellen Hovde (*Faith's Story*), Mirra Bank (*Alexandra's Story*)
Screenplay: John Sayles with Susan Rice
Original Stories: Grace Paley
Cinematography: Tom McDonough
With: Ellen Barkin (Virginia), David Strathairn (Jerry), Ron McLarty (John), Sudie Bond (Mrs Raftery), Lynn Milgrim (Faith), Jeffrey DeMunn (Ricardo), Zvee Schooler (Pa), Eda Reiss Merin (Ma), Fay Bernardi (Mrs Hegel-Shtein), Maria Tucci (Alexandra), Kevin Bacon (Dennis), John Wardwell (Doc), Lou Criscuolo (George)

The Clan of the Cave Bear

1986

Production Company: Jonesfilm, Guber-Peters Company, Jozak Company, Decade Productions
Executive Producers: Mark Damon, John Hyde, Jon Peters, Peter Guber, Sidney Kimmel
Producers: Gerald I. Isenberg, Stan Rogow
Director: Michael Chapman
Screenplay: John Sayles
Based on the novel by: Jean M. Auel
Cinematography: Jan de Bont
Editors: Wendy Greene Bricmont, Paul Hirsch
Production Designer: Tony Masters
Music: Alan Silvestri
With: Daryl Hannah (Ayla), Pamela Reed (Iza), James Remar (Creb), Thomas G. Waites (Broud), John Doolittle (Brun), Curtis Armstrong (Goov), Martin Doyle (Grod).

Wild Thing

1987

Production Company: Filmline, Atlantic Releasing
Producer: David Calloway
Director: Max Reid
Screenplay: John Sayles
Original Story: John Sayles and Larry Stamper
Cinematography: Rene Verzier
Editors: Battle Davis, Steven Rosenblum
Production Designers: John Meighen, Jocelyn Joli
Music: George S. Clinton
With: Rob Knepper (Wild Thing), Kathleen Quinlan (Jane), Robert Davi (Chopper), Maury Chaykin (Trask), Betty Buckley (Leah) Guillaume Lemay-Thivierge (Wild Thing, 10 years), Clark Johnson (Winston), Sean Hewitt (Father Quinn).

Breaking In

1989

Production Company: Breaking In Productions, Samuel Goldwyn Company
Producer: Harry Gittes
Director: Bill Forsyth

Screenplay: John Sayles

Cinematography: Michael Gibbs

Editor: Mark Ellis

Production Designers: Adrienne Atkinson, John Willett

Music: Michael Gibbs

With: Burt Reynolds (Ernie), Casey Siemaszko (Mike), Sheila Kelly (Carrie), Lorraine Toussaint (Delphine), Albert Salmi (Johnny Scat), Harry Carey Jr. (Shoes), Maury Chaykin (Tucci), David Frishberg (Nightclub Singer)

Men of War

1994

Production Company: MDP Worldwide, Pomarance Corporation, Grandview Avenue Pictures

Executive Producers: Moshe Diamant, Stan Rogow

Producers: Arthur Goldblatt, Andrew Pfeffer

Director: Perry Lang

Screenplay: John Sayles, Ethan Reiff, Cyrus Voris

Story: Stan Rogow

Cinematography: Ron Schmidt

Editor: Jeffrey Reiner

Music: Gerald Gouriet

Production Designers: Steve Spence, Jim Newport

With: Dolph Lundgren (Nick Gunnar), Charlotte Lewis (Loki), B. D. Wong (Po), Anthony John Denison (Jimmy G), Don Harvey (Nolan), Catherine Bell (Grace), Tom Guinee (Ocker), Tiny "Zeus" Lister Jr. (Blades), Tom Wright (Jamaal).

Made For Television

A Perfect Match

1980

Production Company: Lorimar Productions

Executive Producers: David Jacobs, Lee Rich

Producer: Andre Gutfreund

Director: Mel Damski

Teleplay: John Sayles

Story: Andre Gutfreund, Mel Damski

Cinematography: Ric Waite

Editor: John Farrell

Music: Billy Goldenburg

Art Director: Tom H. John

With: Linda Kelsey (Miranda McLloyd), Michael Brandon (Steve Triandos), Lisa Lucas (Julie Larson), Charles Dunning (Bill Larson), Colleen Dewhurst (Meg Larson).

