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**Quests for Healing and Identity
in the
Fiction and Films of John Sayles**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
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Abstract

Quests for Healing and Identity in the Fiction and Films of John Sayles

John Sayles, writer and independent filmmaker, is, first and foremost a storyteller. The "stories" in his fiction and films tell of individuals trying to come to terms with personal and/or political issues and often lead their protagonists on journeys or quests in search of healing and identity. These quests frequently involve characters returning to places either from the past, or to the source of the trauma in order to understand and deal with the present. This thesis examines this particular aspect of the fiction and films of John Sayles.

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General Introduction

I first thought seriously about writing about John Sayles' fiction and films about two years ago. At that time I had just seen *The Secret of Roan Inish* without realising that he had directed it. I saw it in a run-down theatre that was almost empty save for a dozen or so patrons. When the film finished no one moved until the last of Mason Daring's soundtrack faded out and as we left the theatre I remember that we smiled at each other as if we had shared a special secret. I had previously seen three other films directed by Sayles and had been captivated by them. But it was *Roan Inish* that made me want to investigate his work further and ultimately decide to embark on this study.

Looking back now I ask myself what it was about that simple little Irish myth that led to this? On reflection I think I always knew. The film was so refreshingly different from any film I had seen, and it was such an extraordinary story of self-help. Furthermore, I saw in it crucial elements that I came to realise characterised and defined Sayles' work and set it apart from the work of others in his field, elements that I would begin to notice again and again as I went on to reflect on more of his fiction and his films. I am referring firstly to the predominance of individuals who are almost always exiles or outsiders in some sense. They are lost and hurt but do not intend to spend the rest of their lives feeling this way. They embark on quests involving either physical or figurative journeys to try to heal their 'hurts' and find themselves. Their quests then are for healing and identity. This thesis attempts to show

that these defining elements that I first noticed in *Roan Inish* can be found to varying degrees in almost all of Sayles' fiction and his films.¹

Before proceeding further I would like to draw the reader's attention to the Appendix section at the back of this work, where a filmography as well as short plot summaries of all the stories, novels and films referred to in this thesis can be found. These may prove invaluable to the reader who is unfamiliar with all the works discussed.

First and foremost Sayles is a storyteller and this is often the way that he likes to describe himself and his work. Although his "stories" feature ordinary people they are drawn with such psychological depth and realism that the ordinary becomes the extraordinary. He seems able to expose the complexity that lies beneath the surface of the commonplace. As stated earlier, though essentially unremarkable, Sayles' characters are often outsiders or exiles in some way. They are often individuals who are suffering from a sense of loss or are themselves lost. Frequently, Sayles' characters are struggling to come to terms with personal and/or political issues, something that Emanuel Levy noted in his book *Cinema of Outsiders* (1999).² Many are hurting and needy

¹ It is interesting to note that, unlike most other Sayles directed films, *The Secret of Roan Inish* was not written by him. It was based on a novella by Rosalie Fry, written in 1959. John Sayles' partner and producer Maggie Renzi had read the novella as a child and suggested Sayles make it into a film. He apparently liked the story and agreed. I find it fascinating to speculate on what it was about the story that attracted him especially in the light of the journey, quest, return aspect of this study.

² Emanuel Levy noted this in relation to Sayles' films in his book *Cinema of Outsiders* in the section on John Sayles entitled "Bridging the Personal and the Political – John Sayles" when he says that more than anything else Sayles' is the cinema of outsiders. He continues:

"Each of Sayles's films has paid tribute to an underrepresented and disenfranchised element in American society:

and like Fiona in *The Secret of Roan Inish*, more often than not they become engaged in a kind of search or quest for truth, for justice or simply for a kind of inner peace or personal identity that is lost or lacking.

Two types of quest appear to preoccupy John Sayles and these quests lead his protagonists on journeys of what could be termed personal and political discovery. The first type of quest involves an actual physical journey of return to places from the past. Here, his protagonists look for answers, hidden beneath years of personal and/or political history. The second type of quest does not involve an actual physical return but rather it involves a psychological journey of discovery. In both cases however, there is a strong healing component to the journey. Invariably Sayles' protagonists it seems must return either physically or figuratively to face events from the past to help them deal with the present.

It is my intention to introduce the reader to this important aspect of John Sayles' work by looking at how his fiction and films illustrate the central idea outlined above. Among the works that I have chosen, both literary and cinematic, there are, it must be said, obvious areas of overlap between the personal and political journey and quest aspect contained in each.

A group of politically disenchanted friends in *Return of the Secaucus Seven*.
 A lesbian in *Lianna*.
 An interracial couple in *Baby It's You*.
 A mute African American in *Brother From Another Planet*.
 Striking coalminers in *Matewan*.
 Gullible baseball players who sell out in *Eight Men Out*.
 Working-class city dwellers in *City of Hope*.
 A handicapped TV star and an unfit mother in *Passion Fish*.
 An isolated Irish girl in *The Secret of Roan Inish*.
 A community of disenfranchised Mexican Americans in *Lone Star*.

The fact that quests for healing and identity are prominent in so many of the films and so much of the fiction of John Sayles suggests a common thematic thread, one that points to the fact that he has consciously or unconsciously imposed his unique creative mark on to his work. We expect this with fiction. The author is the sole creator and artist. But what about film? Whose creation is it? Whose vision? Whose ideas? Whose techniques?

Sayles the filmmaker is quick to deny his status as auteur. A film, he says, is a collaborative effort. It is the sum of the efforts of a lot of people. In 1987 he wrote, "Getting people to work with rather than in spite of each other can be difficult, and wherever possible we try to appeal to people's sense of collaborating on a shared project rather than retreat behind the safe formula of rank"(Sayles 1987 p.105). It is pertinent at this point to look at the notion of the auteur in general and assess the current literature on it.

The idea that the hand or creative mark of the film director can be seen in his or her work is not new. The concept of the auteur dates back at least to post-war France where American genre films, no longer barred during the Occupation, flooded the market and audiences began noticing directors' signature styles. These signature styles were noticed "even among directors operating within the confines of the Hollywood studio system" (Weiss p.30). What had begun was a new way of assessing films based on what Weiss in her article of 1998 entitled "*a film by...*" called the director's stylistic continuity. Andre Bazin had discussed these signature styles in his 1957 article – "*La*

Politique des auteurs” as the analytic process of “choosing in the artistic creation the personal factor as a criterion of reference, and then postulating its permanence and even its progress from one work to the next”. (Bazin 1957) And so the emphasis critics had previously put on plot and script was replaced by a new emphasis on the visual component of film and this, says Weiss, “raised the director from craftsman to artist” (p.30).

Weiss’ article – “a film by...” which was published in *The Independent* in March 1998 included an interview with Andrew Sarris, the critic who back in 1955 had launched this new idea which he termed the auteur theory, in the United States. In this interview he was asked to assess the impact that the auteur theory had had on cinemagoers and critics. Sarris’ comments are particularly pertinent in relation to John Sayles. Sarris was interesting in the way he talked about those aspects of the auteur theory that he still, 45 years on, holds to be true. One of the methods that he used to evaluate directors when the concept was still new was termed the “circle theory”. This looked at films in terms of three circularly connected elements: technical competence, evidence of distinguishable personality, and interior meaning. Pauline Kael, in her critique, “Circles and Squares”, published in *Film Quarterly* in 1963 debunked these three criteria on the basis that even if a director’s film/s displayed all three of these elements (which she saw as vague and subjective) he/she may not be ranked highly enough to be termed an auteur.³ Her article fuelled the debate over the theory, which even today remains topical. However, given its limitations, I feel that it is a useful starting point

from which to assess the aspiring auteur and therefore I make no apology for utilising Sarris's theory in relation to John Sayles.

Sarris's notion of the director as creative mastermind behind the film was a sign that film could be taken seriously. Like literature or the fine arts it would not now constitute mere mindless entertainment. Today, Sarris's "circle" is closer to what we would term the "subtext" or the "directorial attitude" of the movie. Furthermore, the emphasis that he put on the sole creative power of the director over the influence of other components such as actors or writers has changed somewhat. Sarris, who calls himself a constant revisionist, has always said that theories like the auteur theory are constantly in a state of flux. When asked by Marion Weiss in the 1998 interview why he thought that the auteur theory had inspired so much passion over the years, he answered: "I've always felt very much like Mario Puzo. He said that if he had known so many people were going to read *The Godfather*, he would have written it better". Says Sarris: "Auteurism is speculative; it's hypothetical. A lot of people are involved in driving a movie. I just saw Sidney Lumet's *Critical Care*. The person who really keeps it together is [actor] James Spader. In a great many movies it's the acting that drives it; in other movies it's the writing or cinematography. But I took a stab just to get auteurism started. I wanted to shock people. I made some extreme statements. I said I preferred Cukor over Bergman. I wouldn't say the same thing today. Nonetheless, auteurism has gone on" (Weiss p.31-2).

³ Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares", from Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen's (eds) *Film Theory and Criticism*. The article was reprinted in David Denby's(ed) *Awake in*

This visible personal mark is most evident in many films today. Auteurism is still alive and strong. How many people today still talk about seeing “a Steven Spielberg film”, “a Wim Wenders film” or “a Ridley Scott film”? Why? In Sarris’s simple words: “I made a supposition that the director has a great deal to do with it. Because he’s on the set, and he was there when it happened” (Weiss p.32). Having said this however, many films today do *not* inspire the audience to say “I saw a ‘such and such’ film today”. They are made by directors who have not (as yet), built up a kind of defining repertoire of films that exhibit their own personal “mark” or characteristic signature style as John Sayles has.

Personal distinguishing marks are very evident in the films of John Sayles. As Emanuel Levy writes in his chapter “Bridging the Personal and the Political – John Sayles” from his book *Cinema of Outsiders*: “For the past two decades, John Sayles has been the uncrowned father of the new independent cinema. Thematically unpredictable, Sayles has cut an impressive path for himself apart from both mainstream Hollywood and the indie world. Writing, directing, and editing his films have enabled him to exercise assertive control over his work, whose best qualities are balance and restraint” (Levy p.82). We are not then simply talking about a director. He is a “jack of all trades”. He conceives an idea, writes it, directs it, edits it and often acts in it. The “Sayles presence” is very strong on the sets of his films and each new film carries his unique signature.

In her 1987 article on *Matewan* Dorothy McGee asserts that despite Sayles' egalitarian leanings, about which I will elaborate in Chapter One, the feeling on the set of a Sayles' movie is *not* one of collaboration but of auteur performance. "The story, the dialogue, the sets, the takes, the vision, come directly from Sayles. He might walk quietly and unpretentiously around the set, giving new depth to the notion of 'casual', but he is clearly the font of instructions. He issues them in an unequivocal voice".⁴ In the same review McGee quotes Haskell Wexler, who was the cinematographer on *Matewan*, *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994) and again on *Limbo* (1999). Says Wexler, "This movie is thoroughly his picture. I'm thoroughly his servant. I'm not called on for creative input: he has it so completely in mind".

This thesis will demonstrate furthermore that the predominance of the notion of the quest in Sayles' work in itself imposes a strong personal signature on his work. It seems to me that when a narrative and/or thematic device like this is utilised so frequently in so much of a writer's or filmmaker's work it cannot help but begin to define them.

Although Sayles vehemently denies his auteur status on the basis that his films are the result of a collaborative effort it seems to me that comments like those of Wexler refute this and that his auteur status is undeniable. In the final analysis though, Sayles status as auteur comes right back to Sarris's notion of the film director being the creative mastermind behind the film. Sayles' films are rich in terms of Sarris's three circularly connected elements:

⁴ McGee's article entitled "Solidarity forever" can be found on the John Sayles Border Stop web site under News Archive. <http://home.earthlink.net/saylesweb/film.html>

technical competence, evidence of distinguishable personality, and interior meaning.

Although there are many film reviews and some reviews of the fiction of John Sayles, there are very few books written about him specifically. Interestingly, the first book about his work, *Thinking in Pictures* was published in 1987 and was written by Sayles himself. It is his realistic account of the aesthetic and practical issues and problems involved in making the film *Matewan*, which was released the same year. Included in the book is Sayles' shooting script for *Matewan*, which is interesting in its simplicity. In his preamble to the shooting script Sayles gives some insight as to why he keeps the shooting script so simple and unembellished with directions. He describes how on some films, *Matewan* being one, the film itself begins to assume a life of its own, guiding the filmmakers to make certain decisions each day that were never planned. He talks of how sometimes on the set of *Matewan* "the movie was...asserting its character, letting us know what it was supposed to be, like it was out there all the time just waiting up in those hills for us to find it" (p.130). In many ways, statements like this reveal the real artist in John Sayles, someone intuitive enough and confident enough to allow his films to "assert their character" on him.

In 1988 two books about his work were published: Gavin Smith's *Sayles on Sayles* and Jack Ryan's *John Sayles, Filmmaker*. Gavin Smith's book is a series of interviews between Smith and Sayles about all aspects of his writing and filmmaking. This is not as much a critical work as one that attempts to give an overview of the work of Sayles as a creator of fiction, screenplays,

scripts, and films. Smith also includes a lot of incidental and biographical information about Sayles that traces his life to date. Smith's questions cover a wide range of subjects from influences in Sayles' childhood to thematic influences in his films to financial concerns surrounding the production of his most recent films (including *Limbo*) and his plans for the future. The book builds a comprehensive picture of a writer/ filmmaker with principles, sensitivity and style.⁵ Ryan's book, *John Sayles, Filmmaker* is a general analysis of Sayles' work in film. It discusses his films, from his earliest to his most recent, in terms of story, which he stresses is Sayles' biggest strength, theme, characterisation and cinematic techniques employed, rather than dwelling more on the financial and production side of Sayles' output as Molyneaux' more recent book does.

Dianne Carson's (ed) *John Sayles Interviews* was published in 1999 and, as the title suggests, is a collection of interviews and conversations with Sayles. Carson includes interviews that span a period of over twenty years of Sayles' work.⁶ The interviews that Carson has chosen to include in the collection reveal a writer/filmmaker who continues to break new ground without ever straying too far from reality. The book itself endeavours to reveal the variety and range of Sayles' work, balancing questions and answers about the technicalities of making quality films the Sayles way, with discussions that touch more on the ideas and philosophies that inform his work. Gerry

⁵ Gavin Smith is a contributing editor to *Film Comment*, a magazine that is a forum for writing about movies. It is published bi-monthly and has the reputation of being one of the best magazines about film.

⁶ Dianne Carson is a professor of film studies at St. Louis Community College at Meramec. She is also a film critic for *Riverfront Times* in St Louis and the editor of *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*.

Molyneaux's *John Sayles. An Unauthorised Biography of the Pioneering Indie Filmmaker* was published in 2000. In contrast with Carson's and Ryan's works, Molyneaux's book gives a more comprehensive analysis of all the factors involved, practical and aesthetic, in the putting together of each of Sayles' films, dealing in more depth with the political and financial issues involved in making independent films than either Smith, Ryan or Carson.

For the purposes of this study I will use a selection of John Sayles' fiction and films, which best illustrate my central idea. Of his fiction I will deal with some of the short stories that were published in the collection entitled *The Anarchist's Convention* published in 1979. Of his three novels I will look in detail at *Union Dues*, published in 1977 and *Los Gusanos*, written in the eighties and published in 1991. The films that I will concentrate on are *Lianna* (1983), *Matewan* (1987), *City of Hope* (1990), *Passion Fish* (1992), *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), *Lone Star* (1996), *Men with Guns* (1997) and *Limbo* (1999).

Chapter One will build up a picture of John Sayles so that the reader can begin to understand the man behind the art and to see what has brought him to the position of highly respected writer and independent filmmaker that he is today. To this end I will provide general background and biographical information about him as well as discuss his status as an independent filmmaker both in a creative sense but also as regards his financial independence from the mainstream Hollywood studio system. In this chapter I will also define the concept of the quest in an historical sense and elaborate on the significance of the notion of returning and the part that it plays in the

kind of reconstructive healing process that informs the work of John Sayles. I will discuss the terms 'outsider', 'exile' and look into the issue of identity, both on a personal and a collective level as it pertains to the work of Sayles.

Using the analogy of a patchwork quilt, the chapters following Chapter One will provide the pieces of the final article. Chapter Two will focus on Sayles' fiction demonstrating how journeys and quests for healing and identity are central to his narratives. I have chosen to look in detail at two of Sayles' three novels and will discuss most of the stories in *The Anarchist's Convention*. I will also refer incidentally to other fictional works of Sayles.

As mentioned earlier, there is a personal and a political dimension to the quests that are at the core of both Sayles' fiction and his films. Furthermore, although these quests often involve actual physical journeys, many do not. Rather they involve psychological, figurative or metaphorical journeys.

In the early stages of my research I debated whether to group the films discussed here according to whether they were essentially personal quests or political quests, or whether the journeys involved were actual or figurative in nature. It became increasingly evident however that the more I tried to delineate between personal quests and political quests in some of the more complex films such as *City of Hope* and *Lone Star* the more they refused to be teased apart. Furthermore I began to notice that the more recent films of Sayles frequently involve an *actual* journey than do the earlier films. *Passion Fish*, which was released in 1992, seemed to be a turning point in his films in

this respect, being the first film to have its central character make an actual journey back to a place from the past (May-Alice).

Finally it seemed to me that by dealing with the films in the chronological order of when they were made could be more revealing. I could more easily show how the quests for healing and identity in Sayles' films have developed over a period of sixteen years from quests where characters embark on *figurative* journeys to quests where characters embark on *actual* journeys, back to the sources of their traumas in order to face them and begin the healing process. To this end Chapter Three will discuss four films that Sayles made between 1983 and 1992: *Lianna*, *Matewan*, *City of Hope*, and *Passion Fish* and Chapter Four will comment on four of Sayles' later films: *The Secret of Roan Inish*, *Lone Star*, *Men with Guns* and *Limbo*. *Passion Fish* constitutes a 'bridge' between the earlier films where individuals journey in a metaphorical or figurative sense and the later films of where individuals actually return to the places or origins of their traumas.

Having shown how the notion of questing individuals searching for healing and renewed identity defines Sayles' literary and cinematic output Chapter Five will attempt to take a step back and look at his work as a whole. The intention will be to see Sayles' 'big picture' and to point to possible future directions from this writer/director.

Chapter One:

The Sayles Journey

Given the fact that the work of John Sayles is so expressive of his unique vision it is fascinating to begin by speculating on the circumstances and experiences that led him to write fiction and make films which deal so frequently with the stories of outsiders and exiles who, out of a sense of loss or some other deep personal or political need, embark on journeys of healing and discovery.⁷

Sayles' own life journey began in 1950 in Schenectady, New York State. He was the second son of Catholic schoolteacher parents. He believes that he and his brother were fortunate as they grew up in that their parents never pushed them to follow any one path but rather encouraged them to experiment and discover for themselves what they wanted to do with their lives. Sayles had begun reading widely at a very young age and he remembers that writing just seemed to be a natural progression. At about eight years of age he started writing stories, which he describes as mostly: "rip-offs" of *Twilight Zone* episodes. He would people them with kids from his neighbourhood. He remembers: "they were usually influenced by something

⁷ Levy talks about Sayles' preoccupation with outsiders and the concept of loss on page 83 of *Cinema of Outsiders*.

I'd seen or read, and I'd do my own version".⁸ It is interesting that even today Sayles continues to employ this principle of using 'the kids in the neighbourhood' when he casts his films, using a core of actors, many of whom he worked with in his amateur theatre days.

Sayles believes that Catholicism also influenced his storytelling. In one interview quoted in Levy's *Cinema of Outsiders* he explained: "Raised Catholic, you're born with original sin. You haven't done anything and you are already guilty" (Levy p.83). He recalls the sermons that he listened to in church as the first "stories" that he remembers. It is interesting that as a mature writer and filmmaker he has continued to seek out "stories that have a moral content in them".⁹

As a child Sayles also loved to draw. When interviewed by Gavin Smith he said: "mostly it was pretty technical – I wanted to be able to draw so that it looked like real life. I liked to draw literally, not really artistically, but representationally. Now I draw my storyboards"(Smith p.5). Once again, in the light of what we see in Sayles' fiction and his films this doesn't surprise. His work is generally representational in a realistic rather than an artistic sense although as his filmmaking matures the more artistic his films become. Emanuel Levy sums it up: "All of his [Sayles] films are rooted in character studies and social observations" he "displays a vision that is singular and iconoclastic, favoring everyday life and ordinary people" (p.84).

⁸ Sayles talks about his early writing in *Sayles on Sayles*, (p 5). Interestingly, this was exactly his approach when he made *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994).

⁹ Levy goes on to note that Sayles walks a high moral ground in his films, taking a realistic point of view and is not afraid to deal with the "big" issues.

Jack Ryan describes Sayles realism in his 1998 book *John Sayles, Filmmaker* in the chapter entitled "A Storyteller: From Literature to Film". "John Sayles takes pleasure in telling a good story. Flashy style, abstract language, and narrative experimentation are not his concerns" (Ryan p.9). Although Sayles himself confirms this: "My main interest is in making films about people. I'm not interested in cinematic art" (Levy p.82), as mentioned earlier, his more recent films tend to refute this statement. Ella Taylor in her review of *Limbo* for LA Weekly strongly disputes Sayles' contention that he is not interested in cinematic art. She cites the "watery beauty" that cinematographer Haskell Wexler achieves in *Limbo*, the mystical fogginess of *Roan Inish* and the "luscious yellow" shades that typify *Lone Star* (Stuart Dryburgh, cinematographer).

Sayles himself felt that he was somewhat of an outsider when he was a child and remembers quietly observing people without joining in.¹⁰ It is not surprising then to find that many of the characters in his fiction and films are outsiders themselves. Sayles described himself as "subverbal" until he was out of college a few years.¹¹ He majored in psychology and, although he never took it up as a career, his awareness of the complexity of human psychological states and behaviour comes through in his scriptwriting, fiction and films. It appears that his main means of expressing himself at this time was through his writing but also ironically (given his claim that he was 'subverbal') through amateur acting. In his last year at college he became

¹⁰ He has this in common with other directors, notably Scorsese and Spielberg.

¹¹ In *Sayles on Sayles* (p 3) he quips that his father found his subverbal nature particularly useful when he was writing his doctoral thesis on the under-achiever. He and his brother were his father's main case studies!

involved in acting at the Eastern Slope Playhouse in North Conway, New Hampshire. Gordon Clapp who has since acted in a number of his films was directing *Of Mice and Men* and Sayles was asked to take the part of Slim.

Sayles was to act in and direct many plays over the next few years. One wonders whether being able to assume the identity of another character actually helped him to find his own "voice" as a writer and later a filmmaker. He does say that for him, "directing for theater was a form of storytelling where you didn't necessarily provide the story but you controlled it" (Smith p.10). He also says that some of the depth of his writing comes from his being an actor. In an interview with Roger Ebert in 1993 he says: "When I finish a screenplay, I look at every part of it as if I had to act it, and ask, is there enough here to be a three dimensional character? Or could it use maybe one more line or one more relationship or one more indication? No matter what your part is, you have to believe that you have a life outside of the movie. When a supporting character walks off-screen, we should feel like it would be neat if the camera could follow him, and see what he's up to next" (Carson p.162-163). He certainly achieves the depth of characterisation that he talks about here in most of his work and as I will demonstrate he achieves it largely through speech. He creates what Ryan calls "talking prose" preferring to achieve depth of character through dialogue rather than action (Ryan p.243).

Sayles was at college in the late sixties, during the height of the student protest movement but kept his distance from the radicalism all around him. He spent his time reading, writing, acting and directing in amateur theatre and

hitchhiking around the country. Hitchhiking provided Sayles with another world of stories to listen to and a new kind of reality to assimilate into his work. He talks of the times when "you're riding with somebody who's a KKK guy for eight hours. When you're hitchhiking you generally get people who want to be entertained or who want to tell you shit. You're the shrink they never have to go back to. I had people confess murders to me" (Smith p.10). Firstly, I think that Sayles discovered a new appreciation for the art of storytelling itself from these anonymous storytellers, and secondly I think that he came to appreciate that people are complicated and three-dimensional and that the demarcation lines between the different 'camps' in any situation are blurred. Describing some of the drivers that he hitched lifts with he says, "There are people who are truly kind, open, and generous but who hate black people. And you've got to deal with that somehow" (Smith p.9). The insight and knowledge that Sayles gained from these varied life stories on the road is most evident in all his subsequent work but particularly in his early short stories particularly the "Brian" stories which he wrote about this time but were not published until 1979 in *The Anarchist's Convention* collection.

Graduating from college with a degree in psychology, Sayles, rather than entering the professional workplace, chose to work at various menial jobs including meatpacking, digging ditches as well as orderly work in hospitals, working mainly with geriatrics and car crash victims. It appears that he could identify more closely with the working class than with the white-collar world. He continued to write stories and began sending them to publishers. He remembers that he had a wall papered with rejection slips. Finally however, his first novella was accepted for publication. He was asked to expand it into

a novel and this became *Pride of the Bimbos* (1975). Gavin Smith describes it as a study, "of masculinity in crisis" which follows the journey south of Dred as he is gradually stripped of his identity and forced to face his real self.¹² Clearly then, even in this first tentative novel the notion of a journey of personal discovery is central to the narrative. That same year one of his short stories *1-80 Nebraska* was accepted for publication in *The Atlantic Monthly* and later the same year it won the *O. Henry* award for Best Short Story. It was later published in *The Anarchists' Convention* collection (1979). It would appear that in those early days Sayles' hitch-hiking experiences and his varied work background where he associated with people from widely varying backgrounds influenced both the characters in his fiction and later his films.

Soon after *Pride of the Bimbos* was published in 1975 Sayles began writing his second novel, *Union Dues*, about a young man destined (but unwilling) to become a coalminer like his father, who runs away to Boston in search of his brother, missing after returning psychologically scarred from the Vietnam war. The novel is set against the political polarisation of the sixties, something that Sayles himself had felt keenly. Much later Sayles based part of the story of *Matewan* (1987) on *Union Dues*. It was after *Union Dues* was published (1977) that he started thinking about making his own movies. He moved out to California and before long was introduced to Roger Corman of New World Pictures. Corman needed a writer who could rewrite the script of *Piranha* (1978. Dir: Joe Dante) in a hurry and Sayles got the job. He went on to become one of Corman's most valued scriptwriters because of his ability to

¹² Gavin Smith uses this phrase when interviewing Sayles about *Pride of the Bimbos* in *Sayles on Sayles* (p.18).

write witty and revealing dialogue very quickly. The Corman scripts included *The Lady in Red* (1979. Dir: Lewis Teague), *Alligator* (1980. Dir: Lewis Teague), *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980. Dir: Jimmy Murakami), *A Perfect Match* (TV Movie, 1980. Dir: Mel Damski), *The Howling* (1981. Dir: Joe Dante) and others.¹³ In the '90s he also worked as a kind of script doctor on a number of other films including *Love Field* (1991, Jonathan Kaplan), *The Quick and the Dead* (1995, Sam Raimi), *Apollo 13* (1995, Ron Howard), *Mimic* (1997, Guillermo) and *Passing Glory* (TV Movie, 1999, Steve James).¹⁴

Sayles had now worked his way into a position where he had not only the creative inspiration but also the work experience and the money needed to make his own first film. Writing scripts paid well and when Sayles had amassed \$40,000 he knew he was ready. He wrote *Return of the Secaucus Seven* in two weeks with "the kids in the neighborhood" firmly in mind: "I knew I wanted to work with David Strathairn and Gordon Clapp and a few of the other people I had worked with".¹⁵ Maggie Renzi with whom he had been living since the early '70s was Unit Manager on the production team and also took a small acting part, as she has continued to do in subsequent films. She has also continued to produce most of Sayles' films. Austin DeBesche was the cinematographer on both *Secaucus Seven* and his next film, *Lianna* while

¹³ Others included *The Challenge* (1982. Dir: Robert Rosen), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1983. Dir: Mirra Bank), *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1986. Dir: Michael Chapman), *Unnatural Causes* (TV Movie, 1986. Dir: Lamont Johnson), *Wild Thing* (1987. Dir: Max Reid), *Breaking In* (1989. Dir: Bill Forsyth), *Shannon's Deal* (TV Movie, 1989. Dir: Lewis Teague) and *Men of War* (1994. Dir: Perry Lang). Refer to Appendix for additional information.

¹⁴ A list of all of John Sayles' writing credits can be found in the Appendix section at the end of this thesis.

¹⁵ Smith (p.52). Both these actors and Maggie Renzi had worked with him in the Eastern Slope Playhouse.

Mason Daring was Music Director as he has been on all but one of Sayles' subsequent films.¹⁶

Return of the Secaucus Seven (1979) was shot in four weeks at the end of 1978 and, when it was released the following year, it was very well received by both critics and audiences. Sayles had taken the first step towards becoming an independent filmmaker and he had begun as he meant to go on. Not only did he write and direct it, he also edited it and acted in it (in the part of Howie). The movie was a poignant look at a reunion of '60s activists, now in their thirties. Emanuel Levy was particularly impressed with it at the time as a debut effort. Although unspectacular he felt that Sayles was able to effectively construct "strong scenes with resonant dialogue" where his characters were "complex and individually distinguished by speech, gesture, and manner" (Levy p.87). When looking at the body of Sayles' work retrospectively it is this skill of sharp characterisation and poignant dialogue evident in his first film that comes through strongly and is one of the vital personal marks which makes his work stand out from the crowd.

Since *Return of the Secaucus Seven* Sayles has directed twelve films and a television series (*Shannon's Deal*), written scores of film scripts, edited all but two of the films that he has written, acted in most of his own films, directed three music videos for Bruce Springsteen, continued to write short stories, a book about the making of *Matewan* and another novel (*Los Gusanos*).¹⁷

¹⁶ Joel Dorn was Music Director on *Baby It's You* (1983).

¹⁷ A comparison between Sayles and Springsteen is revealing. Springsteen is also a strong character (they don't call him "the boss" for nothing), with liberal outlook and an independent nature. The lyrics of his songs champion the little man and lament

Clearly he is 'independent' in more than one sense. Each new film that he directs reflects his broad talent and wide vision and builds on his early experiences. This in part at least explains why Sayles' films have the certain diverse quality that makes them hard to classify into any particular genre.

Independent "Independent"

It seems to me that the word "independent" is highly significant when analysing Sayles' work. I agree with Susan Thomas's definition of the characteristics of 'independent film-maker' as being twofold: aesthetic *and* financial. In other words, it is as much a matter of creative as of financial independence. Thomas, in her film studies dissertation entitled *John Sayles: American Independent* is more specific: "If a film maker at the inception of a project receives pre-production finance from a major Hollywood studio it can be deemed not 'independent'. After this point, it is an extremely difficult area to define. Primarily a film maker considered independent is both aesthetically and financially free of the Hollywood system" (Thomas p.4). Having said this however, Gavin Smith reminds us in his introduction to *Sayles on Sayles* that: "even the most 'independent' filmmaker is dependent on the structures of the film industry – financiers, banks, agents, actors, distributors, exhibitors, audiences, to name only the obvious instances. Independence is a state of mind and dependency is its flip side" (p.XV). I believe that in the case of John Sayles it is his independent state of mind as well as his status as

the erosion of community by big business. Jack Ryan, in *John Sayles. Filmmaker* calls Springsteen "rock 'n roll's working-class Steinbeck" (p.90).

“independent filmmaker”, which have enabled him to develop his unique signature style.

To deal with his financial independence first, Sayles has used various methods to finance his films and survive as a filmmaker. He has utilised personal funds, grants and investors who put in sums ranging up from \$1000. A grant from PBS as well as his own personal funds saved from various screenwriting jobs helped him to finance his first film, *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979).¹⁸ Since then he has employed what I would call the eclectic approach, combining financial input from a variety of sources to make his films.¹⁹ His brief foray into the world of “Hollywood” style production with *Baby, Its You* (1983, Paramount) was not a rewarding experience and consequently he has made a conscious decision since then to stay right away from the big studios. In his book *Thinking in Pictures* he says: “Only on *Baby, Its You*, the studio picture, did I not have complete cutting control and that turned into a major fight. That experience combined with other misadventures in fundraising has led me and the people I work with to believe that there is such a thing as the right money and the wrong money” (p.39). At times his methods of financing and distributing have been frustrating for Sayles but independent as he is (in a personal sense), he would much rather put up with this than sacrifice his “unique signature” for the sake of “big studio money”. Having said all this it is true however that his three most recent films *Lone Star*, *Men with Guns* and *Limbo* have had some studio influence from Sony

¹⁸ Sayles outlines in some detail how he managed to finance many of his early filmmaking projects in an interview he gave with Eliot Asinof, the author of *Eight Men Out* <http://www.dga.org/magazine/v22-5/john-sayles.htm>

¹⁹ PBS is the Corporation of Public Broadcasting in the US.

Pictures/Columbia Tristar. Sony Pictures however is considered to be very "indie friendly" in the sense that as a company it allows directors like Sayles to retain pretty much full creative control of their films. Sayles would not involve Sony if he considered that this right was threatened in any way.

Before continuing to define the other aspect of Sayles' independence it seems pertinent at this time to mention that although Sayles has often had to 'graft for his craft' in a financial sense this has not had a detrimental effect on the critical and commercial success of his films. Because he has generally outlaid less money in making his films than the Hollywood studios do, any profit he does make goes further. Having said this however, he believes in reinvesting much of the profit he makes from each film into his next.

Sayles has enjoyed considerable critical success for his films. *Lone Star* has been his most successful film both commercially and critically and established him as one of the top American filmmakers. In 1997 it was nominated for an Oscar, a Bafta, a Golden Globe Award, and an Independent Spirit Award, all for "Best Original Screenplay". In the same year it won a Golden Satellite Award for "Best Motion Picture Screenplay" as well as winning "Best Director" and "Best Screenplay" in the American Film and Television Awards. *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, *Matewan*, *City of Hope*, *Passion Fish*, *The Secret of Roan Inish*, *Men with Guns* as well as his most recent film *Limbo* have all either been nominated for or won prestigious awards in American and International film festivals.²⁰

²⁰ Chapter Two, on Sayles fiction outlines the various literary awards that Sayles has been awarded.

As I stated earlier, Sayles' "independence" refers not only to the way that he has rigorously defended the right to tell his stories in his own unique way by steering clear of the Hollywood movie companies' influence and control but also to his state of mind. The clues are evident in his own character and in the way that he sees the world. Sayles' "voice" is truly his own. The fact that he was a writer of fiction (with all the inherent creative control associated with this craft) before he was a filmmaker, seems to have fuelled his desire to maintain overall creative control of his films. His fiction writing enjoys the kind of freedom of expression that most filmmakers don't even get close to achieving. But as master of both arts it is not surprising that he has so rigorously defended the right to make his films in his own way from start to finish in much the same way that he writes. He is not afraid to tell his cinematic stories in his own way with little or no regard to the dictates of the market or the industry.

Also significant is the fact that, as mentioned earlier, Sayles was a "child of the sixties". He was a student in a time when "difference" was valued and independent thought was revered. It was time of experimentation, dissent and heady liberalism. Students like Sayles viewed Governments, institutions and big business as unworthy of their trust and in turn were seen by the establishment as thorns in the side of progress.

Sayles, it would appear, has never lost the spirit of the sixties. His independent streak was never quite tamed. In fact, it was clear from an early age that Sayles was not going to be your average tameable "one-dimensional

man". His interests were always too wide and unpredictable for this to happen. The fictional writing and films of his adulthood reflect his broad vision in the variety of their subject matter. Few writers or moviemakers span the range of settings, subjects, characters and themes that Sayles does. And few have either the diversity of talent, the creative vision or the drive that he displays. In this sense, Sayles is different. He is somewhat of an outsider himself; he is a square peg that refuses to fit in a round Hollywood hole, an "independent" in a world of "dependents", a free thinker, a maverick.

It is clear that for Sayles, his independence is strongly linked to the desire to tell a story. When he was asked what "independent" means to him he replied: "My personal view has always been that independent filmmakers do what they do because there's a story they want to tell. Not because they're thinking in market research terms, or because they just want to get a picture made so they'll accept any actor and script changes they don't think are good ideas just because they want the ride".²¹ But it is Rod Steiger's insight about independent films that I find most applicable to Sayles' films. I am not surprised that Gerry Molyneaux used Steiger's comments inside his *Unauthorised Biography of the Pioneering Indie Filmmaker*. Asserts Steiger: "They are called independent [films] because of their financing, but they're independent because of their spirit".²²

²¹ *Sayles on Sayles* (p 250). Sayles talks about other independent filmmakers such as Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone and Tim Burton. He says: "I would call those guys independent, more independent than somebody who gets their money from a shoe manufacturer who says, 'Yeah, but change this, this, and this and my daughter has to be in it'".

²² Rod Steiger's words are quoted inside the dust cover of Molyneaux's book along with another quote about Sayles by John Calley, Chief of Sony Pictures Entertainment,

The Quest

Having provided some general background and biographical information about Sayles and defined what I see as his independent status as filmmaker and artist it is necessary now to elaborate on the journey and quest aspect of his work and also the notion of returning to face something in the past in order to understand and deal with the present. As I will illustrate, this aspect is almost always present in John Sayles' work. At times it is central to the narrative while at others it is merely one component of it.

The notion of the quest is as ancient as humankind itself. One of the earliest references to the concept of human quest is found in the legend of the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail was reputed to have been the cup that was passed around at the Last Supper and to have caught the blood that ran from Christ's side at his crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea supposedly brought it to England where it lay hidden for many centuries. It became the endless quest of King Arthur's knights to look for it. Legend has it that it was hidden in a mysterious castle in the middle of an inhospitable wasteland and guarded by the Fisher King who himself was sick and suffering from a wound that would not heal. Since biblical times, and until the present day, humans have gone in search of it and its supposed healing powers and its gift of knowledge and have written about it, made films about it, composed music about it and created works of art about it.

"Look, he won't compromise. I consider that admirable. It's almost a lost art in this

Jessie Weston, author of one of the most comprehensive studies of the Grail myth *From Ritual to Romance*, outlines the stages of the Grail quest for traditional Grail heroes which I shall briefly outline. There are of course countless interpretations of the nature of the traditional grail quest but in Weston's view the hero sets off on a perilous quest often with no clear idea of where he is going. At some point on the journey he receives help from an old man. This helper usually appears when the hero is at his most hopeless and desperate. Later, a female directs the hero towards the Grail castle. Weston talks about a crucial moment on the quest, which traditionally takes place at either the Perilous Chapel or the Perilous Cemetery. In Weston's account the hero is either a success or a failure, worthy or unworthy and the outcome is often mirrored in nature, either in the sky, sea, river or trees.

I am not contending however that Sayles' fiction or his films are pure "quest" material, rather that there is a strong element of the quest in all of them. There is no hero in the Arthurian sense, no Parsifal or Galahad, no heroic battle or conquest. Essentially, Sayles combines elements of the traditional quest with those of the journey itself as a classical narrative device.²³ Like Homer's Odysseus, Sayles' protagonists often return to a place of the past, which is frequently the site of some sort of trauma or defining event, and in doing so heal their 'wounds' and come to terms with the present.

society".

²³ I refer to such works as Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus (Ulysses), the archetypal exile, returns to Troy after 10 years away.

This characteristic 'going back to find out' is very much part of Sayles' work, particularly his films. He began having his characters return to places of the past in his first film *Return of the Secaucus Seven* and he has used this device to some degree in all of the films from *Passion Fish* (1992) to *Limbo* (1999). Betsy Pickle, film reviewer from "*The Knoxville News*" makes this assertion in her review of *Passion Fish*: "When the going gets tough, the tough go home".²⁴ In *Passion Fish* it is May-Alice who goes back to the bayou. Fiona goes back to the island in *The Secret of Roan Inish*. Sam Deeds goes back to the Texas borderlands in *Lone Star*. Joe goes back to the sea in *Limbo*. Furthermore, based on promotional material I have read, the narrative of Sayles' most recent, yet-to-be-released film, *Gold Coast*, revolves around two women who return years later to the town of their childhood.

It may seem curious that Sayles, who from most accounts appears well adjusted and confident, should be preoccupied with the idea of quests for healing and identity. In Diane Carson's book *John Sayles: Interviews*, each new interview invariably begins with an observation or description of Sayles by the interviewer. Invariably his interviewers comment on his tousled look, his old sneakers, his worn t-shirt, his "take me as you find me" air, which they take to indicate that he cares little for appearances. Or does he? Is this image, which seems so typical of the sixties, just that, a proud badge of his own identity. Has he consciously decided to stay in a kind of sixties time warp when issues of identity and healing and "saving your own life" typified the

²⁴ Betsy Pickle's article can be accessed at,
<http://cfapps.knoxnews.com/Movies/moviesearch.cfm?IDMovie=1160>

times? He is, after all, one of the only filmmakers of his generation who has retained and is defined by the independence of thought and behaviour that was so characteristic of that time.²⁵

Although often lost and searching, Sayles' protagonists are strongly independent souls like their "author". They are not afraid of what their searches may uncover and are undeterred by obstacles along the way. In a fashion that began with the beat generation of the '50s and peaked in the '60s, they themselves are on quests to "save their own lives" and the lives of others, whatever it takes.

The notion of "going back to heal" is not new. Psychoanalysis and other forms of psychodynamic therapy, deriving from the work of Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries emphasise the importance of discovering and resolving internal and often unconscious conflicts, most often through an exploration of one's childhood or past experiences.²⁶ It is interesting at this point to note that John Sayles majored in psychology at college and although he has never worked in the field directly, his work (particularly the way he is able to reveal character through dialogue) clearly reflects a deep interest and understanding of varied human psychological states.

²⁵ Carson's (ed) book contains interviews that Sayles gave between 1981 and 1998 and so gives a good impression of the problems and issues that he has had to deal with over the years as well as show how he has maintained his artistic independence throughout. Of course there are a number of other directors who have also managed to protect their artistic independence also.

²⁶ Freud's theories and techniques, first developed in the 1890s, have been a central if controversial part of the study of the human condition and mind since that time.

There is a particular branch of psychoanalysis, which I find particularly pertinent to this study, one that has been used extensively by Dr. Frank Gerbode and a number of his colleagues, all practising members of IRM (Institute for Research in Metapsychology) in the United States.²⁷ They have become recognised for a method of psychotherapy that is known as Traumatic Incident Reduction (TIR) and was first used with Vietnam combat veterans who had been diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).²⁸ Gerbode and his colleagues developed the process of TIR as an alternative to other forms of psychotherapy that they felt were proving ineffective and as a systematic and effective approach to PTSD. Bearing in mind that this technique was developed specifically for use on Vietnam vets, Gerbode describes it in the following way:

“The purpose of TIR is to trace back sequences of traumatic incidents to their roots and thereby to reduce or eliminate the charge (repressed, unfulfilled intention) contained therein by completing the unfinished business that was interrupted by acts of repression. Each sequence of incidents depends for its force on the root incident from which it stems... In most cases, however, it is not possible to proceed directly to the root incident of a sequence. So much charge is usually contained in later incidents that memory of the root incident is partially or totally blocked. It is therefore necessary to proceed backward from present time, addressing later incidents first and discharging them somewhat before looking for earlier ones”.²⁹

TIR utilises what Dr. Gerbode calls “retrospection” which literally means, “to look back”, and derived from the work in the late 1800s of Josef Breuer, a

²⁷ IRM was established in the US in 1986 by a group of practising psychologists.

²⁸ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, was formally recognised by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. There is still much debate surrounding its cause and diagnosis.

²⁹ Gerbode is quoted in the article entitled *Back into the Heart of Darkness*, which was written by Tom Joyce and published in the Spring 1994 issue of the Institute for Research in Metapsychology Newsletter. Gerbode originally wrote the words quoted in his article entitled *Handling the Effects of Past Traumatic Incidents* which was

Viennese doctor and colleague of Freud. Breuer's technique became known as the "talking cure" and involved the remembering and re-experiencing of disturbing incidents from the past, thought to have been the cause of various forms of neuroses.³⁰

Central to TIR is the notion that the "client", man or woman, is the "viewer" while the therapist is merely a facilitator helping the viewer locate, acknowledge and confront incidents from their past to enable them to face the demons that refuse to go away in the present, and to begin to heal. It is my contention that much of the work of John Sayles revolves around this psychoanalytic notion of going back to face the "demons" and to heal. It must be said here that some Sayles' "journeys", particularly those films he made before *Passion Fish*, do *not* involve returning, in a physical sense anyway, to places of the past. However, it is my belief that even in these films the "return" to heal takes place on a figurative rather than a physical level.

The "return" promises healing in the work of John Sayles. For his protagonists it is a method of unlocking repressed events, of re-experiencing, remembering and learning to accept, heal and grow. In '60's lingo it enables them to try to 'find themselves' and re-establish and renew their identities. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, so many of Sayles' characters have hidden or refused to face the issues (or 'hurts') that are consuming them but each one reaches a point, (often as a result of a sudden change of

fortune), when he or she knows that the time has come to set the process of healing in motion, whatever the cost. Years ago when I was reading accounts of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, one survivor commented that the only way that Jews would ever come to terms with what had happened in the Holocaust was to *remember* it all and *tell* it. He quoted a saying that he attributed to The Baal Shem Tov, a mystic Hasid, who lived in the 1700s and is regarded as the founder of modern Hasidism, which is a movement in modern Judaism. I recorded the words then that I quote now: "Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption".³¹ It was as if he were saying that this is our history now and it defines us whether we like it or not, so we must embrace it rather than deny it or it will haunt and damage us forever.

The notions of identity and exile are inexorably tied up in the "Saylesian" journeys that are at core of Sayles' work. It is pertinent at this point then to elaborate on these aspects. The question of personal identity has become more and more a subject of debate, as we begin the 21st century. Essentially the claim is that the old identities that remained so stable for so long have been destabilised by the pace and the nature of change and of globalisation in the modern world and that this has resulted in a 'crisis of identity'. This 'crisis of identity' basically describes the fragmentation and dislocation of the concept of 'self'. The argument is that modern identities are being "de-centred", whittled away and fragmented by modern society. This phenomenon

³⁰ According to Tom Joyce in his article entitled *Back into the Heart of Darkness (Combat/PTSD)* (Spring 1994 issue of IRM newsletter), Freud found the procedure interesting and from it developed psychoanalysis.

³¹ The Baal Shem Tov was born 'Israel ben Eliezer' in the Ukraine around 1700 A.D.

is sometimes called the de-centring of the subject. The de-centred subject asks, "Who am I? Why do I not feel that I belong here?"

This de-centring of the subject also occurs in a collective and cultural sense threatening communities and cultures, rather than individuals. In the introduction to the book *Modernity and its Futures*, Hall describes cultural identities as, "those aspects of our identities which arise from our 'belonging' to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and, above all, national cultures".³² The erosion of collective and cultural identities again by 'progress', change and globalisation, creates 'crises of identity' on collective levels where whole ethnic, religious and linguistic groups are 'de-centred', destabilised and at worst, displaced. Hamid Naficy, in his introduction to *Home, Exile, Homeland, Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (1999) talks about the fact that globalisation on the one hand opens up one country to another technologically and economically but on the other hand it appears to cause governments to guard their physical borders more and more vigilantly causing displacement and exilement. The Mexican/American border area is one such site. Sites like this spawn questions such as, "Why am I a good citizen if I live here but a criminal if I live two kilometres away?" Sayles explores aspects of this 'de-centring', both on an individual and a collective basis in both of the novels discussed in Chapter Two as well as in a number of his films, most notably *Lone Star*.

The breakdown of cultural identities in particular is inexorably tied to the notion of exilement. It is one of the claims of this thesis that Sayles'

protagonists are frequently outsiders or exiles in one sense or another. John Durham Peters, whose essay entitled “Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora” included in Hamid Naficy’s (ed) book *Home, Exile, Homeland, Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* suggests that the term ‘exile’ suggests a painful or punitive banishment from one’s homeland and that although it may be voluntary or involuntary, internal or external, it, “generally implies a fact of trauma, an imminent danger, usually political, that makes the home no longer habitable”. Peters quotes Victor Hugo when he called ‘exile’ the “long dream of home” and Salman Rushdie when he called it “a dream of glorious return” (Naficy p.19). As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, Sayles’ stories are brimming with exiles and outsiders on quests to find healing, identity and home.

This chapter has provided some general biographical and background information about John Sayles as well as elaborating on the central idea of this thesis. As I stated earlier Sayles was a writer long before he was a filmmaker. It is fitting then to begin by looking at his writing. In the following chapter I will concentrate on Sayles’ fiction looking in depth at some of his short stories as well as two of his novels, *Union Dues* and *Los Gusanos*. In addition to demonstrating the centrality of the notion of individuals on quests to find healing and identity in these works, I will attempt to reveal some of the techniques and devices that Sayles uses to draw us along so willingly on his journeys of discovery.³³

³² The quotation is from the introduction entitled “Identity in Question” (p 67).

³³ As mentioned earlier John Sayles was a writer of fiction long before he made his first film and yet he is far better known for his films than for his writing. The reasons for this may in part lie in the power and the reach of the visual image but I suspect that it

Chapter Two

Quests for Healing and Identity in the Fiction of John Sayles

It can be argued that all human existence is a quest and that literature, as an expression of human existence, necessarily involves quests of some sort. There is a lot of truth in this assertion. So what is it that sets the quests that inform the narratives of John Sayles' fiction (and his films) apart from any other quest? I believe that it is the nature of the characters whose quests we follow that makes Sayles' quests special. The characters that people the fiction of John Sayles are rarely hurt in any physical sense (with the notable exception of May-Alice in *Passion Fish*) but are nonetheless emotionally damaged, displaced or exiled, often as a result of events in their past. Sayles' fiction confirms however, that they are not about to be victims forever. They possess a strong inner desire to 'save their own lives' which leads them to embark on journeys, both real and figurative, to find the key to their own healing and identity.

It must be stressed that although the narratives in the fiction (and the films) of John Sayles are characterised by quests, these quests do not always result in neat resolutions and happy endings. Many of Sayles' characters do not solve the problems or satisfy the needs that precipitate their searches but all

is due also to the fact that he seems to have reached a kind of peak in his short story writing in the late seventies before he made his first film and whereas since then his cinematic output has been steady, his fictional output has been somewhat spasmodic. This is not intended in any way to downgrade the quality of his fictional

seem better for taking the first step. Like the questers of old, Sayles' protagonists are undaunted by the possibility of failure. I think particularly of the main characters in Sayles' novels such as Hobie, Hunter and Dar in *Union Dues* and Marta in *Los Gusanos*. From the *Anarchists' Convention* stories, characters such as Amado in "Old Spanish Days", Brian in the six stories beginning with "Bad Dogs" and Tan in the story of the same name are all driven in their quests by intrinsic rather than extrinsic reward. To them it is the quest or journey *itself* that matters. The point is that they *do* embark; they *do* step off.

In this chapter I will examine Sayles' fiction in the order that it was published. I will begin with his second novel *Union Dues*, which was published in 1977, and then move on to the short stories that were published in *The Anarchist's Convention* collection (1979). Finally I will deal with Sayles' most recent novel *Los Gusanos*, which was published in 1991.³⁴

***Union Dues* (1977): Escaping the pit**

Union Dues is a novel about loss and the search for meaning and identity that often results from it. As Bruce Allen noted in his review soon after it was

writing but simply to attempt to explain why he is far less well known for this aspect of his work.

³⁴ The notion of the quest or search is present in all of the stories in *The Anarchists' Convention* collection but to different degrees. I will necessarily then devote more time to some stories than to others. When I discuss the novels I will also make brief reference to *The Pride of the Bimbos*, which was Sayles' first novel, published in 1975.

published: "John Sayles' second novel is a story of flight and search".³⁵ There are three flights and searches in the novel. The first, which is not dealt with in detail but which is nevertheless central to the narrative, is Darwin's. He has returned from Vietnam emotionally scarred from his experiences. After returning home briefly, he disappears, unable to reconcile, even to himself, the things he has seen and done in Vietnam. He is a kind of "burnt out case", to borrow from Graham Greene, and has retreated back into the wilds north of Boston, to hibernate and heal.

Although the novel does not dwell on Dar's search, it is nevertheless crucial to the narrative. It is as if his self-image has been shattered by events in Vietnam. He no longer knows who he is. All he knows is that he loathes what he sees in himself. In psychological terms he is probably suffering from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and knows that he must remove himself from people and places that remind him of what he was and what he has lost. He survives now by repressing the memories that are poisoning him, with alcohol and drugs. Of course, Sayles wrote *Union Dues* at a time (1975) when thousands of Vietnam vets were arriving home with their private demons to a hostile homecoming. The dislocation (at best) and the loathing (at worst) that they felt for themselves seemed to be affirmed by the kind of bitter reception that they received when they returned. As I mentioned in Chapter One, PTSD was not formally recognised by the American Psychiatric Association until 1980. Veterans like Dar simply had to try to 'tough it out' and

³⁵ Bruce Allen's review of *Union Dues* was published in *The New Republic*, September 17, 1977.

call on all their inner resources to survive (like the bears that Dar likens himself to) and hope the demons would go.

In the novel, when Dar's father Hunter finally tracks him down and is able to talk briefly with him, he is shocked and saddened by the state of his older son. Dar is hanging out with a gun-crazy dope freak named Jackie who only likes to have him around because Dar feeds him war stories. When Hunter asks his son why he puts up with it, Dar reminds him of when, years ago they found some bears sleeping. He says: "That's what I'm like inside now. There isn't the noise that was in me when I first come back. I lay around here, smoke, sleep. It doesn't even touch me...Those bears, they had the right idea" (*Union Dues* p.325). Sayles is saying here that although Dar's process of healing has begun, he is still repressing the bulk of his pain. In a sense he is sleeping, like the bears. But hidden in the parallel that Sayles draws between hibernating bears and Dar's state of mind is hope. For bears, the winter ends, and they wake up. Sayles is suggesting that it will be the same for Dar. His healing process will be slow, but he *will* wake up. He will eventually heal.³⁶

Although Darwin's search for healing is crucial, the bulk of the novel is structured around the flight and search of his younger brother, Hobie and his father, Hunter. The novel begins with seventeen-year old Hobie running

³⁶ An aside. Years ago in L.A, I had cause to visit a public convenience on Sunset Boulevard. The following poem was written amongst the other graffiti on the walls. It seemed so tragic at the time. I wrote it down so that I wouldn't forget it. It read: "I sleep in the heap of myself/ And hide from dirty day/ And live in the night/ And decay". I can't help thinking that the self-loathing that the writer felt is not unlike what Dar feels about himself in *Union Dues*..

away, just as his brother did, leaving his father Hunter to pick up the pieces.

The novel is essentially about Hobie's and Hunter's searches: Hobie's to find his brother Dar and his own direction in life and Hunter's to find both his boys and his peace of mind.

The names of the three family members in *Union Dues* are symbolic thematically of the quest. Firstly, 'Hunter': the connection is obvious. Hunter is on the brink of losing everything that is important to him. He is defined in the novel by his name. He is a hunter, searching for his boys and his own peace of mind.³⁷ So too is Hobie. The name Hobie cannot help conjure up images of hobo and drifter, traveller and transient. This is what Hobie is in the novel, a wanderer trying to find a sense of direction. Then there is Darwin. The significance of his name is a little more tenuous. Darwin's inner pain and sense of self-loathing leads him to feel utterly lost in a world that no longer seems to be governed by the old principles. I don't think it is too far fetched to suspect that Sayles may have been drawing a parallel between Darwin's search for meaning and his namesake's?³⁸

Sayles creates the character of Hobie so that he is eminently believable and therefore his actions appear inevitable and real. Chapter 1, which is a mere three pages long, reveals the essence of Hobie's character so that the reader can see why he has to run away. Sayles is known for his skill in creating

³⁷ Wim Wender's film *Paris, Texas* (1984) also had a "Hunter": the small boy who was also looking for his family and dreaming of their reconciliation.

³⁸ I refer of course to Charles Darwin's research and theories leading to his writing *On the Origin of the Species by Natural Selection* and his theory that man descended from the apes. Dar's intense feeling of 'man's inhumanity to man' (sic) deriving from his Vietnam experience links him to his namesake.

believable characters. To borrow E.M Forster's terms, he creates 'round' rather than 'flat' characters. Forster describes a 'flat' character as one that is constructed around "a single idea or quality", a kind of 'type', or 'caricature', the kind of character that is predictable and always easily recognisable. The test, he says, of a round character is "whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way".³⁹ Dar, Hobie and Hunter are all convincing, multi-dimensional, characters, capable of surprising and living outside the pages of the book.