Unnatural Causes

1986

Production Company: Blue Andre Productions, ITC Productions

Executive Producers: Blue Andre, Robert M. Myman

Producer: Blue Andre
Director: Lamont Johnson
Teleplay: John Sayles
Story: Martin Goldstein, Stephen Doran, Robert Jacobs
Cinematography: Larry Pizer
Editor: Paul LaMastra
Music: Charles Fox
Production Designer: Anne Pritchard
With: John Ritter (Frank Coleman), Alfre Woodard (Maude DeVictor), Patti LaBelle (Jeanette Thompson), John Vargas (Fernando "Nando" Sanchez), Frederick Allen (kid), John Sayles (Lloyd).

Shannon's Deal

1990 -91

Production Company: Stan Rogow Prods., NBC
Executive Producer: Stan Rogow
Producers: Gareth Davies, Jim Margellos, Allan Arkush
Created by: John Sayles
Cinematography: Steven Lerner, Michael Gerschman
Editors: William B. Strich, Stephen Potter, Conrad Gonzalez
Music: Wynton Marsalis, Lee Ritenour, Tom Scott
Art Director: James J. Agazzi
Teleplay Episodes 1 & 4: John Sayles
With: Jamey Sheridan (Jack Shannon), Elizabeth Pena (Lucy Acosta), Richard Edson (Wilmer), Jenny Lewis (Neala), Martin Ferrero (Lou Gandolph), John Sayles (in episode 1 only).

Music Videos

Born in the U.S.A.

I'm on Fire

Glory Days

1985

Director/Editor: John Sayles
For Bruce Springsteen

Mountain View

1989

Production Company: Alive From Off Centre and WGBH
Executive Producer: Susan Dowling
Producers: Susan Dowling, Maggie Renzi
Directed by: Marta Renzi in collaboration with John Sayles
Cinematography: Paul Goldsmith
Editors: Susan Dowling, Marta Renzi
Production Designer: Sandra McLeod
Music Director: Mason Daring
With: Thomas Eldred (old man), Jane Alexander (bartender), Jace Alexander (son), Red Holland, Mary Shultz (couple on porch), Jim Desmond (barfly), Marta

Jo Miller (young mother), Christine Phillion, Nathaniel E. Lee (newlyweds), Cathy Zimmerman, Thomas Grunewald (couple in truck), Marta Renzi (other woman), Joanne Callum, Caroline Grossman (girlfriends), Doug Elkins, Chisa Hidako (son's friends), Sarah Grossman Greene, Irene Krugman, Caitlin Miller, Amos Wolff (children).

Uncredited Script Contributions

Love Field (1991). Jonathan Kaplan Dir.

The Quick and the Dead (1995). Sam Raimi Dir.

Apollo 13 (1995). Ron Howard Dir.

Mimic (1997). Guillermo Del Toro Dir.

Select Bibliography

- Adams, S. "Silent Strength". *Citypaper.net*.
<http://www.cpcn.com/articles/060399/ae.movie.shtml> .
Internet. Accessed 10/8/99.
- Atkinson, M. "Limbo". *Villagevoice.com* .
<http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/9922/atkinson.shtml> .
Internet. Accessed 13/8/00
- Beaver, F. (1993). "Introduction". In J. Boyer, *Sidney Lumet*. New York:
Twayne Publishers.
- Biskind, P. (November 1994). "AN AUTEUR IS BORN". *Premiere*. 8(3): pp. 94-
102.
- Blackwelder, R. "200-PROOF PERSONALITY PIECE". *SPLICED Online*.
<http://www.splicedonline.com/99reviews/limbo.html> .
Internet Accessed 9/9/99
- Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. (1997) eds. 5th ed. *FILM ART: AN
INTRODUCTION*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Buscombe, E. (1995). "THE IDEA OF GENRE". In Grant, K. ed. *Film Genre
Reader II*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Carnes, M. C. (1995). *PAST IMPERFECT: HISTORY ACCORDING TO THE
MOVIES*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Carson, D. (1999) ed. *JOHN SAYLES INTERVIEWS*. Mississippi: University of
Mississippi.
- Cook, P. and Bernink, M. (1999) eds. 2nd ed. *The Cinema Book*. London:
British Film Institute.
- Corliss, R. (1992). "The Hollywood Screenwriter". Mast, G., Cohen, M. and
Braudy L. eds. 4th ed. *Film Theory and Criticism*. New
York: Oxford University Press.
- Corrigan, T. (1991). *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after
Vietnam*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