The novel begins with Hobie's escape. It is late afternoon. Hunter is still down the mine. Hobie has stuffed a few items in a laundry sack and is making his way as inconspicuously as he can up out of the dark valley of the town to the bus station. Initially the reader doesn't know who is leaving because the narrator refers to him only as "the boy". In doing this Sayles immediately begins to create suspense. Who is this? Where is he going? Why is he going? Who is he leaving? As he "lits out" however Sayles makes it clear that the boy is lost in this town, and that it will devour him if he stays. If he wants to save himself, he must leave.

Sayles describes the dark, clinging, claustrophobic nature of the mining town and its inhabitants so that the reader can almost feel the weight that the boy is carrying both physically and psychologically. He describes the "identical frame houses", "at the bottom of the hollow", facing each other, with "nothing much stirring", suggesting an inward looking place where everyone is being

³⁹ E.M. Forster's ideas about the characteristics of flat and round characters are found in his book *Aspects of the Novel*, (pages 73-76) which was first published in 1927. (The

watched. The road twists up out of the dark past the cemetery, as if the only way you leave this place permanently is to die (p.3).

As the boy draws level with the cemetery he sees an old man trying to rake back the "red dog" from off the graves. The ridge above the cemetery is being strip-mined and the red earth spills down through the trees, which Sayles describes as "all gray up by the dozer-scraped highwall, tilted at crazy angles with their roots poking into space" (p.3). The image of the tormented and dying trees is visually surreal and mirrors Hobie's own state of mind. His mother is buried here but he knows that not even the memory of her can keep him here. He stands at her grave and notices that the "red dog" hasn't reached her, yet. He carries on.

Up ahead he hears the choir singing before he even sees the church. When Sayles describes Hobie's girlfriend, Delia, and her preacher father we see why Hobie breaks into a trot as he passes. He can hear Delia's "strong, righteous soprano" voice and can picture her expression as she sings. He can hear her father, blasting out the bass: "He could feel the Preacher's strength in that bass, feel the crushing handshake he got whenever Delia had him for dinner" (p.4). Sayles' play-on-words is telling. Hobie's resolve is strengthened. Neither Delia nor her father can 'have him for dinner'. He won't stay and let them.

As Hobie climbs higher the wind picks up as if to blow away the still, claustrophobic air that he has lived in. He is wearing his lost brother's

Vietnam fatigue jacket and it flaps in the wind, a physical reminder of the task ahead. Sayles signals that Hobie is an idealist but that cynicism has begun to creep into his outlook: the boy stops to urinate in the charred remains of the little board and batten house where his Appalachian Volunteer friends had stayed. He remembers helping them build their outhouse before the narrow-minded townspeople ran them off.

His last obstacle is passing driftmouth Number 7, the mine-shaft where he knows his father is working and where he knows he too will end up if he stays. "The boy looked up to the top of the mountain, following the scattered glint of railroad tracks to where he knew the tippie stood, but the dust was too thick to see through. It hung gray and still, tinged dull red where the setting sun tried to break through. Night came early on this side of the mountain". Hobie takes a few steps up the track "as if testing how steep a climb it would be", but hurries back down. It won't get *him*. He reaches the overpass of The West Virginia Turnpike. Up ahead he can see the Blue Star bar where the eastbound Trailways will stop: "Beyond that he didn't know the road, he'd never been"(p.5).

And so his journey and quest begins. Clearly Hobie needs to deal with the hurt of both the death of his mother and the loss of his brother. Furthermore, he knows he must escape the prison of school, church and mine that will trap him if he stays. Typically of Sayles' characters, neither fear of the unknown nor fear of failing can stop him. To make sense of his life, he must go.

Parallel to Hobie's quest is his father's. Whereas the reader has a sense that Hobie is leaving *before* he is 'consumed' by the town, the narrative suggests that Hunter is closer to the edge, closer to being physically and mentally broken. Hunter is like Dar in the sense that he has managed to survive by repressing his trauma. Sayles seems to be suggesting however that both Hunter and Dar *are* surviving, but they will never heal, until they learn to deal with their pain. The narrative appears to imply that for Hunter and Dar, remembrance, or a kind of self initiated retrospection, is the key to their healing. Dar is doing this in his own way already. Although hibernating in one sense he is also "talking himself back' into the trauma when he tells Jackie his war stories.

Once again the first few scenes of the novel, from when Hunter finds Hobie gone, until he resolves to go after him, are telling. Within these few scenes Sayles reveals both the extent of Hunter's inner pain and the signs of realisation that if he doesn't follow and find Hobie, in a sense he will lose his own life as well.

Hunter arrives home in the dark to an empty house, finds the note and is sickened to know that Hobie has run away just as his older son did. "First Dar and now Hobie" (p. 6). This is like a deathblow to him. He has nursed his wife Molly until her death, and now lost both sons.

Hunter internalises the pain inside him all the next day. He returns again to the empty house. Sayles captures the intensity of the silence in the house as if to emphasise the terrible void within Hunter: "He [Hunter] heard the pump

next door come on, run for a while, click off. He heard the chipmunk that lived under the front porch rustling. He heard the defroster hum on in the kitchen, heard the house settling around him" (p.47-48). Sayles captures Hunter's increasing panic by connecting the "sucking empty feeling" that is enveloping him with the near death experience that Hunter had in a mine cave-in a year ago. In a flashback scene the reader discovers how Hunter had lain in the darkness, injured and in terrible pain, not knowing whether he would ever be found. He had tried to think the pain away just as he was doing now over Hobie. He "tried to separate his mind from his body" but that "was when the emptiness began". It had begun in his stomach, just like now, spreading upwards into his throat until the pain was gone. *Then*, he remembers, he "had no sense of time or direction left, only a hazy sense that there might be someone coming for him, trying to find his body. He lost the edge of the stone around him then, lost all his own edges to the blackness and was slipping away, the breathing device forgotten in his hand" (p.48). Sayles' description of Hunter clearly puts him on the edge of an abyss with sanity above him and madness below.

But something had saved him *that time* and it wasn't a rescue team. It was the sudden memory that his son needed him. Hobie had been spiked badly in a game and Coach had recommended soaking in Epsom salts. Hobie had asked Hunter that morning if he would get some at the 7-11 on the way back from work. This was the motivation to live that Hunter needed. He "found the self-rescuer in his hand, breathed. He flexed his crushed arm, flexed the pain back into it. The pain was better than the emptiness. The pain was better than nothing" (p.48).

The parallel that Sayles has drawn between Hunter's near death experience in the mine cave-in and his present predicament is important. In the mine accident Hunter had the *means* to save himself with the self-rescuing device. But it was only the sudden realisation that his son needed him that brought him back from the edge of oblivion and made him use it. Now, back in the present, he can feel the same emptiness enveloping him again: "Hunter sat and tried to keep himself together in the empty house" (p.48). He tries to think about the miners' meeting. *They* need him. But it isn't enough. He realises now that *again* he has the means to save himself. The only thing he can do to exorcise the void that threatens to devour him is to go after Hobie. And so Hunter's own quest to find inner peace and healing is set in motion.

Both Hobie's and Hunter's quests are suggestive of the traditional Grail quests described in Chapter One. Using Jessie Weston's account, a number of signs are evident. Like the questers of old, both Hobie and Hunter set off with no clear idea of where they are going and both must overcome many obstacles on their way. Both encounter an old man at a critical moment (the same old man for both), who helps them by affirming their decision to leave and giving them the resolve to do it. Hobie's encounter with the old man takes place at a cemetery when he is at his most vulnerable. Hunter's encounter with the old man (Pappy Dan) is the following day when he tells Hunter that Hobie was right to go, that he saw him leave, and that rather than stop him, he had waved him off. He tells Hunter the story about how, years ago, he left the mine and volunteered to go to war. It is his words that strengthen Hunters' resolve to go. Says Pappy Dan, "We *knew* what was waiting for us down that

mine, knew it too damn well, three-en-a-half feet of gassy air en not a winda in the joint...Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees" (p.70).

Finally, according to Weston's account of the traditional grail quest, the outcome of the quest is often symbolised in nature. This is true of Hobie's, Hunter's and Dar's quests. Whereas the novel began with them each harbouring their own personal demon, by the end it is clear that all three have begun to find the illusive grail they seek. In the case of Dar it is clear that his healing is really just begun. Sayles points this out by emphasising the darkness of the night that Hunter talks to him. (p.324) But the novel ends just as the new-year begins, a detail that in itself is symbolic of hope. Fresh snow falls on Hobie and his friend Sarah as they distribute political pamphlets. They express their affection for each other with a snow fight. Although Hunter has not yet found Hobie, Sayles is making their paths slowly converge (a device he uses again in *City of Hope* and *Los Gusanos*). Their eventual meeting is now inevitable. They will find each other. Hunter wakes to a beautiful morning. His present feeling of hope is contrasted subtly with his earlier despair. Back when Hobie had just left and Hunter was at his lowest for a brief moment all he had really wanted was to forget. He had had one beer then another as if willing his mind and his memory to forget what had happened. But now he has taken control and he knows that his quest to find Hobie and healing is actually within reach. "He was feeling a little more awake...It wouldn't be so bad. A couple of months and he'd be clear. He'd be out of the hole. He'd be golden" (p.385).

***The Anarchists' Convention* stories: Lost and Found**

The stories in the collection entitled *At the Anarchist's Convention* were mostly written in the early 1970s before Sayles wrote *Union Dues*. They were written at a time when he was hitchhiking around the United States and working a variety of jobs to support himself. A number of the stories had already appeared in literary magazines before they were published in this collection. Chronologically then, most of them belong before *Union Dues* and in many ways they are practice pieces for it.

The short story is a very different medium to the novel. In a way it is a little cameo performance, brief but telling. Whereas the novel has time on its side, time is against the short story. What it wants to convey it must do quickly. Whereas the novel has the scope to present a panoramic view from many different angles, the short story can really only take a carefully chosen snapshot of a small part of the panorama from one or two viewpoints at the most.

Sayles is clearly as much at home with the medium of the short story as he is with both the novel and film. He is not a writer of long descriptive passages but rather one who is skilful at revealing character quickly and convincingly through dialogue and in the way his characters interact with each other. His view is that individuals manifest their essence in what they say and in how they interact with each other. Of course Roger Corman benefited greatly in the '70s from Sayles' strength in this area. Later, when Sayles began to make films of his own 'on a shoestring' this skill of being able to reveal character through dialogue became one of his trademarks. As he said in *Thinking in*

Pictures that he learnt early on one of the basic rules of film production, which is that “talk is cheap and action is expensive” (p.6). But it was clearly not only a matter of pragmatism and monetary constraints but also one of knowing that he ‘does talk well’. The stories in the collection affirm this. He is able to reveal the essence of his characters by capturing the individuality of their speech as they interact with others. His dialogue is realistic and is able to show the full range of human emotions. When Edward Butscher reviewed Sayles’ *The Anarchists’ Convention* stories in “Saturday Review” magazine in 1979 he began: “*Union Dues* firmly established John Sayles’ gift for translating acute psychological insights into viable fiction, and [*The Anarchists’ Convention*] indicates no lessening of that gift”.⁴⁰

Butscher goes on to say that in his opinion: “*The Anarchists’ Convention* reaffirms Schopenhauer’s vision of man as a creature in quest of a metaphysical reality, a reality that Sayles and his kind keep alive for us in this world of brute fact”.⁴¹ His statement suggests that Sayles’ ‘vision of man’ is similar to Schopenhauer’s, a suggestion that I question. It is true that the outsiders, loners and exiles that inhabit *The Anarchists’ Convention* stories exhibit a kind of longing and restlessness. It is true that they are questers whose nostalgia for the past and for what is lost is strongly evident. But unlike Schopenhauer’s ‘vision of man’, which appears strongly defeatist and

⁴⁰ Butscher’s review appeared in “Books in Brief” section of “Saturday Review”, Vol. 6, No. 9, April 28, 1979, p. 46.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.46.

pessimistic, Sayles' vision, as exemplified in the majority of these stories, is much more hopeful.⁴²

The questing characters in Sayles' stories are resilient and resourceful and we have the sense that their quests will eventually lead most of them to find what they are looking for. Even Ryder P. Moses of *1-80 Nebraska*, m. 490-m. 205 whose quest literally kills him, is a positive character in that he affirms action in his quest for immortality. Sayles' philosophy, if it can be gleaned from the kind of characters that inhabit his fiction, is one that celebrates action rather than resignation. Schopenhauer's philosophy on the other hand talked of life as a tragedy. In his view individuals are caught on a treadmill caused by the will constantly urging them towards endlessly trying to satisfy their goals. This constant questing, he said, leads not to satisfaction but to endless suffering and that the only way to be free of it is to accept things as they are.

Having said this however, there is an *element* of 'Schopenhauerian pessimism' in many of Sayles' characters, particularly his minor characters, whose hopelessness is contrasted with the hope of the protagonist. The first story in the collection is a good example. The central character of *The Wayfarers* is Nina. Although she is emotionally lost, the narrative implies that she will eventually 'find herself'. In contrast, for the minor characters in the story this will not be the case. Sayles portrays them as stuck, imprisoned by

⁴² Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), the German philosopher, was known for his philosophy of pessimism. His principal work was entitled *The World as Will and Idea* (1819; Trans. 1883) in which he propounded his unique brand of pessimistic philosophy.

their own lack of vision. They indeed conform to Schopenhauer's vision of the endless treadmill of suffering from which there is no escape.

Despite some very humorous dialogue, the *The Wayfarers* has a poignancy and sadness about it. It centres on a group of 'temps' who work for an agency called the "Career Girls". This particular day they are working at a "Home for Wayfarers", a home set up years before to house pregnant single women. Most of the temps are shown as going nowhere in their lives, but Nina, a college graduate, is different. Sayles portrays her as a displaced person, an exile of sorts, adrift in a foreign land. Her job with the "Career Girls" is merely a temporary safe haven on her quest to find a place to belong.

Sayles contrasts Nina with the other 'Career Girls'. There is Chickie da Costa, brash, worldly wise and humorously cynical in her outlook. Her spin on why the Career Girls always have to sit together on their temp jobs is: "Maybe it's so we don't infect the regular help...Or maybe it's so we don't find out what they're gettin paid for the same jawb"(p.3). Barbara is another Career Girl who appears destined to remain on the treadmill of low paid jobs and low self-esteem. She is pregnant and has told no-one so as to keep her job. She is sick and angry. Although Nina has only been on the job a day it is she that Barbara confides in, not the others. Then there is Gwen, who has found *her* sense of belonging by joining a religious group called "The Family of God" where they share a house and pool their wages for the good of the group. She is naïve and prudish and imprisoned like the rest, clearing her throat every time anybody swears. Miss McCurdy as supervisor at the home is portrayed by Sayles as a sensitive and cultured woman but one who is also

hiding some sort of secret. Her uneasiness when she sees the old sepia photo of the pregnant “wayward girls” of twenty or thirty years ago and the concern she shows for Barbara, point to the suggestion that she herself may have been one of the girls in the photo. And here she is, still here, alone and stuck.

As he did in *Union Dues* Sayles employs flashbacks to recent incidents as well as current action to reveal Nina’s character. These scenes emphasise the differences between Nina and the other characters in the story. We jump back a day to her former apartment where she and her flatmate are dividing the furnishings between them in preparation for Nina’s leaving. To emphasise the importance of the journey rather than the destination the narrative shows that she doesn’t care what she takes with her and is prepared to leave it all behind. Obviously, finding out *where* she is going is more important to her than the trappings of a home.

The story jumps back again in time to a visit with her mother. Sayles paints a little cameo of Nina’s mother entirely through dialogue and uses it to highlight the similarities between the mother and the other career girls. She is also stuck, spending her time obsessively trying to organise reunions with her girlhood friends. The episodes serve to emphasise the differences between Nina and all the other characters. Whereas they will be content to accept their situation in life, even if it leads to cynicism and regret, she will not. Nina takes the old photograph of the wayward girls with her when she leaves the Home for Wayfarers at the end of the day. It is as if the photo will help keep her on track and remind her not to give up her quest to find a place where she

belongs. By the end of Sayles' story it is clear that she, in contrast with all the others, will have a 'real life'.

Few writers in a story of just twenty pages would be able to characterise Nina and the other Career Girls as well as Sayles does. Descriptive passages when they exist are short and unembellished. Character is almost entirely revealed through dialogue. This seems to be what Sayles was getting at when he and Gavin Smith were discussing the film *Lianna* for *Sayles on Sayles*. Smith commented that *Lianna* was a character study grounded in social dynamics. Sayles replied: "I don't believe that any social animal, including human beings, evolve/live/grow/change/exist outside of their connections with other things. They do things in reaction to each other".⁴³ To my mind this statement by Sayles exposes a sentiment that obviously influences not only this "Home for Wayfarers" story but also the bulk of his fiction and his films.⁴⁴

The Mexican/American borderlands tale, "Old Spanish Days" makes a crucial point about the importance of knowing and accepting the truth of past events and how this can help humankind to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the present.⁴⁵ It is a story about identity, both personal and collective and how people build their sense of identity on the basis of their history. It stresses the

⁴³ P74 *Sayles on Sayles*. Sayles says more about how he sees the world when he explains that as a psych major he read Freud "and all that stuff" and thought that it was "just great literature" but without any scientific basis. He says he was much more a believer in behaviourism, "in B. F. Skinner and that crowd". He goes on to say that whereas Scott Fitzgerald said, "Character is action" he feels that character is *interaction*. (p74)

⁴⁴ I will address this statement in relation to the films of Sayles in subsequent chapters.

importance of knowing the 'story' that is in 'history'.⁴⁶ As explained earlier, Hunter's and Dar's quests in *Union Dues* are based around them coming to terms with events in their past. Sayles is saying that we cannot begin to heal ourselves of our present problems, either on an individual or collective level, unless we begin to deal with our pasts.⁴⁷

The story centres on a young wetback (illegal alien) named Amado and his search for identity in a foreign and hostile environment. Sayles contrasts the myths about the grand 'old Spanish days' with the truth of hunting down the "wetbacks", harassing them, arresting them and then sending them home. He intersperses scenes of the reality of the present with the propaganda messages of the fiesta. The first example of this is when Amado hurries up State Street to work, aware that if a patrol car or the Immigration come along there will be nothing to see but him. As he crosses the street he looks up at the banner that reads: "OLD SPANISH DAYS 1978. VIVA LA FIESTA!" This is no fiesta for him. "A patrol car eases up the street. Amado makes a tunnel with his eyes, walks stiffly into it" (p.86).

Once again Sayles stresses the cyclical nature of events by beginning and ending the story with Amado attempting to avoid police detection. He uses the device to emphasise the repeating pattern that characterises the history of the borderlands. Nothing has changed. Like so many young Mexicans past

⁴⁵ Sayles developed the ideas and themes of "Old Spanish Days" further when he wrote and directed the film *Lone Star* (1996). I discuss this in Chapter Four.

⁴⁶ Sayles often makes the point that the word *history* has the word *story* in it.

⁴⁷ Sayles' message that we need to know and address events and mistakes from the past before we can heal the present seems tragically relevant in the context of the events of September 11th 2001.

and present, Amado has entered the US illegally because he needs to support his family south of the border. He works shift work at a restaurant, is paid in cash and lives in fear of being caught. The story ends with Amado and his friends being chased by the police. Amado is hiding in a drain near the beach flattening himself against the sides of it trying to be invisible. It is clear that he is no closer to being able to call this country home.

The next six stories in the collection are linked by the journey and quest of a youth named Brian McNeil. Thomas Lask describes the stories as a kind of "rite of passage, from the boy's adolescent fumbling with sex through his Western odyssey and arrival on the Coast, where the ominous portents of his future cast their shadows over him".⁴⁸ Lask implies that Brian's odyssey is the kind Schopenhauer describes, that leads to endless suffering. There are clear signs however, throughout the stories, but particularly in the last story, that refute this reading. There are elements of both the search for healing and the search for identity in Brian's journey, which clearly ends with a feeling of hope. He doesn't want to wake up one day bitter and unfulfilled like his father or spiritually broken like his mother. As he hitches across the US from east to west the people and the situations that he encounters help him to cast off the weight that he has been carrying and to begin to know who he is and what he wants.

The first three stories give an insight into Brian's immediate world so that by the time he sets off on his journey the reader appreciates why he must go.

⁴⁸ Lask's review of *The Anarchist's Convention* stories was first printed in *The New York Times*, Section 111 in 1979.

Obviously, parallels can be drawn between these three stories leading up to Brian's escape and the first chapter of *Union Dues* where Hobie runs away. Both boys are in their final year at school. Both are from less than ideal family situations. Whereas Hobie's mother had died of cancer, his brother run away and his father suffering and distant, in Brian's case it is his drunken father who has died leaving Brian is alone with his seriously depressed mother.

"Bad Dogs" is the first of the six stories. Brian works part time at a kennel for guard dogs helping his widowed mother make ends meet financially. He is like most kids his age, except for the fact that his father, a night patrolman on the railroads, has died, freezing to death after he passed out drunk in the middle of winter in a boxcar headed for Michigan. The story jumps back and forth between Brian's sexual exploits with girls that he doesn't even like and his work with the "bad dogs" at the kennels. These are his 'outs', his escapes from the reality that is his life.

The second story "Hoop" revolves around his other pastime, basketball. The story flashes back time and again to the pub where his disillusioned father had drunk his life away and Brian remembers the advice of Jockey Conn, his father's friend, teaching him how to outwit his opponents with deception and guile, warning him: "Never Show Your Speed" and "the most important thing you got is a sense of timing. Got to know when to coast and when to turn it on. Am I right? Got to hear Opportunity when she knocks". Then Brian would hear the bitterness in his father's words: "You listen to the Jockey...I missed my main chance and I'll regret it as long as I live". His old man wouldn't look

Brian in the eye. He would talk to Brian by way of the mirror over the bar: "Twenty years on the railroad and never once did I ask myself where those loads, those trains, were heading. That's where it was, and I never went after it. Right under my nose and there I was, too blind to smell it.....Wasted my youth on a dead-end job. And youth, youth you never get back. Never". And Jockey would look at Brian and go on: "You settle for what you got and life passes you by"(p.143-144).

It is in the third story, "Buffalo" that we meet Brian's mother for the first time and it becomes clear that if he stays he will either become like her or will be consumed by bitterness and regret like his father was. The title "Buffalo" is significant. Sayles draws a parallel between Brian and the wild buffalo of the past. Brian remembers that long ago the wild buffalo could actually be found almost as far east as he is now. But just as *he* has to now, *they* had to go west to survive. It is the middle of the night and Brian has the map spread out on the kitchen table. He is trying to write his mother a good-bye note but can't find the right words. Stylistically, this is a stream of consciousness story.

Brian's thoughts ramble as he looks at the map, thinks about his life and the movement of wild buffalo and what he is going to say to his mother. He hears a noise and his insomniac mother shuffles into the kitchen pretending she doesn't know he is up. Sayles captures her deep sense of loss: "She padded among the kitchen utensils as if she had come out searching for something lost". She offers to make him a cocoa to help him sleep. But he doesn't want

to sleep, he wants to wake up.⁴⁹ Brian tells her that he is leaving and she, like him, can't find any words to say. "She poked at the few things in the sink as if testing them for signs of life. The cocoa smoked and grew a skin.....She started as if from a dream, stared for a moment at the cup of warm milk that lay between them, and began to shuffle toward her bedroom. 'Well. Have a nice trip, Brian' "(p.160).

The final three stories follow Brian's actual journey and the progress of his quest. Sayles has him travel west on his 'road trip', from the cold Atlantic to the warm Pacific, symbolic of his metaphorical journey from restraint to freedom. Each story is episodic in nature and tells of Brian's encounters and adventures on his journey. The stories are clearly informed by Sayles' own hitchhiking experiences as a young man. Each new situation educates Brian so that by the end of his journey it is clear that he will not make the same mistakes his parents did. Once again Sayles contrasts the hope and idealism that drives Brian's quest with the hopelessness of some of the minor characters. They serve as warnings to him to stay focused and see his quest for healing and identity through.

The character that Brian encounters in "Fission" (the first of the 'road trip' stories) is one such person. Brian has hitched his first ride west and has been picked up by Mary Beth, overweight and talkative, pouring out the struggles of her life and her past to him. "She was like an open wound, Mary Beth, all her hurt just kept pouring out and there always seemed to be more" (p.166).

⁴⁹ This idea of 'waking up' is significant in the context of Sayles' quests. Characters like Brian, but also Hunter in *Union Dues* express the wish to wake up as if for years they

She tells him how her father never wanted her, only wanted boys, how she had left for college but dropped out early, how her mother had died and her father gone bankrupt and walked off their farm. Before she drops him off, she confides in him that she makes her living now by selling drugs. She tempts him to go along with her but already he has learnt some things about himself. At the very least he knows that he won't be like his parents and settle for less than what he is worth.

After a kind of "tripping " dream in the story "Fission" where Brian escapes the clutches of a crazy scientist named Treat, his journey continues west into Wyoming in the story entitled "Breed". His ride has taken him through the night. He stops to sleep somewhere out under the stars and wakes next morning to a buffalo licking his face. But this is not a buffalo roaming free as in the old days. This is a 'one buffalo show' in the middle of nowhere', "Cody Sprague's Wild West Buckin' Bison Ride". This buffalo is not free to roam and follow its instincts to go west like the buffaloes of the past. It is imprisoned. Sayles uses the buffalo to symbolise entrapment in general . This is a dead end place, an interior wasteland, peopled by trapped individuals going nowhere. Brian hears the echo of his father's words and moves on.

Finally reaching the coast in "Golden State" Brian recalls his father's words: "You gain more knowledge in one crossing of the map than in four years at one of your so-called institutes of higher learning" (p.229-230). Brian has come all the way from the dead-enders of his family and friends out east, through the scarred and lonely heart of the land, to the coast that his father

have been psychologically asleep.

romanticised in his pipe dreams. But ironically, vagrants and winos are the first people he encounters. Critics such as Butscher appear to interpret the fact that Brian finds the West not the romantic West of his father's imagination to mean that his journey and quest have therefore been fruitless. On the contrary, Sayles seems to be implying that nothing necessarily changes just because we move to a different place. The journey is not an end in itself. Growth and change occur within us. At the end of the story and the journey Brian recalls his father talking about how Horace Greeley had spun great stories of travelling west and yet never went west of the Mississippi himself. He would snort a little laugh and say: "They also serve who only sit and bullshit" (p.252).⁵⁰

Thomas Lask, quoted earlier sees little hope in the ending of Brian's journey portrayed in "Golden State". He interprets Brian's meeting up with the group of vagrants and winos and the fact that one is found drowned in the town fountain as ominous portents of doom. One would tend to agree with Lask *if* Sayles had Brian stop at the coast as if he had arrived where he wanted to be. But he doesn't. The fact that Sayles has Brian move on is symbolic of hope. Brian's encounter with the vagrants shows that his resolve is strong. Reminiscent of *Union Dues*, the final lines of Brian's saga symbolise the fruitfulness of his quest. While he left the east in the darkness of night, he arrives in the west in the brightness of day. Although he has arrived

⁵⁰ Horace Greeley (1811-1872) was an influential American journalist and political leader who spoke out against slavery before the American Civil war. In 1841 he founded the New York Tribune and was its editor for 31 years. He fought unequal distribution of wealth and monopoly business as well as basic human rights. He advocated 'going west' and popularised the phrase "Go west, young man". The significance to Brian's quest is obvious.

physically Sayles indicates that *figuratively* his journey is just beginning. The final story ends with Brian still moving, but this time he has changed direction. He is heading south now, into the sun. It is as if Sayles is saying that Brian is entering a new stage in his quest. His journey west has taught him a huge amount about himself. Now it is time to apply what he has learned. The narrative ends with a feeling of hope: "It was just getting warm when Brian reached the highway, only a little after eight. He had daylight to burn".

Two powerful stories in the collection warrant attention. Both stories are a combination of Saylesian hope and Schopenhauerian pessimism. The story "Tan" is steeped in sadness, loss and alienation but also in the strength of the human spirit to survive against terrific odds. Tan has lived through the Communist takeover of Vietnam and the war that followed. Throughout her ordeal she has kept her 'dream of glorious return' alive. But she has been systematically stripped of family, friends and home. She has been violated and abused and will forever be an exile from her homeland.

As stated in Chapter One the whole concept of exile is tied to the possibility of return to the homeland. But Tan now knows that the Communists have taken over southern Vietnam and that the homeland of her past is inexorably changed. She can no longer even dream of returning. Survival is all there is left for her now that her homeland is gone. The story draws to a close as she is waiting her turn in the doctor's surgery to have the 'round-eye' operation and give up the last semblance of her Vietnamese identity. She has lost everything, but now, with new eyes and a new face, she will look to the future, stop dreaming and just survive. There is an awful inevitability about

the story as it ends with Dr. Yin welcoming Tan into the surgery with, "Hello Tan...I've been expecting you" (p.281).

"1-80 Nebraska", m.490-m. 205" has the same tragic inevitability about it that "Tan" has. It is a story about another kind of exile. Ryder P. Moses is the quintessential outsider who refuses to come in. His dream is not of home but of immortality and whereas Tan gives up her dream in exchange for simple survival, he is not about to surrender his. This is a powerful story where Sayles is able to merge content perfectly with narrative style. Edward Butscher describes its almost surrealistically "fierce narrative pace" as the trucks speed across the country. He notes how the realistic dialogue leaps from one trucker to another as the rebel trucker, "High on drugs and existential disgust with his culture, achieves mythic stature in his drive to destruction".⁵¹ For Ryder P. Moses the only way of escaping time is never to sleep or stop. He raves to the other truckers, "Take Sleep, the old whore. The seducer of the vital spark...sucks you dry and empty, strains the dream from your mind and the life from your body". And *time*, he says, all *it* does is "bring us all to rust".

Another trucker "Coyote" is in pursuit and the other trucker's lines are open. Everyone is listening. The tension and the pace of the narrative builds and builds as Ryder P Moses gets faster and faster. Coyote hangs back, "held back by the whiff of danger". As he careers down the highway, weaving now, drifting from left to right on the road Ryder P Moses spouts his existential

⁵¹ Butscher, p 46

philosophy over the CB radio: "When you break through the cycle you're beyond the laws of man, beyond CB manners or Smokies' sirens or statutes of limitations. You're beyond the laws of nature, time, gravity, friction, forget them. The only way to win is never to stop. Never to stop. Never to stop" (p.312).

As he speeds directly towards the concrete support of an overpass he speaks, "This is Ryder P Moses...Going west. Good night and happy motoring" (p.313). His quest for immortality is realised.

Los Gusanos: A Dream of Glorious Return

It is impossible to look at either Sayles' fiction or his films and not find exiles and the concept of exilement around every turn. Although *Los Gusanos* centres on one particular Cuban exile, it is a novel about exilement in general and the effects of it on ordinary people. Characters of *Los Gusanos* are forever looking backward, even if they were not born in Cuba. Home is home.

Los Gusanos was written over a period of thirteen years. Sayles started thinking about writing it in the mid seventies when he wrote the short story *Old Spanish Days* but it was not completed until shortly before *City of Hope* was released in 1991. According to Sayles himself, writing *Old Spanish Days* (discussed earlier in the chapter) got him into thinking about borders in

general and how arbitrary they are. He talks about how the border becomes a psychological determiner of people in that the way that they define themselves depends which side of the arbitrary border they are on and whether they are there by choice or necessity. He also makes the point that the way people see themselves and what they take from experience largely depends on where they were in the room.⁵² The influence of this way of thinking is evident in Sayles' earlier novel *Union Dues*, particularly in the multi-viewpoints from which the story is told. It becomes increasingly clear when considering Sayles' work in general that to him this notion of acknowledging and respecting *both* sides of a story is of paramount importance. It has in fact become a defining aspect of all his subsequent work. Like *Union Dues*, *Los Gusanos* expresses this philosophy by employing as many as twenty viewpoints to tell the story.

Salman Rushdie described exile as "a dream of glorious return".⁵³ The central character of *Los Gusanos*, Marta de la Pena, is an exile from her Cuban homeland. She and her anti-Castro family left Cuba when their farm was confiscated in the communist revolution of 1959. Her family, like hundreds of other Cuban families, fled to Miami rather than stay in Cuba and live under communist rule. The title of the novel is crucial to understanding the novel fully. In Spanish, *los gusanos* means "the worms". It was the term that Castro used for Cubans who, like Marta and her family, "deserted" Cuba when Castro's communist government took over. To Castro and his followers,

⁵³ He is quoted in John Durham Peters chapter entitled "Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon" which can be found in Naficy's (ed) book *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place*.

families like Marta's were parasites, often landowners, living well off the backs of others. To him they deserved to lose their property and their 'host'.

As Sayles himself explained, many of the Cuban immigrants who fled Cuba at this time, have never really "unpacked their bags emotionally and mentally" (Smith p.176). America will never be home to them. Despite the circumstances of their leaving, Cuba will always be home. Furthermore, Marta, like many other exiled Cubans, lost family members either in the original communist takeover or in the American backed counter-revolution that followed. In her case it was her seventeen-year old brother Ambrosio who lost his life in the "Bay of Pigs" invasion.

It is from a sense of loss, alienation and anger that Marta's quest is born. Far from home, in a land where she will always be an exile, she nurses her dying father while dreaming and planning to avenge her brother's death and regain her homeland both for herself and for all the other "gusanos". Her quest then is driven by the trauma of her past and the exile of her present. She hopes that by fighting to regain her homeland she will salve some of the pain she carries and reclaim her stolen identity.

Sayles describes the style of his fiction as mosaic in its many points of view and this is particularly true of *Los Gusanos*.⁵⁴ Although the points of view in the short stories are very varied, each story usually employs only one or two points of view. On the other hand, all three of Sayles' novels are told from

⁵⁴ He uses this expression in relation to his fiction in an interview for the section New books from The Reader's Catalogue, <http://readcat.nybooks.com/sayles5.html>

many points of view. Sayles first novel *Pride of the Bimbos*, which Ryan describes as “a satire of American machismo”, also employed many points of view (Ryan p.13). Character, says Sayles is revealed through point of view. “I don’t do internal monologues, I try to create character by what you hear said or what you see done. You don’t get to access someone’s thoughts, you access their point of view” (Smith p.53).

The reason that Sayles does this seems to be linked to two factors; firstly he is fascinated by how people from different places and backgrounds see the world and how different people view the same event. Secondly, possibly because he is a critical observer of people’s mannerisms and speech, he is very good at expressing character through dialogue as opposed to description. Undoubtedly both his script writing and acting experience have helped refine this skill.

This interest in the multitudinous ways of seeing the world has particular relevance to *Los Gusanos* and Marta’s quest. Although it is essentially her quest that directs the novel Sayles wants to make the point that everything that happens in life can be seen and judged in many different ways. To this end the novel is not structured in a linear temporal sort of way where the reader follows Marta’s quest from one day to the next. Instead Sayles juxtaposes events and incidents told from opposing points of view and from the past and the present. Eventually the big picture begins to appear in the

“mosaic” pieces and the narrative gradually gains a kind of gravity and weight.⁵⁵

The narrative cuts from character to character, sub-plot to sub-plot as well as backwards and forwards in time. Everyone gets to ‘speak’, from the Jewish old people’s home residents to their nurses, from the defrocked priest, Padre Martin, now working in the cash and carry, to the Cuban boys on the street. Characters, such as the priest, appear in mere glimpses the first time we see them but as the narrative unfolds become more and more prominent in events. All the while Marta carefully puts together her plan of retribution and salvation.

Although Marta’s viewpoint appears to be endorsed in the way that it gives the narrative direction, Sayles contrasts it with the viewpoints of both some of her friends as well as her enemies. Marta is at the beach one day with Serafin, a friend of her dead brother Ambrosia. Unlike his best friend, Serafin survived the “Bay of Pigs” delivering Ambrosio’s diary to Marta on his return. Whereas Marta wants to fight for her homeland Serafin is broken by events there. “You don’t want to go back? You don’t miss it?” asks Marta. Serafin replies: “The last time I saw Cuba it tried to swallow me”.⁵⁶

Marta needs allies and companions on her quest. She knows that she can’t do it alone. First she needs a boat. Her uncle Tio Felix agrees to take her. Then she enlists the help of sixteen-year old Dewey, a gun mad boy who is

⁵⁵ Sayles uses a similar narrative structure in his film of 1990, *City of Hope*.

desperate to be a soldier (sadly, more to kill than for any more noble reason). Then, despite his deep doubts, Padre Martin agrees to go with her also. It as if having him with her makes what Marta is about to do more honourable and right. But Sayles shows us that the Padre is troubled by doubts and wonders why he has agreed to be a part of it. Comparisons can be drawn here between Padre Martin, Padre Portillo in Sayles' 1997 film *Men with Guns* and Graham Greene's "whiskey priest" from *The Power and the Glory*". All three men have sinned in their own eyes and yet as the circumstances of each man's degradation are revealed the reader feels more rather than less sympathetic towards them.⁵⁷

In keeping with Sayles' view of the world where everything is connected, the narrative moves backward and forward in time, as he introduces characters that are on opposite sides of the political spectrum. These people seem to be moving in different worlds and different directions. It seems absolutely unfeasible that they could ever find common ground. And yet, in a way that relies heavily on chance, Sayles has them begin to converge towards each other in the narrative. Finally, against all the laws of probability, they are in the same place at the same time.

Sayles uses this device in both his fiction and his films. In *Union Dues* when Hobie has run away from home and is looking for work in Boston, his father Hunter is searching for him in the same city. Sayles has them encounter

⁵⁶ His answer makes the reader think of the term 'los gusanos'. The image of the 'host' eating the worm is evoked.

some of the same people and yet not find each *other*. But it is clear that the circles that they are running in are concentric and that they will eventually find each other. He does a similar thing in "*City of Hope*" where he structures the city like a web where everything and everybody is interconnected without realising it. The interconnectedness and the inevitability that it suggests, at best seems uncanny, and at worst tragic as *Los Gusanos* attests.

Marta's rendezvous with El Halcon in the novel has this kind of tragic edge. She has managed to plan a secret action into Cuba to blow up a power station. She has planned it to take place on the anniversary of her brother's death. She needs guns and explosives and her need to get them has blinded her and has drawn her ever closer to El Halcon, whom, as the narrative has shown, is an unprincipled and brutal man. He would be just as prepared to supply her enemy with guns as to supply her. Sayles brings them closer and closer to each other as if making a point that violent action, whether the motive is honourable or not, is still violent action and that every action has a reaction. Finally, they are together in the same room, he, prepared to supply the guns and the explosives and she, prepared to pay the money. The moment is shocking.

There is a particularly powerful scene when Marta and her small band of 'fighters' meet with El Halcon to discuss the deal. The scene is narrated omnisciently. El Halcon is described: "The man who sits by the refrigerator, the killer, is smoking, flicking the ashes into an empty beer bottle on the floor"

⁵⁷ The "fallen" priest is a recurring character in Greene's novels from the bored priest in *The Man Within* through many subsequent novels. I deal with this similarity between

(p.171). Marta is still wearing her nurse's uniform and she is holding her dead father's old rifle as if to say that what she really wants is to finish what her father started back in Cuba. Sayles expresses her apprehension and fear: "She feels the boy [Dewey] pacing behind her, restless, feels the uncertainty of the ex-priest. Her mother is at church making a Novena, praying for her family. The woman touches the barrel of the pistol and faces the cold eyes of the man in the shadow of the refrigerator" (p.172). The all-knowing narrator confirms that Padre Martin's doubt has turned to dread. "Padre Martin can't believe he's sitting here, considering this. If he says this won't work, this is a mistake, will it all stop?" (p.172).

The convergence of these lives hangs like an omen over the last part of the novel. Sayles' forces the reader to question Marta's actual quest. Can it be honourable if it involves El Halcon? Can anything positive come of it?

The sense of dread that hung in the air in the meeting with El Halcon takes a fatal turn. Marta, Dewey and the Padre Martin have the guns and the explosives and are about to leave on their secret night incursion into Cuba. But just hours before they leave, Dewey turns his gun on his parents, killing them in cold blood. He is arrested. Marta and the Padre must now go alone.

Finally, the little boat skippered by Tio Felix makes land in the dead of night on the island of Cuba. But now Sayles drives home the futility of Marta's quest. The last four chapters narrate what happens as if from high above the scene looking down. Chapter Forty-Three looks down on the boat heading in

towards land. The entire chapter has only fifteen words: "Noon. A boat in the ocean. Tiny as a single bird in the unbroken sky" (p.466). The next chapter shifts the view onto the land where an Old Cuban man and a young boy are walking on a path through the trees in the darkness. The old man tells the boy some of the history of how his ancestors were bought in chains to Cuba from Africa. He represents the people whose causes Castro championed and is therefore Marta's adversary. Marta's quest to get her homeland back will clearly hurt innocent and principled people like this.

Chapter Forty-Five looks down again on the little boat. Tio Felix has dropped Marta and the Padre on the beach. He drifts in the little boat wondering if their mission will be successful. The final scene told in Chapter Forty Six is truly powerful as the 'eye in the sky' narrator looks down in turn at the two diametrically opposed pairs of individuals moving inexorably closer to each other in the dark. The tension builds. The old man begins to sing to the boy and then the boy takes up the song. Marta and the Padre hear it and are ready. "The singing is closer. The dog is still barking. The woman and the priest crouch again, waiting, hoping it will pass. They smell charcoal burning. The singing comes closer still, moving up the path towards them" (p.472). The singing stops and a young voice calls out "Quien es?", Who is it? (p.472). "The woman [Marta] hugs the rifle, taut and heavy in her arms, her finger curled, the power held back, muscles clenched at her spine. Everything has been leading to this, pointing to this". Her words reveal the sad inevitability of what is about to happen.

The Padre drops the explosives as the shot explodes next to him. "Then the woman is gone and there is an old man with a rifle asking the priest who he is and a boy sitting on the ground holding his stomach, blood coming through his fingers...The priest understands now why he was meant to be here. It was all pointing to this" (p.472).

The novel concludes with Marta alone in Cuba. Her quest, her dream of glorious return has ended in total blackness. The compressed sensory images that Sayles uses to express her intense panic are gripping. "Only sensation now. Branches. Black water. Air thick and sweet like something about to die. The sound of her own ragged gasp. At the edge of the great swamp the woman is running, breathless, lost on the dark island" (p.473).

This chapter has dealt with two novels by John Sayles and a number of his short stories demonstrating the predominance of the quest for healing and identity in Sayles' fiction. The stories that I have discussed from *The Anarchists' Convention* collection are alive with fiercely independent people who will not settle for merely existing. They want more. The fact that most of them carry the weight of some sort of trauma in their lives seems to motivate them to begin their quests to cast off the weight of past events and begin to heal and find themselves anew. Sayles makes it clear that, as in real life, some are more successful than others in reaching their goals. Nevertheless, the stories demonstrate that the fact that his protagonists find the strength to embark, rather than settle for second best, invigorates them.

The novels *Union Dues* and *Los Gusanos*, verify again that the quests of Sayles' protagonists are often fraught with uncertainty and danger and are not always successful. Whereas there is a feeling of fruitfulness and hope expressed in the new-year and beautiful day that concludes *Union Dues*, *Los Gusanos* leaves the reader with a sense of hopelessness and waste. The water is as black as the night and the air is heavy and sweet and smells of death. The message seems to be that political action can just as easily lead to self-destruction as to salvation. This message is hinted at in the realisation that Tio Felix has after he has dropped Marta and the Padre off and is alone on his boat. He is watching a pair of turtles, a male and a female as they cruise past the boat. "They swim in calm, warm waters, soaring over the coral, one never losing sight of the other. Now and then they bump shells, lightly. They have been swimming in the waters since before there were politics. Columbus sailed over their heads. They are very wise. At night they lie on the beach and there is nothing to hurt them. They make sea-turtle love, which is warm and weighty and very slow. They leave babies in the sand" (p.471).

Chapter Three

Quests for Healing and Identity in four of Sayles' earlier films: 1983-1992.

Lianna, Matewan, City of Hope and Passion Fish

The central tenet of this thesis is that quests for healing and identity are central to the fiction and films of John Sayles. This chapter will use a close analysis of four of Sayles' films to illustrate how even in his earlier films the notion of questing characters dominates the narrative.

In typical "Saylesian" fashion, the journeys, which form the heart of this chapter take us from a liberal arts college in north eastern United States, southwest to heartland West Virginia, back northeast to industrial New Jersey and finally far south to the Louisiana bayous. *Lianna* (1982), *Matewan* (1987), *City of Hope* (1990) and *Passion Fish* (1992), each chart the course of a quest for healing and identity.

In *Lianna* it is the eponymous central character Lianna who is driven by her own sense of dissatisfaction to embark on a risky "journey" in search of healing and renewed identity. In *Matewan*, it is Joe Kenehan's selfless quest to find justice for the coalminers, an objective no less risky than Lianna's. It is Nick whose quest we follow in *City of Hope* as he searches for an identity he can feel proud of. *Passion Fish* centres on May-Alice, the self-exiled "soap"

star made paraplegic after a traffic accident, who retreats to her childhood home in her quest for self-forgiveness and renewed identity.

Not all the quests discussed are successful. Sayles' is far too much of a realist for this. But the point is that his characters do not let life wash over them or defeat them. As the films discussed in this chapter confirm, they fight, they search and sometimes they find.

As has been demonstrated in Chapter Two, Sayles is a master at portraying the emotional states of his characters in his fiction. These four films show that he is also able to do this effectively in film. First and foremost, he tells great stories and his characters are complex and engaging. Secondly, his scripts are realistic and revealing. At times he is able to reveal a character's entire life history in a few sentences, as May-Alice's Uncle Max (William Mahoney) does in *Passion Fish* and Bunny does in *Lone Star*. Thirdly, he casts his main characters so well, finding actors who are able to portray the range of character traits that his scripts require. And finally, he, his production designers and cinematographers seem able to capture both the characters' emotional states, and the atmosphere of each diverse setting so well without the need of the kinds of flashy gimmicks and special effects that defines so many mainstream Hollywood films.

Before I begin to look at these films in detail, I feel that it is pertinent at this stage to mention that even Sayles' very first film, *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, involved a kind of journey or quest. The title itself predicted what would develop as his penchant for the journey or "return" as a thematic and

narrative device. The film tells of a “re-union” of a group of friends ten years after they were politically active together in the sixties. The title, according to Sayles himself, was intended to suggest “rebirth” or “comeback” (Smith p.56). It is also about loss of community, be it a community of like minds, and the attempt to regain the essence of this ten years after the event.

Having established a kind of wide angled view, I will now focus more closely on the actual films to show how each one reinforces the central idea of this thesis. My treatment of the films is chronological but not scrupulously so as there are times when it is necessary to talk about one of the films out of sequence because it reinforces a particular point.

***Lianna*: Out on a Limb**

John Sayles wrote the screenplay for *Lianna* (1982) in the mid seventies, four years before he wrote *Return of the Secaucus Seven* but, having offered it to a number of Hollywood studios without success, he decided he would have to produce and direct it himself. The fact that the Hollywood studios were reluctant to produce it was not surprising, given its subject matter. A married woman (with children!) leaving her respected academic husband for another woman was too risqué and therefore not commercially viable for any Hollywood studio. Having said this however, it is interesting to note that a number of other films with similar content were released by Hollywood about the same time (1982/1983), among them *Tootsie* (Dir. Pollack, 1982) and

Victor/Victoria (Dir. Edwards, 1982)⁵⁸ One wonders whether the studios deemed them more acceptable because their content was tempered with humour and covered ground already established by films such as *Some like it Hot* (Dir. Billy Wilder, 1959). Sayles was not deterred, however, by such conservative and mainstream sentiments. He and his producers, Maggie Renzi and Jeffrey Nelson, raised the money to make the film through a public offering.⁵⁹

Lianna, played by Linda Griffiths, is the unhappy and unfulfilled faculty wife who falls in love with Ruth (a female professor who is taking a part-time child psychology course with Lianna). When Lianna meets Ruth her need for self-fulfilment finds its voice and she is set on a course of self-discovery from which there is no turning back. Her subsequent affair with Ruth, (played by Jane Hallaren), charts the course of her quest: her process of redefining and affirming her identity and then coming to terms with the consequences of her choice.

Even before her affair with Ruth, Lianna is an outsider, lonely, dissatisfied and lost. She feels unfulfilled and trapped in her marriage.

Typically of Sayles, from the very first frames of the film we can begin to see the emotional state that Lianna is in. We sense her uncertainty and her alienation. As Jack Ryan notes, *Lianna* begins abruptly, with no introduction (Ryan p.75). We see Lianna and her friend Sandy discussing their lives.

⁵⁸ Two others of a similar vein were *Personal Best* (Dir. Towne, 1982) and *Making Love* (Dir. Hiller, 1982)

Sandy is standing, her sense of self-assurance obvious, while Lianna is sitting on a child's swing, underscoring her childlike dependence and uncertainty.

Ryan goes further when he asserts that Lianna's position on the swing points to her search for a mentor in her life (p.75). Sayles certainly seems to be implying that her quest is partly a stage of growing up. After she naively confides in her husband and friends about her affair she finds herself completely alone. No-one wants to know her. In an interview with Gavin Smith for *Sayles on Sayles* John Sayles says: "she [Lianna] has to be isolated at some point – she doesn't realize just how much at first, until she doesn't even have a best friend. I needed her to go out on that limb to grow up" (Smith p.73). Sayles makes many of his characters 'go out on a limb', both in his fiction and his films. It seems to be part of his brand of self-help psychology and is closely linked to his habit of having many of his characters go back and face the traumas of their pasts in order to heal the present. Lianna's isolation is what brings about her growth. She has no one to lean on but herself.

The close, protective, academic setting emphasises the entrapment and claustrophobia that Lianna feels. Cinematographer Austin DeBesche frames Lianna within a variety of enclosed and clearly defined spaces in the film such as the children's swing set at the beginning and the end of the film, a car, a swimming pool, a classroom, and the various rooms of her house. He

⁵⁹ Jack Ryan in *John Sayles. Filmmaker* describes this as Sayles' "unique grassroots approach" and says that about 30 non-traditional investors, people who had never

captures her growing alienation from her husband Dick with clever camera work. When Lianna goes to Dick's classroom to talk to him it is clear that he doesn't want her there. He sees her at the door but gives no greeting or sign of recognition. He appears to look right through her, avoiding eye contact. Dick is filmed front-on in the dominant position at the centre of the shot, looking straight past her whereas Lianna is side-on in the frame and although closer to the camera, is made to look insignificant and insecure. She realises what is happening inside her husband's head and lets him know: "What's the matter, afraid to let them see you playing husband?"

The final violent argument that Lianna and Dick have before she leaves him is also cleverly filmed. Debesche uses a slightly wobbly hand held camera, which makes the whole scene 'closer to the bone' somehow as if a nosy intruder is secretly filming their demise. The scene is filmed from Dick's eye level exaggerating his height and his dominance over her. It is a moving and resonant scene with Dick constantly assuming the power position of leaning over her as they argue bitterly.

The first time that we see *Lianna* out of an enclosed space is in her love scene with Ruth. DeBesche uses soft blue lighting from an open window and he films the scene through a blue filter and with backlighting. The open window and the blue light create an atmosphere of 'lightness' and freedom contrasting starkly with the heavy atmosphere of endurance that is evident whenever she is in the bedroom with her husband.

The scene in the bar where Lianna gets her first taste of the gay 'scene' is filmed in such a way as to contrast sharply with previous scenes of the 'other life' that she has left. The space is still enclosed but the difference is that here she is not isolated. She feels wanted and part of a group. The camera work and the editing, quicken, as the music and Lianna's dancing get faster and more frantic. Around the bar the camera flashes this way and that catching shots of laughing couples dancing and talking and smoking and drinking.

When Lianna gets out on the street later to go home her vision is altered. It is clear that she has found a new identity and a group with whom she feels appreciated. The scene has just a touch of magic realism as instead of seeing what is really there she sees only women. Women are everywhere, in couples, groups and alone. Men are nowhere to be seen. It is as if she is seeing women (including herself) for the first time. The scene portrays how different she feels now. She is truly a new person and it is exhilarating.

But Sayles deliberately makes the ending of the film ambiguous. Lianna's quest has indeed given her a new identity but we have the sense that the cost will be high. In the final analysis so much changes for her, and yet nothing does. She leaves her husband and her children for Ruth. She turns her life upside down. But then Ruth moves on. And now, whereas Lianna's exilement had formerly been a result of an unfulfilling marriage, it is now self-imposed. She rents a room off campus and begins her new life, although seemingly with few regrets, nevertheless, alone. Her aloneness is captured in the way DeBesche films her in her new apartment. The emptiness, sterility and confinement is emphasised in the expansive whiteness of the walls and

the echo of her footsteps on the bare wooden floor. It is as if she has given up one prison for another.

In Chapter Two I drew attention to the fact that this circular narrative structure is common in the fiction of Sayles. As will be seen in this chapter and the next, Sayles uses this device in a number of his films. *Matewan* begins and ends deep in the mine. In *City of Hope* the circular narrative begins and returns to the roof of a half built building. In *The Secret of Roan Inish* it is the Irish Sea that starts and completes the cycle. *Men With Guns* begins and ends with a woman relating the story to her daughter and in *Limbo* a whiteout frames the narrative.⁶⁰ In these films Sayles appears to be expressing the relative ambiguity of the outcomes of the films saying that, although much has changed and much gained, the quest is never complete. It is like a circle and circles have no end.

Lianna also begins and ends with Lianna and Sandy, friends since school days, in the children's playground. But the scene at the end contrasts with the initial playground scene in a number of ways emphasising Lianna's growth and at least the partial success of her quest. This time the two women are seen sitting side by side on the park bench chatting. This time they are on equal ground. Furthermore, contrasting sharply with the earlier acrimonious argument scene between Lianna and Dick, this scene is also filmed with a slightly shaky hand held camera. Clearly, Sayles wishes the audience to connect and contrast the two scenes. The implication seems to be that,

⁶⁰ I will say more about the circular structure of these films as I discuss each film in detail.

despite the fact that Sandy was at first unsupportive of Lianna's radical lifestyle change, their friendship has endured. Moments of real warmth show through in the scene as if the friendship is central to the wellbeing of both women. Sayles also seems to be emphasising the fact that in discarding her former identity Lianna is now like a child growing up again, building a new identity that is truly her own.

Lianna has no happy-ever-after ending where one could say that her quest has been fully successful. But then none of Sayles' work is like this, neither is life. *Lianna* affirms the view that life is a process of gains and losses, beings and becomings. In the end Lianna knows that there is a cost to her quest for identity and healing but she also knows that the need that motivated her could not be denied. Despite the consequences, she has no regrets.

***Matewan*: The Impenetrable Coalface**

In contrast to the personal nature of the quest in *Lianna*, there is both a personal and a political aspect to the quests that are at the heart of *Matewan* (1987). The film is set in a small mining town in heartland West Virginia.

Matewan is based on the actual Matewan Massacre that occurred early in the West Virginia Coal Mine Wars of 1920 and 1921. It is a story of coalminers driven to strike because of exploitation and oppression by the Stone Mountain Coal Company, the company that owns everything and everyone in the town. The film's central character is union organiser Joe Kenehan, played by Chris Cooper. He travels to Matewan to help organise the striking miners, embracing their quest as his own.

It was while Sayles was researching his second novel, *Union Dues*, that he came across accounts of the Matewan Massacre. Some of the characters in his film are based on actual people: Sid Hatfield, chief of police; Cabell Testerman, mayor of Matewan; Few Clothes, the first black miner to join the strike; and C.E. Lively, the company spy. Other characters in the film were fictional but based on un-named people from the accounts of the massacre that he read. In an interview for "Cineaste" Sayles says "A lot of what I try to do in *Matewan* ... is have the audience spend time with people they ordinarily wouldn't spend time with, with history they either forgot or never knew, and make it have some bearing on what's going on today."⁶¹ Sayles believes that knowledge of our history is essential. "I feel that history, especially the stories we like to believe or know about ourselves, is part of the ammunition we take with us into the everyday battle of how we define ourselves and how we act toward other people."⁶²

Kenehan arrives in town to organise the striking miners into some kind of united stand. But the company, has imported scab labour, (Southern Blacks and immigrant Italians), to try to keep the mine operational during the strike. Hostility between the local strikers and the scabs is intense and Kenehan must try to create some sort of solidarity between them. He knows that as long as they are divided they will remain weak and the company will win. Kenehan's left-wing rhetoric in helping unite the workers to take on the company is contrasted with the Church's right-wing rhetoric, which labels

⁶¹ Popkin, *Cineaste* article, 1983 (p.39-40)

⁶² Carnes, *Past Imperfect* (p.11)

unions as the work of the devil. The hard-shell preacher (played by John Sayles himself) is the Church's "hit man" supporting big business and the company spies while Kenehan is his equivalent for the union movement. Kenehan finally succeeds at uniting the disparate groups to stand against the company but the result is a bloody shootout in which he and many others are killed.