- Dwyer, M. "Limbo". *The Irish Times*.
[http://www.ireland.com/dublin/entertainment/cinema/archiv
e/reviews/limbo.htm](http://www.ireland.com/dublin/entertainment/cinema/archiv
e/reviews/limbo.htm) . Internet . Accessed 13/8/00.
- Edwards, P. (1992). "John Sayles On City of Hope". *Movie Trader*. 1.9. Pages
11, 18-19. February.
- Field, S. (1979). *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. New York: Dell
Publishing.
- Giddens, A. (1997). 3rd ed. *Sociology*. Polity Press: Cambridge.
- Goldman, W. (1985). *Adventures In the Screen Trade, A Personal View of
Hollywood and Screenwriting*. London: Futura.
- Gordon, I. (1982) (ed.) *COLLINS CONCISE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE*. NZ ed. Auckland: Collins.
- Greenburg, H. (1991). "Re-Screwed: Pretty Woman's Co-opted Feminism."
Journal of Film & Television. 19. 1. Spring, Pages 9-13.
- Guthmann, E. (1987). "Miner's Bloody Battle for Union Relived". In Carson, D
(1999). *JOHN SAYLES INTERVIEWS*. Mississippi: University of
Mississippi.
- Hall, S. (1980). "Encoding/decoding" in Hall, S. Hobson, D. Lowe, A. and
Willis, P (eds.). *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson
- Hayward, S. (2000) 2nd ed. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. London:
Routledge.
- Huffines, K. (1987). "Director John Sayles Makes Films with Conviction". In
Carson, D. (1999)(ed). *JOHN SAYLES
INTERVIEWS*. Mississippi: University of
Mississippi
- "Icon and Everyman". *n.b. interview*. <http://readcat.nybooks.com/sayles1.html> .
Internet. Accessed 21/10/99.

- Kempley, R. (1988). "Eight Men Out". *Washington Post*. September 23, 1988.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longte.../eightmenoutpgkempley_a0c9ed.htm
Internet. Accessed 13/8/00
- Leong, A. *Limbo Movie Review*. <http://members.aol.com/leong1631/limbo.html>
Internet. Accessed 21/9/99
- McDonnell, B. (1998). *Fresh Approaches to Film*. Auckland: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Maltby, R. (1995). *HOLLYWOOD Cinema*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Molyneaux, G. (2000). *John Sayles*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books.
- Nathan, I. "Limbo". *Empire Online*. Issue 128, January 2000.
<http://www.empireonline.co.uk/reviews/review.asp?5395> .
Internet. Accessed 13/08/00
- Nowitzky, J. *rough cut reviews*.
<http://www.roughcut.com/reviews/movies/vault1999/limbo.html> .
Internet. Accessed 21/9/99
- Nye, R. (1992). *Three Psychologies: Perspectives from Freud, Skinner and Rogers*. California: Brooks/Cole Publishing.
- Ryan, J. (1998). *John Sayles, Filmmaker*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co.
- Sarris, A. (1999). "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962". In Braudy, Leo and Cohen, Marshall. 5th ed. *Film Theory and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Sayles, J. (1987). *THINKING IN PICTURES: THE MAKING OF THE FILM MATEWAN*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Sayles, J. "A Work in Progress". *The Austin Chronicle*. May 19, 2000.
<http://www.auschron.com/issues/dispatch/2000-05-19/pols_feature.html> Internet . Accessed 9/9/2000.
- Schatz, T. (1981). *Hollywood Genres*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Seidman, S. (1994) *Contested Knowledge*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.
- Sklar, R. (1994). *MOVIE-MADE AMERICA*. Revised and updated. New York: Vintage Books.
- Smith, G. (1998). *Sayles on Sayles*. London: faber and faber.
- Stein, H. (1999) " HOW JOHN SAYLES LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE STUDIO". *PREMIERE: THE MOVIE MAGAZINE*. July 1999, Pages 90-95 and 110.
- Taylor, E. "Border Town". *LA Weekly*.
<http://www.laweekly.com/ink/99/28/film-taylor.shtml>.
Internet. Accessed 9/9/99
- Wyatt, J. (1996). "Economic Constraints/Economic Opportunities: Robert Altman as Auteur". *The Velvet Light Trap*. 38. Autumn 1996. Page 51-67.