This is not the first time that Sayles contrasts the disparity between the 'love thy neighbour', and be thy 'brother's keeper' message of the scriptures and the bigotry and self-serving nature of the Church itself. In *Union Dues* the main character Hobie talks of how the Church 'ran off' the Appalachian Volunteer people who had tried to settle in the area and burned down their cabin. The message in *Matewan*, as in *Union Dues* is that the Church frequently misuses its power and that it promises no guarantee of caring. Individuals working together, rather than organisations, seem to be the key.

Furthermore, Sayles sees many similarities between religion and politics. He talks about hard-core Marxists and anarchists and notes that there is "something religious about their quest." He sees how each can be subverted for personal or collective gain: "there can be wonderful stuff in religion, but it can be used to chop people's heads off. And the same thing with any political belief; you can pervert it, just in the way you read it and interpret it" (Smith p.129). In *Matewan* Joe Kenehan's pacifist and humanist approach is contrasted against the hard-core, "absolute believer" nature of both religious and political activism.

Union organiser and pacifist Joe Kennehan is a little like the questing knight in *Matewan* with young Danny as his apprentice. In *Thinking in Pictures*, the book Sayles wrote about the making of *Matewan*, he talks about how he creates young Danny Radnor, “an adolescent boy, a coal miner, preacher, and union man who has both the Old Testament values of righteousness and retribution and the New Testament dreams for peace and justice within him”. Sayles makes it part of Joe’s quest to teach Danny another way to help his people, “to help him to see beyond the cycle of blood feuds and meaningless revenge the company fosters among the miners” (Sayles 1987 p.19). Joe is Danny’s mentor passing the pacifist baton on to him before he dies.

The action begins down in the mine with young Danny spreading the word that a strike is on. Sayles superimposes the voice of Pappy Dan (Danny grown old) who provides the background to the present action, “Hit were 1920 in the southwest field and things were tough. The miners was trying to bring in the union to West Virginia and the coal operators and their gun thugs was set on keeping em out. Them was hand-loading days – they paid you by the ton and they didn’t care no more for a man than they done for a draft mule”.⁶³ When the story itself begins Sayles alternates between the points of view of either young Dan or Joe Kennehan with old Pappy Dan occasionally breaking into the narration when a sense of perspective is needed.

After it is all over Pappy Dan is there again to draw the narrative to a close. Joe is dead and the day fades into darkness. The sound of dripping replaces the sound of gunshots. Out of the darkness a tiny dot of light moves towards

us. The voice-over of Pappy Dan is heard as the advancing light becomes the beam of a miners' light: "That were the start of the great Coalfield War and us miners took the worst of it like Joe said we would. 'Hit's just one big Union, the world over,' Joe Kenehan used to say, and from the day of the Matewan Massacre that's what I preached".⁶⁴ Sayles uses Pappy as a kind of framing device for the events of the film. Beginning and ending his story in the darkness of the mine, Pappy Dan reiterates Sayles' point about the cyclical nature of the miners' struggle. As an old man who lived through those mine wars of the twenties, he knows that the fight for miner's rights and conditions didn't end there.⁶⁵

Rita Kempley, reviewing for the Washington Post, was scathing of *Matewan*: "It's really no surprise when John Sayles shows up as a preacher in "*Matewan*," a mine-workers' drama that becomes the filmmaker's Sermon on the Mount. Riddled with labor rhetoric, this coal-dusted tragedy wavers between well-acted propaganda and historical burlesque".⁶⁶ To her, Kenehan's speeches about how the company exploits the workers and thinks of them as simply equipment, rather than men, are too often simply ideology. She criticises Sayles for what she calls structuring the story too much like an old-fashioned western, and depicting the characters in the simplest of terms. She half expects Sayles to have them wearing black or white hats. She sums

⁶³ Quoted from the shooting script of *Matewan* (p.5), *Thinking in Pictures*.

⁶⁴ Also from the shooting script of *Matewan* (p.179), *Thinking in Pictures*.

⁶⁵ There is also a Pappy Dan in Sayles' *Union Dues* in a similar role. In the novel he is also an old man who has spent a lifetime down in the mine. Like Pappy in *Matewan* he has the wisdom of experience and age. It is he who tells Hunter that his runaway son is better off away from the mine.

Matewan up as “humourless and bleating” and likely to appeal only to those who have paid their dues.

To my mind Kempley has missed the point of the film. There is much more to *Matewan* than what she sees as simply political rhetoric and Western-style melodrama. Sayles uses elements of these deliberately as a background against which to contrast the harsh reality of this and other political struggles like it. Although this is a fictional story it is based on real events. Back then people were defined by their politics, their religion or their skin colour. (Is it vastly different now?⁶⁷) But the simple black and white shades of bad versus good that Sayles uses and Kempley derides, are set against the hazy skyline as if to emphasise that there are no real winners in this war. The final shootout and Danny’s final words: “us miners took the worst of it”, affirm this.

When the shooting is over it is clear that there are no winners. This is no Western where the hero stands alone in a sea of destruction. This victory is fleeting and is won at great human cost. Sayles is well aware that the miners endured twenty more long years of merciless exploitation at the hands of the mining companies.⁶⁸ And so he asks the question, was it worth losing all those good men’s lives? As the credits begin to roll at the end of the film we hear the unaccompanied and mournful voice of bluegrass balladeer Hazel

⁶⁶ Rita Kempley’s review of *Matewan* was published in October 1997 in the Washington Post. www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longter.../matewanpg13kempley13/08/00

⁶⁷ Nike, for example, was prepared to turn a blind eye to child labour being used in their factories in Laos and Vietnam.

⁶⁸ Even today the West Virginia coalmines are the scenes of many ongoing battles. Miners fight the companies for compensation for “black lung” and for diseases such

Dickens singing "Beautiful Hills of Galilee". The words emphasise what was lost in the battle rather than what was won. "Travelling home, travelling home/ One by one, one by one/ Across that river/Our friends have gone/And we are following/One by one." It is a dirge acknowledging that despite this small victory generations of miners have died and will continue to die for their cause, one by one. Actually, legislation was finally passed as recently as 1999 forcing the mining companies to pump fresh air deep into the mine shafts so that miners would not have to breathe in such high levels of chemicals, including dangerous methane gas, which has been linked to many serious ailments.⁶⁹

Sayles' dark but realistic vision is reflected in the way that Haskell Wexler photographs *Matewan*. Speaking of the actual events surrounding the Matewan Massacre and the West Virginia setting Sayles says: "There is a cyclical sense of time there, a feeling of inescapable fate that in the story resists the optimism and progressive collectivism of the 1920's workers' movement" (Sayles 1987 p.10). Haskell Wexler captures this vision with the oppressive darkness and claustrophobia of the coal mines, the shadows and dusky light of the town, and the misty wet quiet of the Appalachian Mountains. Sayles says of Wexler: "In collaboration with me and Nora

as leukaemia and Alzheimers that they believe have been caused by mining conditions.

⁶⁹ The most recent battle being spearheaded by the residents of West Virginia is to try to take back their state from "King Coal" and to stop the total removal of mountaintops for the mining of coal. In West Virginia author Denise Giardina's words: "They came in here and stole our land, killed a hundred thousand miners, polluted our streams, ground our roads into dust with their coal trucks, and then they have the nerve to tell us that they should be able to destroy our mountains because they have created jobs. Denise Giardina is a native of West Virginia and has written two books,

Chavooshian and the forces of nature, he took the story off the page and put it back into pictures".⁷⁰

The striker's debate over the use of violence is central to the narrative of *Matewan*. Many of the key activists want to shoot it out. But Kenehan is adamant. Armed resistance he believes is futile against the combined might of the company and the government. "You don't go shooting the solid if you can examine the face, do you?" he asks. This is mining lingo meaning it is futile to dynamite the strongest part of the coal vein. It simply won't work and you'll still be staring at a black impenetrable coalface when you're done.

But when all is said and done Joe and Danny and the others really do try to 'shoot the solid' and despite their short-term success are indeed left facing a formidable coalface. Their quests are only partly realised. Joe loses his life standing up for his principles and Danny spends *his* living the principles that Joe died for, working in the mine and preaching for improved conditions and an end to exploitation. But in the end where has it got him? The film ends in the same black hole that it started in.

City of Hope: Searching for Self in an Urban Wasteland

City of Hope (1990) has been called Sayles' most ambitious film because of its sheer scale. It was shot in Cincinnati, Ohio for \$5 million and used over

"*Storming Heaven*" and "*The Unquiet Earth*" about life in West Virginia coal camps. The article quoted was published in *The Charleston Gazette* on January 31, 1999.

⁷⁰ Nora Chavooshian has been Production Designer on most of Sayles' films.

forty locations and thirty-eight characters. It is about another kind of black hole, but this time it is an urban wasteland. The title itself is steeped in irony. There is little hope in this socially conscious film. It paints a picture of a sick town in need of a moral and spiritual overhaul. It deals with what Levy, in *Cinema of Outsiders* calls the "distinctly American dilemma". Says Levy: "Sayles's diverse output is unified by a distinctly American dilemma: the tension between personal life and social responsibility, or self-interest versus collective interest" (Levy p.82). This theme is strongly evident in the two novels *Union Dues* and *Los Gusanos* discussed in Chapter Two as it is in *Matewan*, *Lone Star* and *Men with Guns*.

The film takes place in a fictional generic setting, a device that Sayles uses again in *Men With Guns* (1998). His purpose is to universalise his message so that the audience isn't tempted to say, "Oh, but that is what it is like in 'such in such', and deny that these things can happen anywhere in the world, and do. Whereas *Men With Guns* is set somewhere in central America, *City of Hope* is set in an industrial New Jersey city where characters either struggle to resist the endemic corruption and vice of the city, or become part of it.

Thematically, the film is a blend of the personal and the political quest. It poses many of the same sorts of questions that *Matewan* does, such as, are people more, or less effective in bringing about change when they work as a group or as individuals? Can positive change be successfully achieved politically without compromising one's principles?

The story has a number of key characters and many interconnected stories. A sense of community is conveyed by the fact that everyone's actions have repercussions on the lives of others. This is very similar to what Sayles does in his fiction, as detailed in Chapter Two. Everyone and everything is interconnected. I like Roger Ebert's description of *City of Hope* as being "like a wheel of torture, to which the characters are chained". Sayles, he notes, "follows them through their days and nights, as they run into one another, make deals, tell lies, seek happiness, and find mostly compromise and disappointment."⁷¹ Schopenhauer's endless cycle of suffering springs to mind. This is a dog-eat-dog place where decisions are made out of expediency and self-interest, a place where the end justifies the means.

Typically of Sayles, the film is peopled with "compromised individuals, each facing a moral dilemma" (Levy p.88). First there is Nick (played by Vincent Spano), son of corrupt building company owner, Joe (Tony Lo Bianco). Nick's quest to define himself is central to the narrative of the film. He is an idealist. He hates the greed and corruption of the world around him. He is lost and searching, looking for an identity he can feel proud of rather than repugnant of. He is desperately in need of direction and parental love, and seems to be just one step away from joining his powerful father on the tightrope between his own basically good values and the corrupt world around him. It is as if he is searching for life in a land of the dead.

⁷¹ Roger Ebert writes for the *Chicago Sun Times*. These words are from his article on *City of Hope* published 25/10/1991. www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert-reviews/1991/10/677249.html

Joe, Nick's father, is a successful city contractor but one whose success is dependent on the cooperation of both the Mob and the city government. Increasingly, he has become their puppet. They move, he jumps. Nick hates both what his father stands for in the business world and also for the part he believes his father played in the death of his brother. He carries the disdain for his father around with him like a wound that won't heal.

The "father/son" relationship between Nick and Joe is pivotal in the film in so far as it is the ground on which each defines the other.⁷² Nick has always defined himself in relation to his "hero" brother, Tony, who was killed in Vietnam. He has always blamed his father for letting Tony go. Based on what he believes to be true, he has never measured up to his brother and has always seen himself as a loser in comparison. But Joe has lied to Nick about Tony and has carried the truth around with him like a weight for years.

In his despair, Nick has walked away from his job on his father's building site and has been involved in a robbery. When his father finds out, he instinctively tries to bail Nick out of trouble by buying his freedom. From Joe's perspective, and the position of knowing the truth, anything he can do to protect his remaining son, he sees as right and honourable, even if it means sacrificing the lives of others. In return for keeping Nick out of jail, he is willing to sacrifice the lives of the poor tenants of his run-down tenement block. He agrees to have his thugs burn down the tenement block so he can sell the land to the Galaxy Tower developers in return for Nick's freedom. Innocent

⁷² The "father/son" dimension explored in *City of Hope* runs through much of Sayles' work but, as I will explore later, is most dominant in *Lone Star* (1996).

lives are lost in the fire and when Nick finds out that his father has done this for him, he is sickened by it.

But what is worse, Nick's father has used these means before. The truth that Nick has never known is that his brother Tony was not a hero at all. The night before he left for Vietnam he got drunk, stole a car, ran over a woman and left her dying on the road. Joe, in an effort to protect the son he loved and knowing that the police would eventually find him, packed him off to Vietnam where he was killed. All these years, Nick's identity has been built on the premise that his brother was a hero, and he, merely a poor imitation. It is only when Nick is shot and fighting for his life that his father finally tells him the truth. He tells Nick that he lied about Tony to protect him from the truth. But of course all Nick ever wanted was precisely that, the truth. Only now can Nick begin to put together the pieces of his identity. But is it too late?

Running parallel to Nick's quest is Wynn's (played by Joe Morton). Wynn is a black middle-class councilman who must work within the white-run system to benefit his predominantly black constituents. At the beginning of the film he is optimistic, idealistic and hardworking, trying to improve education and housing for poor blacks in the city. But when two black youths mug a white, former colleague of Wynn's and then, to protect themselves, lie that he propositioned them, he has to choose whom to support. He finds himself caught up in the politics between the white establishment that he depends on to get ahead and the black militants in his constituency who support the boys.

The scene with Wynn, aspiring politician, and Errol, expedient ex-mayor, on the golf course is the turning point for Wynn. Errol functions in much the same way that Joe Kenehan did in *Matewan*. Just as Joe becomes young idealistic Danny's mentor, passing on his wisdom, so too is Errol the mentor of Wynn. As Errol tells Wynn how his own idealism was undermined, one can sense the growing awareness both in Wynn's words and his tone: "Worked so hard to get on the damn council....I never thought about...". Errol's education of Wynn is complete. Wynn now knows that if he wants power he will inevitably have to sacrifice his principles.

Power, and the need to acquire it, whether for good or bad intentions, will always corrupt says Sayles. He shows Wynn's idealism being systematically stripped away as he becomes more and more compromised by his situation and his own political aspirations. He knows the boys are lying and yet he chooses to ignore it. As Errol has intimated, expediency will and does win through and life goes on. Wynn compromises not only his own integrity but also the credibility of his innocent colleague, all for his own political gain. It is a sad demise, but one that Sayles is saying is inevitable in the dirty world of politics. Errol, the black former mayor, but also the corrupt present mayor is a prime example of this. Both were idealists once, but both learnt the lesson that in order to survive they had to compromise their moral integrity.

Nick is the one glimmer of hope that exists. Amidst the corruption and cronyism he is the lone innocent idealist. He is Sayles' classic outsider, sailing against the wind, in this case trying to maintain his idealism and integrity in a world where such things are mere romantic fantasies. There is

the underlying belief that within all the journeys that make up the Sayles oeuvre, the individual holds the key. In *City of Hope* Sayles appears to be going a step further and suggesting that only by remaining an outsider can individuals resist the corruption of their values. And so Nick's solitary journey when contrasted with Wynn's offers at least some hope for the future, while diffusing some of the irony of the film's title.

City of Hope is a difficult film to unravel because the narrative is dense with plots and subplots layered one upon the other. Cinematographer Robert Richardson (also cinematographer for *Eight Men Out*, 1988) is able to capture the expanse and density of the narrative with its constantly moving characters and plots. Sayles says that he and Richardson decided to shoot much of the film in Panavision wide screen so that they could have five or six people on screen without sacrificing image size. He says that this enabled them to make slight adjustments in the blocking so that the audience would start to see the people who were about to become the story in the background. (Smith p.187) Levy describes Richardson's style. His "alert camera never stands still, drifting among individuals as their paths cross, with long master shots demonstrating the interconnectedness of all of the city forces" (Levy p.89). This technique is similar to what Sayles does in *Los Gusanos* where the narrative shifts and turns and moves backwards and forwards in time. As mentioned earlier, this interconnectedness is very much part of Sayles' master plan. When asked what he was trying to express through Richardson's seamless camera style besides keeping things flowing he replied: "Basically that these people don't know it but they're all connected" (Smith p.185).

Sayles takes pains to accentuate his message through his method and this is evident even from the first frames. The credits are a blood red bold against a black background and move in time to a kind of sad city rock/blues (composed by Mason Daring) with harmonica prominent. As the film title appears we hear the sound of a train braking and, as if words and train are connected, both jerk across the screen as if they are being hand cranked. Then the screen goes black.

Sayles uses a more subjective and expressionistic cinematic style in *City of Hope* than in his previous films. The mise en scene captures Nick's state of mind in the very first scene with a classic film noir technique of positioning Nick at the edge of the frame rather than the centre in a skewed shot, alerting the viewer to his general confusion and alienation. Echoing the red credits there is a red wash on Nick and his surroundings hinting of further problems to come. The two parallel stories of Nick and Wynn that subsequently drive the narrative are foreshadowed even in this first scene. As Nick walks off the job he is momentarily in the same frame as Wynn. Again Sayles is saying that though we may not know each other (as is the case for Nick and Wynn) we are nevertheless inexorably connected. Nothing we do affects only ourselves.

I described *City of Hope* earlier as depicting a kind of urban wasteland. It is possible to see that Sayles' mythical *City of Hope* is his version of Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The city is sick, the inhabitants are sick. Joseph Campbell describes a wasteland as a land where "everybody is living an inauthentic life,

doing as other people do, doing as you're told, with no courage for your own life".⁷³ In the film, Nick, however seems to be the only one that sees it like this. He is like the questing knight searching for the grail: meaning and life among the ruins. The powerbrokers of the city, including the present mayor, the ex mayor, the heads of the various influential families and the mob represent aspects of the ailing king in this wasteland, incapable of escaping or healing the endemic sickness around them.⁷⁴

Not only is *City of Hope* thematically similar to *The Wasteland*, it is also structured like it. Both Eliot's poem and Sayles' film are built like surrealistic paintings. Collections of seemingly unrelated fragments appear at first glance to have been thrown together onto the canvas. The city scenes of both poem and film speak of despair and disillusionment. The mood is dark, infused with emptiness and loss. This is a dead land where nothing can grow. Clearly, Sayles' city is like Eliot's: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches / grow / Out of this stony rubbish?"⁷⁵

Like *The Wasteland*, the events of *City of Hope* begin to feel connected to each other. They tell the same tale of desolation and despair. Sayles' urban wasteland is like Eliot's waterless desert. It is a place where the inhabitants

⁷³ Joseph Campbell talks at length about the origin and meaning of the Holy Grail and its relation to the concept of the wasteland in *The Power of Myth* (p 195-200).

⁷⁴ T. S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* written following World War One paints Europe as a wasteland, physically, spiritually and emotionally. The land and its inhabitants are wrecked, like a battlefield after a battle. It paints a scene of devastation and decay, of emptiness and loss. The war has fragmented Europe and Eliot sees this as a metaphor for the broken human soul and the degradation of humankind.

⁷⁵ This is lines 18-20 of *The Wasteland*. It continues: "Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the

seem trapped, doomed to a never-ending cycle of repetition (Schopenhauer again). Asteroid, played by David Strathairn, is Sayles' expression of this never ending and nightmarish cycle. Asteroid spends much of the film striding through unfolding events harmlessly but surreally imitating "Mad Anthony's" electronics commercial. The "Mad Anthony" commercial itself takes on a bizarre life of its own in the scene where it is blaring out of dozens of televisions at high volume over and over again creating the sense that the world is out of control. In the final frames of the film when Nick is dying high on the roof of a building and Joe is calling desperately for help, Asteroid can only manically mimic his pleas over and over again modeling the "Mad Anthony" commercial. He is filmed from the roof of the building where Nick's life is slipping away in front of his frantic father. Down below on the red lit street, as if to suggest hell on earth, Asteroid grips the high wire fence and shakes it rhythmically as he yells to no-one: "Help! We need help! Help! We need help!".⁷⁶

Sayles' expressionistic cinematic technique is seen in the way that the camera films Nick throughout. There is a strong element of *film noir* in the scenes where Nick is running, trying to hide or escape in the night streets. The scene invites comparisons with other similar scenes such as Richard Widmark running through London in the 1950 version of *Night in the City*. The streets are alive with shadows and lines and silhouettes angling across his

dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,/ And the dry stone no sound of water."

⁷⁶ Sayles seems to draw another connection between Asteroid and Nick. Asteroid is what Nick could become. So in a sense he *is* Nick. Furthermore, just as Asteroid mimics "Mad Anthony" in the film, without even realising it, by turning in his despair

path as if the place itself is thwarting him. Nick runs in and out of pools of light, sometimes red, sometimes blue or white against the blackness. The red tones that wash over Nick and his surroundings are suggestive both of the anger that he feels now but also the violence, the fire and the death that is coming. The pools of blue and white give off a dreamlike sense of unreality. At other times bright white spotlights are used on character's faces, effectively freezing them in its beam and thus exaggerating their captivity. This is like Dante's "Inferno" with the "sinners" forever caught in the circle of sin.⁷⁷

As in Eliot's poem there is little hope here in this modern urban jungle. The film begins and ends with Nick, still off centre, still on the edge just as *Matewan* began and ended with Pappy Dan in the "same black hole" that he started in. It is clear that Nick's quest for healing and identity is only partly realised, but at least it has begun. The scene on the roof at the end of the film shows that once again little has changed, the cycle continues. But one thing is made clear. In the final analysis, it all comes down to the individual. The irony of the title is very clear at this point. Nick alone represents the only real hope for the future and as the film ends Sayles deliberately leaves his life in the balance.⁷⁸

Passion Fish: Journeys of Recovery

and dissatisfaction to petty crime, Nick is mimicking his brother Tony (Tony / Anthony?).

⁷⁷ The 'Inferno' comprises one part of three of what is considered Dante's greatest poetic work *Divina Commedia*. Written in the early thirteen hundreds and finished just before his death.

Passion Fish was screened in 1992 and was Sayles' next film after *City of Hope*. Instead of the wide busy canvas of industrial New Jersey Sayles transports us into the interior confines of a personal struggle in the humid wetlands of Louisiana. Where *City of Hope* dealt very much with a male struggle, *Passion Fish*, like *Lianna* is about the power of female friendship to overcome loss and pain and rebuild lives. *Passion Fish* marks the beginning of what could be called Sayles' "going back" films. This film, as well as all four films to be discussed in Chapter Four, revolve around the journey of a central character to a place, either from the past, or the site of their trauma, in order to fulfil their quests for healing and identity.

May-Alice (Mary McDonnell), a soap opera star, has been paralysed from the waist down in a car accident. Unable to come to terms with her tragic circumstances she moves back to her childhood home in the Louisiana bayou and wallows in self-pity. She employs a series of nurses to care for her but drives all of them away with fits of anger at her wretched dependency. All except one, Chantelle (Alfre Woodward), who, carrying her own emotional "baggage", turns out to be May-Alice's match. In one sense it is a film also about the dangers of monetary success and the inevitability of class distinctions. But above all, it is a painstakingly accurate portrait of suffering, and once again, like much of Sayles' work, it revolves around the issue of coming to terms with loss and failure and the piecing together of a shattered identity.

⁷⁸ Ryan notes that the film ends with a song by the Neville Brothers Band entitled "Fearless" that is both melancholy and positive. (P 172)

Given the subject matter, *Passion Fish* might easily have lapsed into the realm of the sentimental tragedy. But Sayles' choice of cast goes a long way towards ensuring that this does not happen. In particular, the casting of Mary McDonnell as May-Alice and Alfre Woodward as Chantelle was inspired.⁷⁹ McDonnell brings a cynical edge to her role as May-Alice that gives her character real depth and Woodward seems able to portray the wide swings of Chantelle's character, from doubt to hope, from self-destructiveness to strength. David Strathairn, who has been in many Sayles' films since *Return of the Secaucus Seven* is understated and natural as usual, lending realism to the part of Rennie.

Like Nick in *City of Hope*, May-Alice and Chantelle are outsiders, self-imposed exiles on journeys of recovery. Stephen Hunter, film critic for "The Sun" describes Chantelle: "In her own way, she's fighting the same devil that chokes May-Alice: the devil of self-hatred and its consequent desire to obliterate self". He continues: "The true journey in *Passion Fish* is toward self-forgiveness: It's about people learning to look in the mirror and not get the gag reflex as a reward."⁸⁰ The boat trip into the heart of the bayou mid-way through the film is a metaphor for their journey. It is like a play within a play, in Shakespearean fashion; a journey back within a journey back, taking them

⁷⁹ McDonnell (previously in *Dances with Wolves* and *Grand Canyon*) was nominated for an Oscar as best actress for her role as May-Alice. Alfre Woodward, who was previously in *Grand Canyon* also, as well as *Cross Creek* wasn't nominated for her role as Chantelle but should have been. Both actresses gave excellent and highly believable performances.

⁸⁰ This review was written for "SunSpot", the film review section of "The Sun", online: <http://www.sunspot.net/cgi-bin/movies/displaymovie.cgi?=827>

back in time to an almost primeval land where they can begin to come to terms with their past and heal their present.

As already mentioned this characteristic “going back to find out” becomes more and more visible in the films of Sayles from *Passion Fish* on. Not only does May-Alice go back to the bayou in *Passion Fish* but, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, Fiona goes back to the island in *The Secret of Roan Inish*, Sam Deeds goes back to the Borderlands in *Lone Star* and Joe goes back to sea in *Limbo*.

The question is why does Sayles do this? The answer is very “Saylesian”. Our past is the key. It is our history and it can heal and empower us.⁸¹ Clearly, Sayles, like Gerbode, and his contemporaries, (whose work I refer to in Chapter One) believes that on a personal level the answers to our most pressing questions and most urgent needs lie in our own personal past. Necessarily then, given the needy nature of the central characters of Sayles’ films, they must put themselves through this kind of retrogression as a means of healing their scars.

Passion Fish opens with a close-up of May-Alice’s hand hanging limply over the edge of a hospital bed. Its pale “broken doll-like” appearance is a symbol of her emotional *and* physical state. The camera waits. A tiny twitch of a finger, a sign. Slowly the camera moves up and settles on her face. She is waking from the anaesthetic, about to find out that she is paralysed. In the

background, as if in a dream, an emotional conversation is heard. May-Alice has heard it too. The camera follows her gaze as it finds the T.V. on the wall. There she is, acting in her “soap”, intact as she used to be. We begin to realise what she *was*. The camera drifts back to her face. Now we see what she has *become*. It is a powerful realisation. The suspense builds as we wonder whether she knows what has happened to her. The unreal, dreamlike sense is further accentuated by the actual words that we hear from the television.

Like a play within a play, an effect approximating *mise-en-abime*, something else is going on here and it is all about identity, losing it and fighting to regain it. May-Alice lies in bed having lost the ability to ever walk again. Her T.V. character has lost her memory and when asked if there is *anything* she can remember she recounts what she thinks is a dream where she is walking down a very long dark corridor that never seems to end. It is so quiet that she can hear her own footsteps. She senses that there is something terrible at the end but knows that “if she can stand up to it and face it, it could be something beautiful.” Her words are both a metaphor for and a foreshadowing of what is *really* about to happen to her. We learn later that even before her accident her career has hit a dead end (she is being written out of her “soap”), her marriage has ended and she is bitter and unhappy.

Roger Deakins' cinematography in *Passion Fish* complements Sayles' purpose. He continues to build the sense of entrapment. As May-Alice begins

⁸¹See the later paragraph on *Lone Star* when Sayles talks about the word “story” being inside the word “history”. This is important in that we are defined by our “stories” and

to suspect the awful truth she demands answers from the nurse and doctor. Deakins never shows the faces of the nurses or the doctors attending her. They are merely words and hands, like sterile mechanical manipulators of her life. They hold the balance of power. She is powerless. One feels the sheer helplessness and terror of her predicament. This cinematic technique of not showing those who hold the balance of power is used frequently in the films of Sayles. One example is the scene in the pub at the beginning of *The Secret of Roan Inish* where little Fiona's fate is being discussed. Apart from a medium shot of her listening, only the hands of the adults who are discussing her can be seen, emphasising her powerlessness. As in this instance the technique invariably relies on showing the hands only, with no other clues as to who or what is really happening. In other words identity is denied, disorientation is created.

Sayles' work with spinal cord injury patients in nursing homes in the late sixties and early seventies showed him what they go through following their injuries. He said: "I knew that any problems that you had before you were hurt, you still had". He also says that *Passion Fish* was intended to be about what it is like to be forty and to "hit the ceiling" as he calls it. "I'm fascinated by America where so much of advertising and the American psyche is about no frontiers, manifest destiny, the sky's the limit. What happens to people who hit that ceiling?" May-Alice has hit the ceiling. She can't hide from it and as a strong character she doesn't want to. As Sayles says, she could have just gone back to her New York apartment and become one of those people who "you never see again, who just sends out for things" (Smith p.198). In

therefore we must know them before we can know ourselves.

having her return to the claustrophobic Louisiana swamps Sayles brings her face to face with her predicament.

As in so many of Sayles' films the soundtrack subtly enhances the narrative. It is never overbearing or obtrusive. Mason Daring has worked on the music for all Sayles' films except *Baby it's You*. He uses the traditional music that belongs to each setting combining it subtly with modern thematically consistent works such as Los Lobos performing "Anselma" in *Lone Star* and Springsteen's "Lift me up" in *Limbo*. In *The Secret of Roan Inish* the narrative is enhanced by the mystical melodies of Celtic flutes. In *Passion Fish* Daring uses the zydeco music and the sad southern "Ry Cooder-like" slide guitar to add Louisiana atmosphere, feeling and authenticity to events.

Ultimately, *Passion Fish* is a far more positive and hopeful film than either *Matewan* or *City of Hope* and this hope is shown in the light changes that Deakins and Sayles achieve in the film. Sayles talks about the importance of achieving this in *Passion Fish* and how he discussed with Deakins that he wanted the light to change as the film progressed from the cold bright white hospital room to progressively darker tints until, when May-Alice is at her lowest, most desperate point, the only light is coming from the T.V. He says: "I wanted to get to the point where the audience is shrivelling up with this woman, rolling up in a ball, and she's got her two drugs, television and wine, and she's anaesthetizing herself" (Smith p.201). As soon as Chantelle comes on the scene the light begins to change. One of the first things she does is drag May-Alice out squinting into the sun.

When May-Alice and Chantelle are inside the house they are filmed in such a way as to isolate one from the other. The camera rarely films them in the same frame unless something in the frame, such as a piece of furniture, physically separates them. But when they are outside, they are filmed so that they seem less isolated from each, more often in the same shot with the camera backing away from them making them seem part of the land. Sayles describes the bayou (in *Sayles on Sayles*) as a sort of "dissolve-y" kind of place where there are no sharp edges or angles even on the trees.

Essentially then, when May-Alice and Chantelle are filmed outside Sayles seems to have been able to take away *their* sharp edges and angles and emphasise their 'softer' sides. They behave less abrasively towards each other as if the open setting is beginning to strip away their anger and despair. The camera's soft and fluid way movement mirrors the landscape. It follows May-Alice's and Chantelle's faces and uses dissolves rather than cuts when necessary. Sayles says: "It's so personal and so intense sometimes that you really want to get in their faces. And to do that you're going to have to move if either one of them moves, instead of cut, cut, cut. So often what I wanted the camera to be was the referee at a boxing match, where you keep moving as the referee so your angle isn't blocked" (Smith p.202).

May-Alice's and Chantelle's quests to find healing and renewed identity in *Passion Fish* are fruitful. Sayles emphasises that healing is taking place by filming them less often in the dark confines of the house and more often outside in the light of day. At her 'blackest', May-Alice wanted to 'cancel out' time because it reminded her of what she would have to live with for the rest of her life. She would spend the day drinking heavily and sleeping and the

night watching mindless television shows in the unlit house. But as she improves she is more and more able to cope with time passing and therefore is able to acknowledge when day and night begins and ends. As time goes on even when she and Chantelle are inside, Deakins films with more natural light coming in, symbolic of their journeys of healing through the 'darkness of despair' and out into the 'light of recovery'.

Chapter Four

Quests for Healing and Identity in four of Sayles' more recent films.

The Secret of Roan Inish, Lone Star, Men with Guns and Limbo

Each of the four more recent films dealt with in this chapter is structured around a physical journey and/or return to a place from the past. The geographical range of these journeys and quests is vast, far greater than those of the previous chapter. It is as if, as Sayles refines his craft and becomes more confident, he ventures further and further away from familiar ground. Sayles has us travel across the Atlantic to the wild Irish coastline, back to the arid and unforgiving American/Mexican borderlands of Frontera Texas, south to the isolated mountains of Central America and then far north, to the Alaskan sea-belt.

In Chapter Three I indicated that *Passion Fish* marked a departure of sorts for Sayles in that it began the trend that saw the main characters in his films begin to embark on *actual* rather than *figurative* journeys of discovery. Just as May-Alice's journey south in *Passion Fish* is a metaphor for her 'inner' journey, the very act of physically returning to her childhood home is the first step of what will be a long and painful healing process. The films dealt with in this chapter follow this trend that began with *Passion Fish*.

The journey that informs the narrative of *The Secret of Roan Inish* centres on a little girl, Fiona, lost in what Sayles terms the “new world” of the mainland.⁸² In the quest to regain her home and her identity she travels back to the island. The main character of *Lone Star* is Sheriff Sam Deeds, outsider in that, after many years of what could be termed self-imposed exile, he has returned to Frontera to face his private demons. But, what for him begins as a search for the truth about his father becomes also a quest for political justice. Dr Fuentes of *Men with Guns* has defined himself on the basis of the good he has done in training doctors to go into the isolated and civil war-torn mountains of Central to heal the sick and wounded. His journey of discovery involves travelling deep into the mountains to find out what he has really done. And then there is *Limbo*, where Joe, an ex fisherman, unable to go back on the sea after a tragic boating accident years earlier, finds himself reluctantly sailing north into the wilds of Alaska on his own journey towards healing.

As Emanuel Levy noted in *Cinema of Outsiders*, Sayles’ characters are as varied as his settings.⁸³ But, diverse as they seem, their emotional scars connect and unite them. The main characters of these films travel back to the scene or the source of their present angst in order to begin the healing process. As it was in the previous chapter also, the notion of ‘self-help’ is prominent in these films. Therapists and psychologists are redundant in Sayles’ narratives. Each individual must ultimately save his/her own life and

⁸² John Sayles uses this term, the “new world” in the interview on *The Secret of Roan Inish* in *Sayles on Sayles*. He goes on to say that in *Roan Inish* by telling the story about the loss of an island and a way of life he tried to capture the sense of Ireland being an island that’s obsessed with loss. (p 208)

so they embark, some more willingly than others, on journeys of self-discovery and healing.⁸⁴

As Phillip Kemp says, John Sayles is concerned: "with people trying to gain (or regain) control of their lives, often by coming to terms with who they are and where they started out from".⁸⁵ As I explained in Chapter One, in the context of psychoanalysis and therapy, "going back to heal" is not new. The method of curing various types of neuroses by "talking" patients back to and through the disturbing incidents from their past in what is called "retrospection" is most pertinent to what Sayles does in these films.

As Chapter Three demonstrated, *Matewan* and *City of Hope* contained elements of both personal and political quests. This thematic duality is particularly evident in the films explored in this chapter. For example, although *The Secret of Roan Inish* is essentially a myth about a child's personal search for home and identity, there is also a political dimension to it revolving around urbanisation and the inevitable loss of community that it brings. This same theme is juxtaposed against Joe's personal quest for healing in *Limbo*. *Lone Star* also, is as much a political quest as a personal one as is *Men With Guns*.

⁸³ See footnote 2 for Levy's description.

⁸⁴ Interestingly, it is the women and children (Lianna, May-Alice, Fiona and Chet) who seem to accept the need to be proactive in their quests while Sam (*Lone Star*) and Joe (*Limbo*), are more guarded although eventually and reluctantly are drawn into theirs. Sam however has taken 15 years to get to this point and Joe has taken 25.

⁸⁵ This observation of Sayles' thematic concerns is made in Kemp's review of *The Secret of Roan Inish*, *Sight and Sound*. August 1996, Vol. 6, Issue 8, p 63.

The dual nature of the quests in these films makes them structurally and narratively more complex than the more straightforward personal quests of films such as *Lianna* and *Passion Fish*. Furthermore, they have more complex outcomes. Of the films that could be considered more thematically political, such as *Matewan* and *City of Hope* discussed in the previous chapter and *Lone Star* and *Men with Guns* in this chapter they have more of an element of futility about them. Sayles seems to be saying that political action can be either a highway to change or a dead end street or elements of both.

Fast forwarding to the future for a moment, according to Matt Soergel, movie reviewer for *Times-Union*, even the film that Sayles is working on currently, signals that again he will have his central characters return to a place of their past. Again he will deal with the familiar theme of loss of community and the search for personal identity. At the time of writing, filming on *Gold Coast* (or *Sunshine State* as Matt Soergel believes it will be called) was about to begin.⁸⁶ The film will star Angela Bassett and Edie Falco "as women who've returned, reluctantly, to their hometown of Plantation Island in Northeast Florida".⁸⁷ Falco's character has returned to protect her father's motel and café from developers (loss of community), while Bassett's character has come home seeking reconciliation with her mother (search for identity).

⁸⁶ The article that I quote from is in the Current News section of The John Sayles Border Stop web site <http://home.earthlink.net/~saylesweb/news.html>

⁸⁷ Ibid.

The Secret of Roan Inish: The Long Dream of Home

It is the lyrical Celtic sound of the Irish flute that we hear first in Sayles' next film, *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994). In typical Sayles fashion we cross the world (and go back in time) to Ireland's isolated coast. Sayles based the screenplay on a novel by Rosalie Fry entitled *Secret of the Ron Mor Skerry*.⁸⁸ It has been called a modern day fairytale for its timeless mythical quality and it is possibly Sayles' best example of the power (and the secrets) of the oral tradition. Sayles describes these stories passed down orally as creation myths because they tell you who you are and where you came from.⁸⁹ Once again he wants us to think about these things. Who are we when we know nothing about our past? Can knowing about it help us and heal us? Can it empower us? It seems to me that Sayles has concerned himself more and more with this aspect of how we build and rebuild our identities in all his films since and including *Roan Inish*. The other three films discussed in this chapter, *Lone Star*, *Men with Guns* and *Limbo* all deal in varying degrees with the importance of the oral tradition.

The main character of the movie is a little girl, Fiona (Jeni Courtney).⁹⁰ As are many of Sayles' main characters, she is a victim of a lost way of life, alienated from her home and mourning the death of her mother and the literal

⁸⁸ Rosalie Fry wrote *Secret of Ron Mor Skerry* in 1959.

⁸⁹ Sayles talks in depth about how our oral tradition defines us and how he uses this in *Roan Inish* and *Limbo* in particular in the interview with Anthony Ferrante in *IF Magazine* (www.ifmagazine.com)

loss of her baby brother Jamie. After her mother died, Fiona and her family, fishermen by trade, reluctantly decided to leave the island of Roan Inish and live on the mainland where they could make a better living. Fish were scarce. Times were bad. The day they sailed away from Roan Inish they literally lost Fiona's baby brother. They had left him in his 'ark-like' wooden cradle on the sand while they loaded the boat. But while they were busy loading, the sea took the cradle and Jamie and washed them out to sea.

The scene is incredible in one sense and yet realistic enough to shock. After searching and searching they have to assume that Jamie has perished. Fiona goes to the city to live with her dad but is clearly pining for her lost home and family. When she goes to stay with her grandparents who live in a tiny cottage on the mainland across the sea from Roan Inish she hears rumours that her baby brother is still alive, that he has been seen on the island and is being looked after by seals.

As time goes on Fiona's curiosity draw her to the island and she sees Jamie with her own eyes. She knows that her future and her happiness lie on the island. It is as if Jamie is calling her home emphasising that it is she not Jamie that is lost. The film is about her quest to re-establish her identity by returning to her island home and restoring what is left of her family. But the film is not meant to be solely about the quest of one little girl. The mythical

⁹⁰ Jeni Courtney was an inspired choice for the part of Fiona. She has a naturally wistful but strong air about her.

quality that Sayles achieves suggests that this little tale about Fiona's "long dream of home", to use Victor Hugo's words, speaks to all exiles.⁹¹

As I mentioned in my introduction, this was the first John Sayles film that I saw and I was hooked. It is visually stunning, capturing beautifully both the wild landscape of Ireland and the outsiders that people it. Haskell Wexler, cinematographer, who also shot *Matewan* and *Limbo*, seems to have the same intuitive feel for the landscape that Deakins had in *Passion Fish*. I stated earlier that the film has been described as a modern day fairytale because of its timeless mythical quality. The magical and mythical nature of the narrative is achieved by the use of clever lighting techniques, camera positions and "evocative visual composition" (Ryan p.202). When Sayles was asked why he chose Wexler to shoot *The Secret of Roan Inish* he answered: "Haskell's really good with natural light and firelight from candles or fireplaces. Also, on the Donegal coast, the Irish weather changes every hour. I knew how good Haskell was at making everything match and appear seamless" (Smith p.127).

Just as the opening scene of *Passion Fish* emphasised May-Alice's alienation and loss, so too do the first scenes of *Roan Inish* emphasise Fiona's.

The film begins with a fishing boat cutting through the sea towards the camera, which seems to be at the water level. On the boat we see Fiona for the first time. She is standing alone looking out into the distance. When the

⁹¹ Victor Hugo is quoted in John Durham Peter's chapter "Exile, Nomadism, And Diaspora" in Naficy (1999).

shot reverses to show a seal we realise that we have been watching Fiona from the seal's point of view. The seal dives under with a splash at the same moment that the title "The Secret of Roan Inish" appears on the screen. We sense immediately a connection between girl and seal and know that "the secret" has something to do with this connection.

The scene dissolves back in time to a small family funeral on the hill overlooking the ocean. The inscription on the gravestone, and the absence of a mother figure tell us that it is Fiona's mother who has died. The camera, mounted low at Fiona's eye-level, pans up and across the faces of her remaining family and then away across the misty seascape behind them. It seems to connect them to it. The scene dissolves into mist.

Fiona emerges from the mist and walks towards the camera. The graveyard on the lonely hill has given way to a bustling town. There is a long travelling shot of little Fiona looking for her father in the steamy, noisy factory where he works. The camera is mounted low, at her eye level and it tracks her as she winds her way through the maze of machines and workers. They tell her that her father is in the pub. Without a word she crosses the lane and enters the crowded, dimly lit pub. The camera, still down at her level, moves with her as she brushes past the noisy drinkers, finally arriving at her father's side. We hear the drinkers and the barmaid discussing "the poor wee mite....with no mother to give her the loving touch"...etc, etc. But in the style of the opening scene of *Passion Fish*, again, we never see the faces of those discussing her. Sayles and Wexler use this device powerfully to convey her acute

isolation and powerlessness. And yet, as the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that it is actually she who has the power that they lack.

As mentioned above the film has a magical and mythical fairytale quality. Anything is possible. Just as Sayles endows Fiona with a kind of wisdom and power beyond her years he also gives the animals and the ocean and sky the power to influence events. Sayles says that he wanted Wexler to give the impression that the film was a conscious conspiracy "between the sky and the wind and the waves, the water, the seals and the gulls to take this child [Jamie] and keep him alive until these people come back and hold up their end of the bargain" (Smith p.214). Ryan believes that this was achieved when he says: "Ireland, especially the western shore and off-coast islands, functions for Sayles as Louisiana does in *Passion Fish*. It is a place of rough, mysterious beauty; a vestigial place, shaped by memories and legends; a reminder that a rugged life has not been entirely eradicated.

Ryan notes that in *The Secret of Roan Inish* Sayles has given nature "a consciousness and a power to control human events" (Ryan p.199). This is the kind of thing that some poets are able to do. Sylvia Plath created what she called "psychic landscapes" in her poetry. I think of her poem "Hardcastle Crags" where a young disturbed woman goes for a night walk up into the stone hills above the town. Plath was able to give the terrifying impression that "the weight / Of stones and hills of stones" were going to crush the woman of the poem, breaking her down to "mere quartz grit".⁹²

⁹² Sylvia Plath is one poet who seemed to be able do in her poetry what Sayles tries to do, particularly in *The Secret of Roan Inish* and *Passion Fish*. She seemed able to

Sayles creates his own kind of psychic landscape in *Roan Inish*. The seals and the birds and the ocean and the sky are like characters in the story conspiring to lure Fiona back to the island. In other words Sayles and Wexler give them a point of view and the power to influence events. Frequently it is the eyes of the seals and the birds that we see through in the film. It is this unusual mystical use of point of view in the mise-en-scene that helps Sayles and Wexler capture the magical quality of this myth without resorting to gimmicks or special effects.

Fiona's quest to re-establish her home on the island is successful. Magically, her baby brother who was lost at sea has survived and he and the seals that have taken care of him draw her back to the island. Fiona and her cousin begin to restore the abandoned island cottages knowing that they will eventually convince her grandparents to come with them back to the island for good.

Finally they do return and are reunited with Fiona's 'lost and found' baby brother. In the style of a fairytale where everything is possible, a way of life is saved in the nick of time and Fiona's quest for healing, identity and home is complete. The final scene provides a telling contrast with the scene in the cold windy graveyard at the beginning of the film. Fiona, her cousin, her

capture the essence of the landscape and show us its mythical (and in her case destructive) power. "Hardcastle Crag" was first published in her collection entitled "*Colossus*" in 1960 and again in 1981 in *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* (Ted Hughes: ed)

W.B. Yeats achieves the same kind of mythical power in poems such as "The Magi" and "Leda and the Swan".

grandparents and little Jamie are together in the newly painted and rejuvenated cottage on Roan Inish. It is their first night together back home. Firelight plays on their faces revealing their undisguised joy at being reunited and coming home.

***Lone Star*: Knowing our 'Stories'**

Like *Roan Inish*, *Lone Star*, which was released in 1996, is steeped in secrets, personal history and the search for identity. It is also about the role that storytelling has in shaping our identities. It is our history that defines us and gives us our identity. Sayles says himself: "history has the word story in it...Everyone starts with some kind of handicap or advantage, and that's their personal history" (Ryan p.218).

A close examination of the very first scene of the film is revealing. Identity is the key. Here are two men out in the desert together, and yet they are light-years apart. One has a notebook and is identifying desert plants by name. He rails at the other, who is searching for some kind of treasure with a metal detector, for not knowing anything about the place where he lives. "Man knows a hundred-fifty varieties of beer, he can't tell a poinsettia from a prickly pear...You live in a place, you should know something about it."⁹³ And so one man's knowledge of the desert plants, each of which has a name and an identity, is contrasted first with his companion's ignorance of plant identities and then with the discovery of two mysterious things: a body and a mason's

⁹³ Quoted from the Script of *Lone Star*, Sayles (1998)

ring. The origin and identity of both is unknown. There they are just lying in the desert. The gaping mouth of the skull is reminiscent of Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream".⁹⁴ It seems to be trying to scream some violent secret to them. The mason's ring is symbolic both of this secret and the secrecy that surrounds the lives of many of the characters in the film.

In the film, new sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) finds himself having to solve the forty-year-old mystery surrounding the body in the desert.⁹⁵ The mystery involves his own father and he must therefore delve into forgotten and forbidden areas of his own personal history to solve it.

Sam Deeds had left Frontera fifteen years before, when he was a teenager; driven out by the hate he felt when his father (the "legendary" sheriff Buddy Deeds) banned him from any liaison with his young lover, Pilar. But Buddy Deeds is dead now and so, after years of self-imposed exile, Sam feels able to come back to search for what he lost and left behind fifteen years earlier. The quest that he embarks on then is complicated. Before he can begin to know who he really is and be "healed" he must find out who his father really was. He must find out whether his father was responsible for the death of past sheriff, Charlie Wade (the body in the desert). The bottled up hatred in him secretly suspects his father of being guilty. Gradually he learns the truth and in so doing begins to heal the hatred and start to put together the fragments of his own identity.

⁹⁴ Expressionist Norwegian painter Munch painted "The Scream" in about 1891. The head is like a skull and the mouth is wide open, screaming. The look of the skull in the desert in *Lone Star* is very similar.

⁹⁵ Chris Cooper who played Sam Deeds was also in *City of Hope* and *Matewan*.

Identity and the search for it permeates every aspect of *Lone Star*. Sayles, however, wants us to think hard about collective as well as personal identity. Contrasted with Sam's own struggle then is a political struggle involving town, county and race. The struggle involves the clash between Mexican and Anglo American. Here the setting of *Lone Star* is most telling. This is Frontera (literally "Border"), a frontier, and a border town, where an arbitrary line has divided people who at one time were connected. Rosa Linda Fregoso in her essay entitled "Recycling Colonialist Fantasies on the Texas Borderlands" situates *Lone Star* in the genre of borderland cinema that began in the U.S. in the early days of silent film. As she notes: "The film, in fact, reads like an alternative lesson in Texas history", a kind of cinematic "historical revisionist project".⁹⁶

The scene directly following the credits at the start of the film is the first hint that this is also about collective (and political) as well as personal identity. It takes place in a high school classroom where Pilar (Sam's teenage lover now grown up) is involved in a heated discussion about how the history of the borderlands should be taught. In this scene the 'official' version of events is contrasted against the truth of what really happened, a point that Sayles makes many times in the film culminating in the phrase "forget the Alamo". The point here is one that he has explored in differing ways throughout so much of his work: that as individuals, groups *and* races, we build our identities from knowing our "stories", our history. And we are not whole until

⁹⁶ Fregosa's essay was published as a chapter in Hamid Naficy's book *Home, Exile, Homeland. Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, published in 1999. (p 169-192)

we do. As long as we remain ignorant of the truth about our history we cannot heal the scars of the present and begin to grow, either on a personal or political level.

Paralleling Sam's personal quest for identity, are a number of other quests. Firstly there is Pilar's and her mother's. Her mother has withheld the truth about Pilar's identity all her life and it is Sam who finally pieces it together. Secondly, there are the three generations of African American Paynes. "Del" Payne, the newly appointed 'big shot' army colonel and his teenage son Chet have returned to Frontera after many years away. Del, like Sam, was also "driven" away by his father (Otis), now an old man. Del wants nothing to do with his father but his teenage son Chet does. Chet feels estranged from his own father and wants to get to know his grandfather, whom he has never known. He needs to know about his history. Significantly, it is the son who manages to break down the barriers between them and begin to heal the rift that has existed like a border between them.

And then there is Bunny, Sam's ex wife. Unlike Sam, who escaped firstly from the clutches of his father and then the clutches of their marriage, she is still stuck. One of the most powerful scenes in the film is when Sam goes back to visit the highly unstable Bunny, to collect a box of things his father had given him long ago, things he had not cared enough about at the time to take with him when he left. Sayles' skill in being able to reveal character is very evident in the script of this scene, as is his casting of Frances

McDormand as Bunny.⁹⁷ He is able to expose the heart of Bunny's character and her instability in just a few minutes of monologue. Rapidly it is crystal clear why her marriage to Sam could never have worked. History destroyed them. As Sayles says: "This is a woman who has not escaped the past. It's clear that the weight of her family and their money doomed the marriage. The two of them came into it with this shit on their backs that made it impossible" (Smith p.224). In both cases their "baggage" involved their fathers.⁹⁸ There may however, still be a chance for Sam. He may have a second life. Bunny is not going to have one. "She is absolutely trapped in that room. You can see her thirty years from then – same person, the room is just messier" (Smith p.225).

This scene featuring Bunny's powerfully illuminating speech also demonstrates the tendency of Sayles to have his minor characters, rather than his main characters, deliver speeches, which, in the context of narrative and theme, are pivotal. In *The Secret of Roan Inish* it is the slightly threatening Tadhg (played by John Lynch), little Fiona's "black sheep" cousin, who tells her about the strange sylkie myth on which her own history and the narrative are built. In *Men with Guns*, released in 1997, it is the campfire 'story' of Padre Portillo (Damian Alcazar), which really alerts the audience to the seriousness of the situation. In *Lianna* it is the barman who relates the story about Joe's tragic accident over the bar to a couple of newcomers.

⁹⁷ Frances McDormand won an Oscar for her portrayal of the Policewoman in *Fargo* released the same year as *Lone Star*. She gave a commanding performance as the pregnant mistress in *Wonder Boys* (2000) and the mother in *Almost Famous* (2000).

⁹⁸ The subject of fathers being responsible for some of the trauma Sayles' characters carry is prominent in much of Sayles' work most notably with Brian's father in the

Sayles approaches the interplay of foreground and background characters a little differently to other filmmakers, particularly the Hollywood "set". "In your average Hollywood movie there are two leads and everyone else is basically an extra – in mine the secondary characters start moving forward and become primary".⁹⁹ This is both a theatrical as much as a cinematic device that Sayles is using, one that has been utilised on stage from early Greek theatre through Shakespeare until the present, but it is also a result of his writer's insight. As keen observer, writer and actor, Sayles is well aware that no one is one-dimensional and it is often the person who says the least who actually says the most.

Sam's quest to find the truth about his father is realised in the film. But in uncovering the truth, he really only exposes the tip of an iceberg. He begins to find out just how much his father had kept from him, truths that had he known would have made his life completely different. His new knowledge is a double-edged sword. He finds out who he really is but also learns that the woman he loves is his half sister, a truth withheld from him by his father.

Finally though, he and Pilar, meet in the light of day at the same drive-in theatre where they used to meet under cover of night so many years ago.

Weeds have taken over the site and the huge screen looks blankly on. Sam

"Brian Stories" (*Anarchist's Convention*), Nick's father Joe in *City of Hope* and both Sam's and Bunny's fathers as well as Chet's and Delmore's father's in *Lone Star*.

⁹⁹ Sayles goes on to say: "It's like the way that I mix sound – if you're in a bar, and it's noisy, the background noise is mixed up closer to the foreground sound, which makes it a little harder for people who don't hear very well. I'm not the only person

and Pilar's teenage trysts are shown through flashbacks contrasting sharply with the present. But it is clear that despite the passage of time they still feel the same way about each other. The secrets that they have uncovered about their parentage have far reaching implications but they both know that they can either choose to be heeded by their new knowledge or ignore it. Sayles chooses the latter. Sam and Pilar decide to ignore the taboo of incest and to stay together. Pilar's final words to Sam in the film: "Forget the Alamo," says it all. As Sam and Pilar both know from bitter experience, the burden of history is heavy. It can haunt and poison us if we let it. They see that now, and are not about to let it haunt them any more.

Men with Guns: An Awakening

Men with Guns (1997), is a journey into the mountains in an unnamed Central American country, where a doctor confronts the truth that he has been denying to himself. Like *City of Hope*, *Men with Guns* is representative rather than specific and like *City of Hope* it takes place in a mythical yet representative setting. Sayles intention is clear. He doesn't want the viewer to say, "Oh that's what it's like in such and such" and then dismiss it. He wants us to see that these places can be anywhere, that the things that happen there are universal rather than specific to certain locales.

Men with Guns then is another kind of myth. It takes place in a country where men are defined by whether or not they carry guns. Those that do are defined

who does it that way; Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese do it that way. The

by what they take away while those that do not are defined by what they give. Sayles contrasts the “givers” with the “takers”. We meet “the salt people”, “the sugar people”, “the coffee people”, “the banana people”, “the gum people”, and “the corn people”. But all are trapped in a no man’s land between the “men with guns”: the revolutionary guerrillas on the one hand, and the army on the other.

Slawomir Idziak’s cinematography captures the mixture of myth and realism in *Men with Guns*. Moments of magical realism do not seem out of place. The first suggestion of it is in the opening scene of the woman and her daughter cooking on a fire. The audience have no hint of what part they will play in the film. A touch of magic surrounds the woman who is telling her daughter that a “healer” is coming” to the village. She already knows that he has trouble breathing and later when the doctor has almost reached the village, “Close to Heaven”, she tells her daughter that they needn’t hurry to see him because he will be there to stay.

The mise en scene is lush and close so that the horizon can rarely be seen, emphasising Dr Fuentes’ journey itself rather than his destination. Mist hangs in the trees in the early mornings, clears for a while and comes again at night giving the setting a mystical otherworldliness. Tracks and paths appear out of the trees, crossing each other and disappearing into the mist to unknown places. They seem to be symbolic of the various individuals, all of them searching, whose journeys cross in the film.

The mythological setting of *Men with Guns* has another function also and here I turn to Joseph Campbell to explain.¹⁰⁰ Campbell called myths the masks of God in the sense that they are metaphors for what lies beyond the visible world. No matter how mystic traditions may differ from culture to culture, said Campbell, all concur that myths bring us to a deeper awareness of living itself. But the unpardonable sin in Campbell's opinion, and which is so pertinent to Sayles' *Men with Guns*, is the sin of not knowing and of not taking personal responsibility for one's actions. It is not acceptable in Sayles' opinion, (and Campbell would agree), to close our minds to the world around us. It is like the grieving mother who says she didn't know that her dead child was being beaten. We have an obligation to learn and explore and know.¹⁰¹

The story of *Men with Guns* is centred on the journey of Dr Fuentes. He has woken one day to the realisation that he is guilty of the crime of inadvertence. Fuentes lives in a city somewhere in Central America. He has spent a good part of his career training young doctors to go into the remote mountain areas to heal the sick. His identity has been built on the belief that in his life he has done great work, in short that he is a hero. He has equipped others to cure sickness and save lives. But suddenly, after the death of his wife, he begins to doubt himself. He decides to travel to the mountains to find the young doctors that he trained. When he tells his prospective son-in-law of his plans, the young man is disdainful. He hints that Dr Fuentes' work has been worthless and that Fuentes will not find the doctors alive. Fuentes is shocked

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Campbell, arguably one of the world's greatest scholars and authorities on mythology discusses the hero's quest in mythology in *The Power of Myth*. p 123-164.

and offended and yet is even more determined to go and find out what has happened to them. His whole identity is under threat. Like the hero in mythology and in true Saylesian fashion he embarks on a journey of discovery, deep into the mountains where the answers to his most pressing questions lie.

The usual hero quests in mythology says Campbell, begin with someone from whom something has been taken. According to Campbell: "This person then goes off on a series of adventures, beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a going and a returning." Dr Fuentes is like the mythological hero. His quest is to find the truth, and to come to terms psychologically with its implications. This is a kind of awakening that takes him from innocence to experience, from a state of political naivety to one of political awareness.

In the tradition of other quests in folklore and literature, Fuentes encounters many trials and revelations on his journey. His journey, which is part odyssey, part mystery takes him deep into the mountains. Each village that he visits is more remote than the last and each time he finds that the doctor that he trained has been killed, either by the revolutionary guerrillas or the army. The only thing the surviving villagers will tell him is that the doctors were killed by "men with guns". Gradually he begins to understand that he has put his trainees in a no-win situation. There is a war going on. If they minister to a guerrilla, the army will kill them, and vice-versa. Fuentes has in fact

¹⁰¹ I use the analogy of the grieving mother (one that is all too familiar in recent years) and that Maria Garcia uses in her review of *Men with Guns* for Film Journal

sentenced his young trainees to death. And so two questions fuel Fuentes' quest: "Who am I if I have spent my life teaching others to save lives?" and "Who am I if all I have given my students is a death sentence?"

Dr Fuentes meets other scarred and searching individuals along the way, each of whom he helps and each of whom teach him important lessons. First there is an orphaned boy of ten, who becomes his guide. Then he allows an army deserter who has just robbed him to join the group. The young deserter has been shot and he forces Fuentes to administer to his wound. Next a tormented ex priest, and finally a young girl, traumatised after being raped, join them. Each of his companions has their own cross to bear and need to journey on with Fuentes to begin their own healing process.

The Padre's story is central to the narrative. When Fuentes first picks him up on the road he asks him: "Are you lost?" The Padre answers with a wry laugh: "Yes. For a long time now". He tells Fuentes that he was a Padre until he was tested and failed the test. Later when the little band of travellers stop for the night Fuentes and the Padre talk about how they both wanted to leave some sort of legacy in the world but agree that both have failed. It is clear that both men are lost. As they squat around the fire the Padre tells them a ghost story. The scene is unforgettable.

The Padre tells the ghost story as if it is about someone else, beginning: "There was a Priest who came to a mountain village to teach the Bible. He used theatre – put on plays for the children to bring the holy word". The Padre

continues his tale, as a flash back sequence of his story takes over. He continues to relate his story as a voice-over to the action. His tale is terribly sad and culminates in him deserting his villagers, leaving them to die. When the flashback and the Padre's story ends the extent of the burden of guilt that he carries is obvious. The men ask him what happened to the Priest to which he answers: "The Priest wanders the roads and pathways of the country, never sleeping in the same place. He is neither here nor there – a ghost".¹⁰² It is clear that he inhabits a living hell one from which he will find no redemption. Like Padre Martin in "Los Gusanos", Padre Portillo in *Men with Guns* is also reminiscent of the whisky priest in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*. Like Greene's whisky priest Padre Portillo is a fallen man. His crime of running away from his death sentence meant that another villager died because of him. His guilt hangs on him like a shroud.

Ultimately, Fuentes does arrive with his small band of outcasts at the furthest and highest point that he can go, to a village significantly named "Close to Heaven", that even the helicopters can't find. In his first book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Campbell described what he called the vision quest that is prominent in many different mythologies. His description of it cannot help but remind us of Dr Fuentes quest: "You leave the world that you're in and go into a depth or into a distance or up to a height. There you come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world you formerly inhabited. Then comes the problem either of staying with that, and letting the world drop off, or returning...and trying to hold on to it as you move back into your social world again" (Campbell p.129).

¹⁰² The lines quoted are taken from the published screenplay of *Men With Guns* (p.68).

It is clear that Dr Fuentes' quest is complete. While he can never change the reality of what he now knows that he did, at least now he understands. He can surrender, he can "let the world drop off" as Campbell would say. It has become clear that Fuentes' heart is failing and he dies there "close to heaven", suggesting that his enlightenment is complete. Mythology tells us that out of a given life comes a new life, a new way of being or becoming. Symbolic of this, when the doctor is dead, his black doctor's bag that he has carried with him throughout his journey is passed on to a new healer, the young deserter who robbed him and whose life he saved earlier on the journey. Significantly, this time the bag will be carried by someone (unlike Dr Fuentes when *he* began) who really understands the double-edged sword that it is.

***Limbo*: Into the Heart of the Alaskan Darkness**

Limbo (1999) is John Sayles' most recently released film to date. It is also only the second studio picture he has made in his career to date, the first being *Baby it's You* (Paramount Pictures, 1983).¹⁰³ Juneau, Alaska where *Limbo* was filmed is another kind of deserted island/borderland in the middle of nowhere, the kind of place where people can't escape their past. Roger Ebert puts it like this: "Juneau is the only state capital with roads that lead nowhere. Every highway out of town ends in the wilderness. That serves as a

¹⁰³ *Limbo* was made by Sony Pictures Entertainment. Sayles sees Sony as an 'artist friendly' company that is happy to leave full artistic control in the hands of Sayles, something that Sayles will not give up for anything.

metaphor for the characters in John Sayles' *'Limbo'*, a movie about people whose lives are neither here nor there, but stuck in-between."¹⁰⁴ Sayles habitually finds these sort of "outposts" against which his questing characters are forced to face their demons. I think of the insular wetlands of *Passion Fish*, the desolate island of *Roan Inish*, the desert borderland setting of *Lone Star* and the isolated jungle pathways of *Men with Guns*.

Once again comparisons can be drawn between Sayles and Graham Greene. Increasingly, Sayles seems to set his films more and more often in the same kinds of outposts that Graham Greene chooses. I think of novels such as *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *A Burnt Out Case*, *The Quiet American* and *The Honorary Council* to name a few. John Sayles has always respected Greene's work and, given certain similarities of setting, theme and choice of characters, I feel certain that Greene's fiction has influenced Sayles' "storytelling". Furthermore, when Graham Greene describes how he came to write *The Power and the Glory* his words bring to mind Sayles talking about how many of his stories derived directly from things he saw and heard when he was hitchhiking in the late '60s and early '70s. Greene tells how *The Power and the Glory* was borne out of a trip to Mexico in 1937-38 where he saw characters and observed mannerisms and the began to connect them into the beginnings of a plot.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ I find Ebert's reviews perhaps the most illuminating as regards the central idea of this thesis. This particular review was written for the *Chicago Sun Times*, June 4, 1999, www.suntimes.com/output/ebert1/limbo04f.html

¹⁰⁵ As I have already mentioned in my discussion about *Los Gusanos*, similarities also exist between Sayles and Greene as regarding the way they characterise priests and padres in their work.

Sayles takes his three main characters, ex-fisherman Joe Gastineau (David Strathairn), barroom singer Donna (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) and her lonely and displaced daughter Noelle (Vanessa Martinez), on a journey of self-discovery in *Limbo*. Sayles seems to be able to create characters that have extraordinarily complicated pasts, as Nick of *City of Hope* and Sam of *Lone Star* confirm. Joe and his almost girlfriend Donna are no different. Both are carrying around the 'baggage' of traumatic events of their pasts. Joe was involved in a fatal boating accident and has carried the guilt and trauma of it around with him for twenty-five years. Donna has become a displaced person, moving on and dragging her daughter with her, every time her affairs with men turn bad. Because her mother never stays anywhere long enough for her to know where home is, Donna's daughter Noelle is fast becoming an exile. In her review for the L.A. Weekly entitled "Border Town. John Sayles' *Limbo*" Ella Taylor says: "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".¹⁰⁶ They are like the salmon we see as the first whiteout ends, swimming against the current and going nowhere.

Wexler, a master at enhancing atmosphere by the use of light, is the cinematographer for *Limbo* as he was for *Matewan* and *Roan Inish*. Lighting was crucial in creating atmosphere in these films and once again, in *Limbo*, it is important thematically and narratively. Like *Men with Guns*, *Limbo* is at

¹⁰⁶ "Border Town. John Sayles' *Limbo*" can be read online at www.laweekly.com/ink/99/28/film-taylor.shtml

once a real and figurative journey into a Conradian “heart of darkness” where, as night or the weather closes in, firelight is the only light. Wexler frequently fades to black in the second half of the film to capture both the passage of time and the emotional black hole that the characters are trapped in.

Even before the reluctant seafarers set off Wexler films Juneau to make it appear utterly washed out, like the ‘washed up’ fisherman inhabitants. This is a town in transition, between a traditional salmon fishing economy and a tourist town. It, also, is struggling to find its identity. The mise-en-scene mirrors the reality of a town where the only entertainment is “watching fish die” or listening to “grisly marine stories recounted by beached sailors” in the Golden Nugget Casino.¹⁰⁷

In the first scene in the bar when everyone is telling stories, both Sayles’ script and Wexler’s cinematography captures the essence of the town. The camera crosscuts from one ghoulish tale of attack and drowning to the next. Donna is in the bar and as she hears the story about Joe’s boating accident the camera cuts to a deep focus shot of Joe. He is bathed in blue light, which seems to emphasise his feeling of loss. In an interview with Erica Pennella for the *Philadelphia Weekly* Sayles recounts how he wrote the complete stories for all the little snippets that are heard in the bar, but then had the camera and the soundtrack catch only important pieces of each story. In this way he ensured that the snippets that were heard were convincing. This kind of

¹⁰⁷ Curtis review for Hot Tickets, Film Review can be read online at www.thisislondon.co.uk/dyn.../film.html

approach is typical of Sayles.¹⁰⁸ The stories seem to be emphasising the point that this is literally a 'dead-end' place. Not only do the fish die here, the people do too, literally and emotionally. Not only do the roads lead nowhere here but the people are going nowhere as well.

Joe, Donna and Noelle put to sea, against their own better judgements, for what is meant to be a simple delivery and sightseeing trip. But what transpires is far from sightseeing. Their trip turns bad and they find themselves lost and fighting to stay alive in the cold, wet, uninhabited wilds far to the north of Juneau. The environment symbolises their emotional landscapes. Becoming lost in this wilderness is like immersing themselves in their own despair. It brings them right back to ground zero and forces them to begin to come to terms with some of the issues that are poisoning them. In this respect *Limbo* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* have much in common. Like *Heart of Darkness*, much of *Limbo* takes place at night where Joe, Donna and Noelle are huddled around the barely adequate fire in the cold and leaking hut. Their journey into the Alaskan wilderness, like Malowe's into the heart of the Africa, is a journey into the unconscious, a spiritual voyage of self-discovery.

As the film comes to an end there is a sense that they have turned a corner in their lives. Joe appears to have cast off the guilt that he has carried for twenty-five years and is looking positively towards the future. And whereas Donna's previous affairs with men whom she has hardly known have always

¹⁰⁸ Erica Pennella's interview/article entitled "Traveling Indie-Auteur John Sayles Sails Through *Limbo*" is printed on www.Indiewire.com/film/interviews

ended in disillusionment, it is different this time with Joe. After what they have been through they know each other almost better than they know themselves. This time, just maybe things will work out.

Even as the film ends however, there is the sense that their journeys are not over yet. And typically of Sayles, he gives no guarantees that they will live to see them out. They are literally in a state of limbo, between damnation and salvation. Just as the film began with a whiteout, Sayles expresses their state of limbo metaphorically by ending on a whiteout as well.

Chapter Five:

Concluding words

I think back now to what it was that touched me about *The Secret of Roan Inish* that precipitated my own journey into the world of Sayles' fiction and films. For me, the film revealed not one but many secrets. I saw in it common elements and concerns that can be found in a great deal of his work as both writer and filmmaker.

Fiona is the typically Saylesian questing individual in *The Secret of Roan Inish*. As I have demonstrated, her strongly independent nature as well and her "self-help" attitude is evident in so many of Sayles' protagonists. Like Fiona, the central characters in the fiction and films of John Sayles are often exiles or outsiders. Like her they carry the wounds and traumas of past events. But they do not intend to carry them forever. They are driven by strong intrinsic need to heal and to find renewed identity for themselves.

Roan Inish, as are many of Sayles' other films, is a socially conscious film. It is a story about the consequences of the breakdown of community and the power that individuals, even children, have to rebuild it. This thesis has demonstrated that these characteristics and concerns that I first noticed in *Roan Inish*, are evident in almost all of Sayles' work to varying degrees.

I have shown that the central characters in both Sayles' fiction and his films are lost and hurting. Their tales are extraordinary tales of self-help. Driven by an inner need to "save their own lives" they step out of their comfort zones and embark on quests in search of the twin grails of healing and identity. In a sense their quests take them through a kind of self-administered psychotherapy similar to the method discussed in Chapter One. They take themselves back into the trauma of past events remembering and re-experiencing events so as to exorcise their 'demons' and heal. From characters in the earliest work discussed to Sayles' most recent; from Hobie and Hunter in *Union Dues* (1977) through to Dr Fuentes in *Men with Guns* and Joe in *Limbo*, Sayles' protagonists "step off", not always knowing where their quests will lead them but undaunted by possibility of failure. Characters such as May-Alice from *Passion Fish*, Sam from *Lone Star* and Dr Fuentes from *Men with Guns* are like Marlowe in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, driven to confront the emptiness and the darkness in order to set themselves on a path towards the light.

As I have noted before, not all the quests are fruitful or successful in Sayles' work. Characters such as Lianna (*Lianna*), Dr Fuentes (*Men with Guns*) and Joe (*Limbo*) are seen more to have gained personal enlightenment rather than achieving anything more tangible. Although Lianna 'comes out' from a unfulfilling relationship, in the final analysis she is alone. Dr Fuentes' quest culminates in his death, as does Joe Kennehan's in *Matewan*. Joe Gastineau's life is tantalisingly left in limbo at the end of his journey, as is Nick's in *City of Hope* and Marta's at the end of *Los Gusanos*. The future looks uncertain for Amado in "Old Spanish Days". Hobie and Hunter of *Union*

Dues as well as Brian in the *Anarchists' Convention* stories are all shown to be at least on the way towards achieving their goals as is Sam from *Lone Star*.

But Sayles never dramatises the achievement or attainment by his characters of the goals of their quests. The reader and viewer rarely see his characters happy or content in the gaining of their goals, with the exception of Fiona in the final frames of *The Secret of Roan Inish*. Sayles only hints at these things or shows his characters *about* to achieve their goals. In doing this he is making the point that it is not the end point in each 'journey' that is important but the journey itself. Sayles is saying that enlightenment in the form of healing and renewed identity cannot be measured in these terms and can also never ever be *fully* realised. This, suggests Sayles, is part of the human condition and is what keeps us striving and questing for better in our lives instead of simply accepting what life throws at us.

The fiction and films discussed in this study affirm Sayles as a socially conscious writer and filmmaker. Films such as *City of Hope*, *Roan Inish* and *Limbo* deal with issues of loss and erosion of community. "Old Spanish Days" and "Los Gusanos" deal with the issue of exile from homeland. *Lone Star* and *Matewan* emphasise the importance of knowing our history and *Men with Guns* deals with the crime of not knowing, suggesting that as humans we have a responsibility to know what is going on in the world and to act on the basis of knowledge rather than ignorance.

All the stories, novels and films dealt with confirm what is perhaps Sayles' biggest strength. He is a masterful storyteller. His tales are well crafted and memorable, the sort of stories that can be told around a fire. His characters are realistically drawn. Sayles reveals their essence through dialogue, capturing each person's dialects and vocal mannerisms in the belief that character is revealed by what a person says and does rather than through longwinded description.

Sayles' novels in particular, but also films such as *City of Hope* and *Lone Star* employ many points of view to tell their stories. In doing this he is saying that everything in life can be viewed from a myriad of different angles confirming the validity of more than one point of view. The narrative structure in Sayles' work also emphasises this point by shifting backwards and forwards from one character and one time to another. Furthermore, Sayles work is an affirmation of the interconnectedness of everything and everybody. Everyone's actions affect everyone else, as the narrative of films such as *Los Gusanos* and *City of Hope* in particular demonstrate.

This study of Sayles' fiction and films has illustrated the centrality of the quest in his work. It has shown that his characters are as questers of old, searching for the illusive grail of healing and identity. It would appear that Sayles is not done with this notion yet. The main characters in the film on which he is currently working (*Gold Coast*) are also drawn back to face events and issues of their past to enable them to deal with their present lives.

It has been fascinating to delve into this aspect of the work of such an extraordinary writer and independent filmmaker. The future looks bright for Sayles. His work to date has earned him the title of uncrowned king of independent film and he has managed to protect his integrity and his creative vision against strong odds. It seems to me that as time goes on Sayles will continue to deal with the issues he has dealt with in the past but he may give them more of a political edge. Clearly he is a very principled and socially conscious writer and filmmaker who is concerned about the issues of his time. It would not surprise me if, in his future fiction and films this political aspect of his work becomes more prominent.

In the final analysis though, Sayles work will continue to surprise and challenge in the years to come. He also, like the questing characters discussed here, is clearly on his own life quest to tell his stories his own way and share with us his unique and powerful vision.

Appendix A

Filmography

As Director and Screenwriter

1979

The Return of the Secaucus Seven

Production company: Salsipuedes Productions

Producers: Jeffrey Nelson, William Aydelott

Unit manager: Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Austin DeBesche (Duartcolor)

Editor: John Sayles

Music Director: Mason Daring

Cast: Bruce MacDonald (*Mike Donnelly*), Adam Lefevre (JT), Gordon Clapp (*Chip Hollister*), Karen Trott (*Maura Tolliver*), David Strathairn (*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 (*Left*), John Sayles (*Howie*), Amy Schewel (*Lacey Summers*), Eric Forsythe (*Captain*), Betsy Julia Robinson (*Amy*), John Mendillo (*bar tender*), Jack Lavalle (*booking officer*), Benjamin Zaitz (*Benjamin*)

110min., 16mm

1982

Lianna

Production company: Winwood Company

Producers: Jeffrey Nelson, Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Austin DeBesche (Duartcolor)

Editor: John Sayles

Art Director: Jeanne McDonnell

Music: Mason Daring

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

112 min., 16mm

1983

Baby, It's You

Production company: Double Play Productions, Paramount Pictures Corporation

Producers: Griffin Dunne, Amy Robinson

Associate producer: Robert F. Colesberry

Screenplay: John Sayles

Original story: Amy Robinson

Cinematography: Michael Ballhaus

Editor: Sonya Polonsky

Production designer: Jeffrey Townsend

Cast: Rosanna Arquette (*Jill Rosen*), Vincent Spano ("*Sheik* " *Capadilupo*), Joanna Merlin (*Mrs. Rosen*), Jack Davidson (*Dr. Rosen*), Nick Ferrari (*Mr. Capadilupo*), Dolores Messina (*Mrs. Capadilupo*), Leora Dana (*Miss Vernon*), William Joseph Raymond (*Mr. Ripeppi*), Sam McMurray (*Mr. McManus*), Liane Curtis (*Jody*), Claudia Sherman (*Beth*), Marta Kober (*Debra*), Tracy Pollan (*Leslie*), Rachel Dretzin (*Shelly*), Susan Derendorf (*Chris*), Frank Vincent (*Vinnie*), Rohin Johnson (*Joann*), Gary McCleery (*Rat*), Matthew Modine (*Steve*), John Ferraro (*Plasky*), Phil Brock (*Biff*), Robert Downey Jr. (*Stewart*), Fisher Stevens (*stage manager*)

104 min., 35mm

1985

The Brother from Another Planet

Production company: A- Train Films

Producers: Peggy Rajske, Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Ernest Dickerson

Production designer: Nora Chavooshian

Art director: Stephen Lineweaver

Music: Mason Daring

Cast: 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 (*Man In Black*), David Strathairn (*Man in Black*). Maggie Renzi (*Noreen*), Olga Merediz (*Noreen's client*), Minnie Gentry (*Mrs. Brown*), Ren Woods (*Bernice*), Reggie Rock Bythewood (*Rickey*). Alvin Alexis (*Willis*), Rosetta Le Noire (*Mama*), Michel Albert Mantel (*Mr. Lowe*), Jaime Tirelli (*Hector*), Liane Curtis (*Ace*), Chip Mitchell (*Ed*), David Bahcock (*Phil*), Sidney Sheriff Jr. (*Virgil*), Carl Gordon (*Mr. Price*), Fisher Stevens (*card trickster*), Kim Staunton (*teacher*), Anthony Thomas (*basketball player*), Rosanna Carter (*West Indian Woman*), Josh Mostel (*Casto vendor*)

108 min., 35 mm

1985

Music videos featuring Bruce Springsteen.

Born in the U.S.A.
I'm on Fire
Glory Days

1987

Matewan

Production company: Red Dog Films, Cinecom Entertainment Group, Film Gallery
Executive producers: Amir Malin, Mark Balsam, Jerry Silva
Producers: Peggy Rajske, Maggie Renzi
Cinematography: Haskell Wexler (Duartcolor)
Editor: Sonya Polonsky
Production designer: Nora Chavooshian
Art director: Dan Bishop
Music: Mason Daring
Cast: Chris Cooper (*Joe Kenehan*), Mary McDonnell (*Elms 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*), Jo Henderson (*Mrs. Elkins*), Josh Mostel (*Cabel Testerman*), Gary McCleery (*Ludie*), Maggie Renzi (*Rosaria*), Tom Wright (*Tom*), Michael Preston (*Ellix*), Thomas A. Carlin (*Turley*), John Sayles (*hard-shell preacher*)
 133 mm., 35 mm

1988

Eight Men Out

Production company: Orion Pictures Corporation
Executive producers: Barbara Boyle, Jerry Offsay
Producers: Sarah Pillsbury, Midge Sanford
Co-producer / production manager: Peggy Rajske
Based on the novel by: Eliot Asinof
Cinematography: Robert Richardson (Duartcolor)
Editor: John Tintori
Production designer: Nora Chavooshian
Art Director: Dan Bishop
Music: Mason Daring
Cast: 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*), Michael Learner (*Arnold Rothstein*), Richard Edson (*Billy Maharg*), Christopher Lloyd (*Bill Burns*), Michael Mantell (*Abe Attell*),

Kevin Tighe (*Sport Sullivan*), Clifton James (*Charles Comiskey*), Barbara Garrick (*Helen Weaver*), Wendy Makkena (*Kate Jackson*), Maggie Renzi (*Rose Cicotte*), Nancy Travis (*Lyria Williams*), Ken Berry (*heckler*), Danton Stone (*hired killer*), Stephen Mendillo (*monk*), Jim Stark (*reporter*), John Anderson (*Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis*), Eliot Asinof (*Heydler*), Clyde Bassett (*Ben Johnson*), John D. Craig (*Rothstein's lawyer*), Michael Laskin (*Austrian*), Randle Mell (*Ahearn*), Robert Motz (*district attorney*), Bill Raymond (Ben Short), Brad Garrett (Pee Wee) Tay Strathairn (Bucky), Jesse Vincent (Scooter)
120 min., 35mm

1989

Mountain View

Production company: Alive From Off Center 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

Cast: Thomas Eldred (Old man), Jane Alexander (Bartender), Jace Alexander (Son), Fred Holland, Mary Schultz (Couple on porch), Jim Desmond (Bar fly), Marta Jomiller (Young mother), Christine Philion, Nathaniel E. Lee (Newly weds), Cathy Zimmerman, Thomas Grunewand (Couple in truck), Marta Renzi (Other women), Joanne Callum, Caroline Grossman (Girl friends), Doug Elkins, Chisa Hidako (Son's friends), Sarah Grossman Green, Irene Krugman, Caitlin Miller, Amos Wolf (Children)

25 min., 16mm

1990

City of Hope

Production company: Esperanza Inc.

Executive producers: John Sloss, Harold Welb

Producers: Sarah Green, Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Robert Richardson

Editor: John Sayles

Music: Mason Daring

Production designers: Dan Bishop, Dianna Freas

Cast: Vincent Spano (*Nick Rinaldi*), Joe Morton (Wynn), Tony Lo Bianco (Joe Rinaldi), Barbara Williams; (*Angela*), Stephen Mendillo (*Yoyo*), 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*), Gloria Foster (*Jeanette*), David Strathairn (*Asteroid*), Anthony John Dension (*Rizzo*), Kevin Tighe (*O' Brien*), Josh Mostel (*Mad Anthony*), Joe Grifasi (*Pauly*), Gina Gershon (*Laurie*), Miriam Colon (*Mrs.*

Ramirez), Daryl Edwards (*Franklin*), Jude Ciccolella (*Paddy*), Mason Daring (*Peter*), Lawrence Tierney (*Kerrigan*), Louis Zorich (*Mayor Baci*), Ray Aranha (*Errol*)

130 min., 35 mm

1992

Passion Fish

Production company: Atchafalaya

Executive producer: John Sloss

Producers: Sarah Green, Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Roger Deakins

Editor: John Sayles

Music: Mason Daring

Production designers: Dan Bishop, Dianna Freas

Cast: Mary McDonnell (*May-Alice*), Alfre Woodard (*Chantelle*), Vondie Curtis-Hall (*Sugar*), David Strathairn (*Rennie*), Leo Burmester (*Reeves*), Nora Dunn (*Ti-Marie*), Mary Portser (*Precious*), Angela Bassen (*Dawn/Rhonda*), Sheila Kelley (*Kim*), Nancy Mette (*Nina*), Lenore Banks (*Nurse Quick*), William Mahoney (*Max*), Maggie Renzi (*Louise*), Tom Wright (*Luther*), John Henry (*Dr. Blades*)

135 min., 35 mm

1994

The Secret of Roan Inish

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

Editor: John Sayles

Music: Mason Daring

Production designer: Adrian Smith

Cast: 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 (*sylkie*)

103 min., 35 mm

1996

Lone Star

Production company: Rio Dulce/Castle Rock Entertainment

Executive producer: John Sloss

Producers: R. Paul Miller, Maggie Renzi

Cinematography: Stuart Dryburgh

Editor: John Sayles

Production designer : Dan Bishop

Art director : Kyler Black

Music : Mason Daring

Cast: Chris Cooper (*Sam Deeds*), Elizabeth Pena (*Pilar Cruz*), Joe Morton (*Delmore "Del" Payne*), Matthew 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*), LaTanya Richardson (*Priscilla Worth*), Stephen Lang { *Mikey*}, Ron Canada (*Otis Payne*), Gabriel Casseus (*Young Otis*), Leo Burmester (*Cody*), Chandra Wilson (*Athens*), Eddie Robinson (*Chet*), Gordon Tootoosis (*Wesley Birdsong*), Oni Faida Lampley (*Celie*), Eleese Lester (*Molly*), Joe Stevens (*Deputy Travis*), Gonzalo Castillo (*Amado*), Richard Coca (*Enrique*), Tony Frank (*Fenton*), Jeff Monahan (*Young Hollis*), Damon Guy (*Shadow*), Dee Macaluso (*Anglo mother*), Luis Cobo (*Mexican American father*), Marco Perella (*Anglo father*), Don Phillips (*principal*), Tay Strathairn (*Young Sam*), Vanessa Martinez (*young Pilar*)

Film Extract: *Black Mama, White Mama* (1973)

135 min., 35 mm

1997

Men With Guns/Hombres Armados

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

Editor : John Sayles

Music: Mason Daring

Production design : Felipe Fernandez del Paso

Cast : 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 Grodv (*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 Renazi, Shari Gray (*tourists by pool*), Paco mauri (*captain*), David villalpando, Raul Sanchez (*gum people*)

123 mln., 35 mm

As Screenwriter

1978

Piranha

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 (Metrocolor)
Editors : Mark Goldblatt, Joe Dante
Art directors : Bill Mellin, Kerry Mellin
Music: Pino Donaggio
Makeup : Rob Bottin
Cast : Bradford Dillman (*Paul Grogan*), Heather Menzies (*Maggie McKeown*), Kevin McCarthy (*Dr. Robert Hoak*), Keenan Wynn (*Jack*), Dick Miller (*Buck Gardner*), Barbara Steele (*Dr. Mengers*), Belinda Balaski (*Betsy*), Melody Thomas (*Laura*), Bruce Cordon (*Colonel Waxman*), Barry Brown (*trooper*), Paul Bartel (*Dumont*), Shannon Collins (*Suzie Grogan*), Shawn Nelson (*Whitney*), Richard Deacon (*Earl Lyon*), John Sayles (*soldier*)
 94 min., 35 mm

1979

The Lady in Red

Production company: New World Pictures
Producer : Julie Corman
Co-producer : Steven Kovacs
Director : Lewis Teague
Screenplay : John Sayles
Cinematography : Daniel Lacambre (Metrocolor)
Editors : Larry Bock, Ron Medicos, Lewis Teague
Production designer : Jac McAnelly
Music: James Horner
Cast: Pamela Sue Martin (*Polly Franklin*), Robert Conrad (*John Dillinger / Jimmy Lawrence*), Louise Fletcher (*Anna Sage*), Robert Hogan (*Jake Lingle*), Laurie Heineman (*Rose Shimkus*), Glenn Withrow (*Eddie*), Rod Gist (*Pinetop*), Peter Hobbs (*Pops Geissler*), Christopher Lloyd (*Frognose*), Dick Miller (*Patek*), Nancy Anne Parsons (*Tiny Alice*), Alan Vint (*Melvin Purvis*), Milt Kogan (*preacher*), Chip Fields (*Satin*), Buck Young (*Hennessey*), Phillip R. Allen (*Elliot Ness*), Ilene Kristen (*Wynona*), Joseph X. Flaherty (*Frank*), Terri Taylor (*Mae*), Peter Miller (*Fritz*), Mary Woronov (*woman bankrobber*), Jay Rasumny (*Hill*), Michael Cavanaugh (*undercover cop*), Arnie Moore (*trucker*), John Guitz (*Momo*), Saul Krugman (*judge*), Blackie Dammett (*immigration officer*)
 93 min., 35 mm

1980

Alligator

Production company : Alligator Associates, Group 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
Cast: Robert Forster (*Det. David Madison*), Robin Riker (*Marisa Kendall*), Michael V. Gazzo (*Police Chief Clark*), Dean Jagger (*Slade*), Sydney Lassick (*Lou Gutche*), Jack Carter (*Mayor Ledoux*), Perry Lang (*Jim Kelly*), Henry Silv (*Colonel Brock*), Bart Braverman (*Thomas Kemp*), John Lisbon Wood (*madbomber*), James Ingersoll (*Helms*), Robert Doyle (*Bill*), Patti Jerome (*Madeline*) Angel Tompkins (*newswoman*), Sue Lyon (*ABC newswoman*)
 94 min., 35mm

1980

Battle Beyond the Stars

Production company: New World Pictures
Executive producer: Roger Corman
Producer: 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 director: James Cameron, Charles Breen
Miniature design/construction : James Cameron
Music : James Horner
Cast : Richard Thomas (*Shad*), Robert Vaughn (*Gelt*), John Saxon (*Sador*), George Peppard (*Space Cowboy*), Darlanne Fluegel (*Nanelia*), Sybil Danning (*St. Exmin*), Sam Jaffe (*Dr. Hephaestus*), Morgan Woodward (*Cayman*), Carl Boen (*First Nestor*), John Gowens (*Second Nestor*) Steve Davis (*Quopeg*) Larry Meyers (*The kelvin*), Lara Cody (*The Kelvin*), Lynn Carlin (*Nell*), Jeff Corey (*Zed*), Marta Kristen (*Lux*), Julia Duffy (*Mol*), Eric Morris (*Pen*), Doug Carleson (*Pok*), Ron Ross (*Dab*), Terrence McNally (*Gar*)
 103 min., 35 mm

1980

The Howling

Production company : Avco Embassy Pictures, International Film Investors, Wescom 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 by : Gary Brandner
Cinematography : John Hora
Editors : Mark Goldblatt, Joe Dante
Art director : Robert A. Burns
Music: Pino Donaggio
Special makeup: Rob Bottin ;
Cast : Dee Wallace (*Karen White*), Patrick Macnee (*Dr. George Waggner*),
 Dennis Dugan (*Chris*), Christopher Stone (*R. William "Bill" Neill*), Belinda
 Balaski (*Terry Fisher*), Kevin McCarthy (*Fred Francis*), John Carradine (*Erle
 Kenton*), Slim Pickens (*Sam Newfield*), Elisabeth Brooks (*Marsha*),. Robert
 Picardo (*Eddie*), Margie Impert (*Donna*), Noble Willingham (*Charlie Barton*),
 James Murtaugh (*Jerry Warren*), Jim McKrell (*Lew Landers*), Kenneth Tobey
 (*older cop*), Don McLeod (*TC*), Dick Miller (*Walter Paisley*), Roger Corman
 (*man in phone booth*), John Sayles (*morgue attendant*)
 90 min., 35 mm

1980

***A Perfect Match* (made for TV)**

Production company: Lorimar Productions
Executive producers: David Jacobs, Lee Rich
Producer: Andre Gutfreund
Director: Mel Damski
Teleplay: John Sayles
Story by: Andre Gutfreund , Mel Damski
Cinematography: Ric Waite
Editor: John Farrell
Music: Billy Goldenberg
Art director: Tom H. John
Cast: Linda Kelsey (*Miranda McLloyd*), Michael Brandon (*Steve Triandos*),
 Lisa Lucas (*Julie Larson*), Charles Durning (*Bill Larson*), Colleen Dewhurst
 (*Meg Larson*), Clyde Kusatsu (*Dr. Tommy Chang*), Bonnie Bartlett (*Judge
 Greenburg*), Hildy Brooks (*Esther*), Alexa Kenin (*Angel*), Bever-Leigh Banfield
 (*Rhonda*)
 100 min., 35 mm

1982

The Challenge

Production company: CBS Theatrical Films
Executive producer: Lyle Poncher
Producers: Robert L. Rosen, Ron Beckman
Director: John Frankenheimer
Screenplay: Richard Maxwell, John Sayles, Ivan Moffatt
Cinematography: Kozo Okazaki (Deluxe)
Editor: Jack Wheeler

Production designer: Yoshiyuki Oshida

Music: Jerry Goldsmith

Martial arts coordinator: Steven Seagal

Cast: Scott Glenn (*Rick Murphy*), Toshirō Mifune (*Sensei Yoshida*), Donna Kei Benz (*Akiko Yoshida*), Atsuo Nakamura (*Hideo Yoshida*), Calvin Jung (*Ando*), Clyde Kusatsu (*Go*), Sab Shimono (*Toshio Yoshida*), Kiyoaki Nagai (*Kubo*), Kenta Fukasaku (*Jiro*), Shogo Shimada (*Takeshi Yoshida*), Yoshio Inaba (*instructor*), Seiji

Miyaguchi (*old man*), Miiko Taka (*Sensei's wife*)

116min.35 mm ,

1982

Enormous Changes at the Last Minute

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 by : Grace Paley

Cinematography : Tom McDonough

Cast : ".*Virginia's Story*" : Ellen Barkin (*Virginia*), David Strathairn (*Jerry*), Ron McLarty (*John*), Sudie Bond (*Mrs. Rafferty*); "*Faith's Story*" : Lynn Milgram (*Faith*), Jeffrey DeMunn (*Ricardo*), Zvee Scooler (*Pa*), Eda Reiss Merin (*Ma*), Fay Bernardi (*Mrs. Hegel-Shtein*); "*Alexandra's Story*" : Maria Tucci (*Alexandra*), Kevin Bacon (*Dennis*), John Wardell (*Doc*), Lou Criscuolo (*George*)

110 min., 35 mm

1986

The Clan of the Cave Bear

Production company : Jonesfilm, Guber-Peters Company, Jozak Company, Decade , Production

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 (Technicolor)

Editors : Wendy Greene Bricmont, Paul Hirsch

Production designer : Tony Masters

Music : Alan Silvestri

Cast : Daryl Hannah (*Ayla*), Pamela Reed (*Iza*), James Remar (*Creb*), Thomas G. Waites (*Broud*), John Doolittle (*Brun*), Curtis Armstrong (*Goov*), Martin Doyle (*Grod*), Adel C. Hammond (*Vorn*), Tony Montanaro (*Zoug*), Mike Muscat (*Dorv*), John Wardlow (*Droog*), Keith Wardlow (*Crug*), Karen Austin

(Aba), Barbara Duncan (Uka), Gloria Lee (Oga), Janne Mortil (Ovra), Lycia Naff (Uba), Linda Quibell (Aga), Bernadette Sabath (Ebra)
98 min., 35 mm

1986

Unnatural Causes (made for TV)

Production company : Blue Andre Productions, ITC Productions
Executive producers: Blue Andre, Robert M. Myman
Producer : Blue Andre
Director : Lamont Johnson
Teleplay : John Sayles
Story by : Martin M. Goldstein, Stephen Doran, Robert Jacobs
Cinematography : Larry Pizer
Editor: Paul LaMastra
Music: Charles Fox
Production designer: Anne Pritchard
Cast : John Ritter (*Frank Coleman*), Alfre Woodard (*Maude DeVictor*), Patti La Belle (*Jeanette Thompson*), John Vargas (*Fernando "Nando" Sanchez*), Frederick Allen (*kid*), Richard Anthony Crenna (*soldier*), Frank Pellegrino (*Raul*), Jonathan Welsh (*Dr. Lester*), Luba Gay (*Rena*), John Sayles (*Lloyd*), Roger Steffans (*Golub*)
100 mln., 35 mm

1987

Wild Thing

Production company : Filmline, Atlantic Releasing
Producer: David Calloway
Director: Max Reid
Screenplay : John Sayles
Based on a story by : John Sayles and Larry Stamper
Cinematography : Rene Verzier (Sona Color)
Editors: Battle Davis, Steven Rosenblum
Production designers : John Meighen, Jocelyn Joli
Music: George S. Clinton
Cast : Rob Knepper (*Wild Thing*), Kathleen Quinlan (*Jane*), Robert Davi (*Choper*), Maury Chaykin (*Detective Trask*), Betty Buckley (*Leah*), Guillaume Lemaire- Thivierge (*Wild Thing, age ten*), Robert Bednarski (*Free/Wild Thing, age three*), Clark Johnson (*Winston*), Sean Hewitt (*Father Quinn*), Teddy Abner (*Rasheed*), Cree Summer Francks (*Lisa*), Shawn Levy (*Paul*), Rod Torchia (*Hud*), Christine Jones (*Laurie*), Robert Austern (*Wiz*), Tom Rack (*Braindrain*), Alexander Chapman (*Shakes*), Robert Ozores (*El Borracho*)
92 min., 35 mm

1989

Breaking In

Production company: Breaking In Productions, Samuel Goldwyn Company

Producer: Harry Gittes

Director: Bill Forsyth

Screenplay: John Sayles

Cinematography: Michael Gibbs (Medallion Color)

Editor: Michael Ellis

Production designers: Adrienne Atkinson, John Willett

Music: Michael Gibbs

Cast: Burt Reynolds (*Ernie Mullins*), Casey Siemaszko (*Mike Lefeb*), Harry Carey Jr. (*Shoes*), Sheila Kelly (*Carrie*), Lorraine Toussaint (*Delphine*), Albert Salmi (*Johnny Scat*), Maury Chaykin (*Tucci*), Stephen Tobolowsky (*district attorney*), Richard Key Jones (*Lou*), Tom Laswell (*Bud*), Frank A. Damiani (*waiter*), David Frishberg (*nightclub singer*), John Baldwin (*Sam the Apostle*), Eddie Driscoll (*Paul the Apostle*), Melaine Moseley (*young woman apostle*), Galen B. Schrick (*choir master*), Duggan L. Wendeborn (*Faith House member*), K. Gordan Scott (*counterman*), Clifford Nelson, Roy McGillivray (*old men*), Kim Singer (*anchorwoman*), Charles E. Compton (*real estate agent*)

94 min., 35 mm

1989

Shannon's Deal (made for TV series pilot)

Production company: Stan Rogow Prods., NBC

Producers: Stan Rogow, Gareth Davies, Jim Margellos, Allan Arkush

Director: Lewis Teague

Teleplay: John Sayles

Cinematography: Andrew Dintenfass

Editor: Neil Travis

Music: Wynton Marsalis

Production designer: John Vallone

Cast: Jamey Sheridan (*Jack Shannon*), Elizebeth Pena (*Lucy Acosta*), Richard Edson (*Wilmer*), Jenny Lewis (*Neala Shannon*), Alberta Watson (*Teri*), Martin Ferrero (*Lou Gandolph*), Miguel Ferrer (*Todd Spurrier*), Claudia Christian (*Molly Tempke*), Ely Pouget (*Gwen*), Ron Joseph (*Det. Joe Menke*), Michael Bowen (*Scotty Powell*), Eddie Velez (*Chuy Vargas*), Andrew Lowery (*Eric*), Stefan Gierasch (*Klaus*), Danny Trejo (*Raul*), Kevin Peter Hall (*Card Player*), Coco Mendoza, Russel Yip, Jesse Dizon, Brian Smiar

120 min., 35 mm

1990-91

Shannon's Deal (TV series)

Production company: Stan Rogow Prods., NBC

Executive producer: Stan Rogow

Producers: Gareth Davies, Jim Margellos ; Allan Arkush (second season)

Created by /creative consultant: John Sayles

Cinematography: Stevan Lerner; Michael Gerschman (second season)

Editors : William B Strich, Stephen Potter, Conrad Gonzalez

Music: Wynton Marsalis (theme); Lee Ritenour; Tom Scott

Art director : James J. Agazzi .

Cast: Jamey Sheridan (*Jack Shannon*), Elizabeth Pena (*Lucy Acosta*),

Richard Edson (*Wilmer*), Jenny Lewis (*Neala*), Martin Ferrero (*Lou Gandolph*)

First season, April 1990-May 1990

Words to Music

Writer: John Sayles

Director: Allan Arkush

Cast: Michelle Joiner, Tanya Tucker, John Sayles, Iggy Pop, David Crosby,

Stanley Brock, Joe Bratcher, Julius Harris

Inside Straight

Writer: Mark Rossner

Director: Allan Arkush

Cast: Dick Antony Williams, Ron Joseph, Michael Beach, Tisha Campbell, D.

Scott Hoxby, Miguel Ferrer

Art

Writer: David Greenwalt

Director: David Greenwalt

Cast: Nicholas Miscusi, Marc Lawrence, Larry Hankin, John Michael Bolger,

Mimi Craven

Custody

Writer: John Sayles

Director: Joel Oliansky

Cast: Lucinda Jenney, Jeff Perry, Bob Delegal, Frank Birney, Julianna

McCarthy

Hitting Home

Writer: Tom Rickman

Director: Aaron Lipstadt

Cast: Ralph Waite, George Murdock, Ron Joseph, Nick Cassavetes, David

Amott

Sanctuary

Writer: John Byrum

Director: John Byrum

Cast: Robert Covarrubias, John Anderson, John Shepherd, Frank McCarthy,

Monty Hoffman

Second Season, March 1991-May 1991

Bad Beat

Writers: Eugene Corr, Ruth Shapiro

Director: Eugene Corr

Cast: Darrell Larson, Mary Jo Keenan

Greed

Writer: David Greenwalt

Director: Allan Arkush

Cast: Whitman Mayo, Charles Lane, Stephen Tobolowsky, Juanin Clay,

Tom Towles, Kurt Fuller, Ron Joseph

Strangers in the Night

Writer: Tom Rickman

Director: Tom Rickman

Cast: B. D. Wong, Victor Love, Clark Gregg, Steve Vinovich, Randle Mell, Dee Dee Rescher, Ron Joseph

First Amendment

Writer: Barry Pullman

Director: Allan Arkush

Cast: John Kapelos, Brent Hinkley, Stuart Pankin, Kimberly Scott, Sonny Carl Davis

The Inside Man

Writer: Corey Blechman

Director: Corey Blechman

Cast: Paul Whitthorne, Mark McManus, Julie Garfield, Michelle Forbes, James Lashly, Richard Roat, David Spielberg, Kimberly Scott

Matrimony

Writer: Kathy McCormick

Director: Betty Thomas

Cast: Michele Park, Barry Cullison, Cecile Callan

Trouble

Writer: Joan Tewksbury

Director: Joan Tewksbury

Cast: Michele Park, Barry Cullison, Cecile Callan

1994

Men of War

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

Executive producers: Moshe Diamant, Stan Rogow

Producer: Arthur Goldblatt, Andrew Pfeffer

Director: Perry Lang

Screen Play : John Sayles, Ethan Reiff, Cyrus Voris

Story: Stan Rogow

Cinematography: Ron Schmidt (Deluxe)

Editor: Jeffrey Reiner

Music: Gerald Couriet

Production designers: Steve Spence, Jim Newport

Cast: Dolph Lundgren (*Nick Gunnar*), Charlotte Lewis (*Loki*), B. D. Wong (*Po*), Anthony Denison (*Jimmy G*), Don Harvey (*Nolan*), Catherine Bell (*Grace*),

Tiny "Zeus" Lister (*Blades*), Tom Wright (*Jamaal*), Tim Guinee (*Ocker*), Trevor Goddard (*Keefer*), Kevin Tighe (*Merrick*), Thomas Gibson (*Warren*), Perry Lang (*Lyle*), Aldo Sambrell (*Goldmouth*), Juan Pedro Tludela (*Kal(o)*).

103 min., 35 mm

Uncredited writing contributions

Love Field (1991) Jonathan Kaplan

The Quick and the Dead (1995) Sam Raimi

Apollo 13 (1995) Ron Howard

Mimic (1997) Guillermo Del Toro

Acting Credits

The Howling as morgue attendant (Joe Dante, 1981)
Unnatural Causes as Lloyd (Lamont Johnson, TV movie, 1986)
Hard Choices as Don (Rick King, 1986)
Something Wild as motorcycle cop (Jonathan Demme, 1986)
La Fin della notte (Davide Ferrario, 1989)
Untamagiru as U.S. Army officer (Go Takamine, 1989)
Little Vegas (Perry Lang, 1990)
Straight Talk as Guy Girardi (Barnet Kellman, 1992.)
Malcolm X as FBI agent (Spike Lee, 1992.)
My Life's in Turnaround as marginal producer (Eric Schaeffer, 1993)
Matinee as Bob (Joe Dante, 1993)
Gridlock'D as police officer (Vondie Curtis-Hall, 1997)

Appendix B

The Films: Plot Summaries

***Lianna* (1983)**

Lianna is about a thirty three year old married woman with two children who is caught in an unfulfilling and unhappy marriage. In her search for fulfilment she has an affair with another woman. Lianna's friends and family disown her and she leaves her university professor husband, Dick, and her children and moves into a place of her own. The film is about her "coming out" but more importantly the consequences of it.

***Matewan* (1987)**

The film is based on the actual Matewan Massacre, which occurred in the West Virginia Coal Mine Wars of 1920 and 1921. The mining company has exploited the miners for years and they finally decide to strike. But the company imports outsiders, "scabs", mostly blacks and Italians, to keep the mine working. Joe Kenehan, drifter and union organiser arrives in town to help the striking local miners take on the company but finds that he has to first unite the disparate groups and form a united front to have any chance against the might and tactics of the company. He succeeds in uniting the men to take on the company together. The story ends with a bloody shootout in the main street between the striking men and the company thugs in which Kenehan is killed.

***City of Hope* (1991)**

The film is set in a fictional city where corruption at all levels is endemic and individuals seem powerless to resist it. The main character is Nick, the son of a wealthy and influential property developer. Nick commits a burglary and two black adolescents beat up a white teacher. These two events set in motion a chain of events that effects people from poor tenants to influential city governors. As a bribe to keep his son from going to prison, Nick's father allows his "heavies" to burn down a run-down tenement building and a woman and her baby are killed. Nick finds out what his father has done and is sickened by it. The film ends with Nick's life in the balance and the cycle of corruption set to continue.

***Passion Fish* (1992)**

Passion Fish is about a successful New York TV soap opera star, May Alice, who has become a paraplegic after being hit by a car. Unable to come to terms with the cruel twist of fate in her life, she retreats to her childhood home in the Louisiana bayous to 'lick her wounds' and wallow in the mire of self-pity. She hires a succession of 'helpers' but drives them all away with her self-centred anger and despair. Finally, however one stays. Her name is Chantelle and she almost as many problems as May-Alice. With the help of

Chantelle, she gradually begins to come to terms with who she is and begins to rebuild her shattered life.

The Secret of Roan Inish

Ten year old Fiona's Coneelly's family left the island of Roan Inish after her mother died and she has been living in the city with her father. She has come back to be with her grandparents who live on an isolated piece of coast across the sea from Roan Inish. This is a magical story about how she finds out that her baby brother Jamie, who was thought to have been lost at sea the day her family evacuated the island of Roan Inish, is alive and has been looked after on the island by the seals. Fiona becomes determined to return to the island with her family and be reunited with Jamie, a dream that, with the help of the magical power of the seals comes true.

Lone Star

The discovery of a body, an old Sheriff's badge and a mason's ring in the desert near the town of Frontera, Texas sets in motion a murder mystery. The body is identified as that of the cynical and racist previous sheriff, Charley Wade. The central character is new sheriff, Sam Deeds, who must try to solve the mystery that seems to him to implicate his own father, local hero Buddy Deeds, now deceased. Sam has to delve into his own personal history to try to unravel the events that led to the body in the desert and in doing so he discovers things about himself and his own history that change his life.

Men With Guns

The film has a generic setting in a mountainous area of a Central American country. The central character is Dr Fuentes, almost ready to retire, who has spent his last years training young doctors to go and work in isolated mountain villages believing that in doing so he is saving lives. The story is about his journey to find the truth about what he has done. His journey takes him deep into the mountains where he finds that instead of helping save lives he has actually given his young doctors a death sentence. The film charts the doctor's awakening to the truth as he climbs higher and higher into the mountains.

Limbo

Limbo is set in Alaska and is about ex fisherman Joe Gastineau who is haunted by a tragic boating accident that killed his friend. Joe meets Donna, a singer who travels where the work is and moves on every time her relationships with men go bad. Joe's 'wheeler dealer' half-brother arrives in town and begs Joe to take him north by sea for some mysterious purpose. Joe asks Donna and her adolescent daughter, Noelle, to accompany them on the trip never suspecting that his brother is involved in drug dealing and that the trip will turn into a nightmare. Joe's brother is killed and Joe, Donna and Noelle are left stranded in the inaccessible wilds of northern Alaska where they fight to survive long enough to be rescued. The film leaves the viewer in a state of limbo, not knowing whether the threesome are saved or damned.

Appendix C

The Writing

Fiction

The Pride of the Bimbos (Little, Brown and Co., 1975)
Union Dues (Little, Brown and Co., 1977)
The Anarchists' Convention and Other Stories (Little, Brown and Co., 1979)
 Home for Wayfarers, At the Anarchists' Convention, Schiffman's Ape, The 7-10 Split, The Cabinetmaker, Old Spanish Days, Bad Dogs, Hoop, Buffalo, Fission, Breed, Golden State, Tan, Children of the Silver Screen, 1-80 Nebraska, 490-2.05.
Los Gusanos (Harper Collins, 1991)

Non Fiction

Thinking in pictures: The Making of the Movie Matewan (Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
Men with Guns & Lone Star (screenplays), (Faber and Faber, 1998)
Sayles on Sayles. edited by Gavin Smith. (Faber and Faber, 1998)

Published short stories and articles

"I Wanna Tell You a Story," *The Guardian*, Aug. 1, 1996
 "20 Best Political Films," *Mother Jones*, May-June 1996
 "How to Stay Independent," *Index on Censorship*, Nov/Dec 1995
 "Above the line," *Premiere*, Sept. 1994
 "Keeping Time," *Rolling Stone*, Dec. 1993
 "Peeling," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1993
 "Director's Cut: Punchy Delivery," *The Independent*, Nov. 29, 1991
 "Maverick Moviemakers Inspire Their Successors," *The New York Times*, May 12, 1991
 "Inside *Eight Men Out*," *Sport*, July 1988
 "Treasure," *Esquire*, March 1988
 "The Halfway Diner," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1987
 "Pregame Jitters," *Esquire*, June 1986
 Book Review, *Adventures in the Screenwriting Trade* by William Goldman, *Film Comment*, May-June 1983
 "At the Republican Convention," *New Republic*, Aug. 2-9, 1980
 "Dillinger in Hollywood," *Triquarterly*, Spring 1980
 "Children of the Silver Screen," *Quest* /79, 1979
 "At the Anarchists' Convention," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Feb. 1979
 "Writing Dialogue," *Writer*, Jan. 1978
 "Golden State," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1977
 "Hoop," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1977
 "Breed," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1976
 "1-80 Nebraska, 490-205," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1975

Appendix D

The Fiction: Plot Summaries

The Anarchists' Convention short stories.

"Home for Wayfarers"

This is about a group of young women, one in particular named Nina, who have no long-term employment, many of whom may never have any, who have joined a temporary work agency, ironically called the "Career Girls". They are currently working at the "Home for Wayfarers", a house of refuge for young single, pregnant women sending out thankyou letters to individuals and businesses, which have given donations to the Home. It is clear that the "Career Girls" are as much wayfarers as the actual residents of the Home, whom we never meet.

"At the Anarchists' Convention"

This is a humorous story about a group of aging anarchists at their annual convention. It is narrated in the first person by reluctant senior citizen Leo, carrying around his aching hips and his unrequited love for Sophie, another of the group. About to begin reliving old issues, the anarchists are suddenly ignited to action when the management of the convention centre tries to move them to a smaller room because they have inadvertently double booked the big room with the Rotary club.

"Old Spanish Days"

This is a borderlands story set in a small town on the American side of the Mexican/American border. Sayles uses the annual "Old Spanish Days" festival to contrast the myth of what America likes to *think* happened on the border with the reality of what actually did and does happen. The story revolves around a group of young Mexicans forced by poverty to cross illegally into the U.S. where they work illegally while trying to get a Green Card and live in fear of being detected, arrested and deported.

The "Brian" Stories:

"Bad Dogs", "Hoop", "Buffalo", "Fission", "Breed", "Golden State".

“Bad Dogs”

This is the first of the stories about Brian, a High School youth. Brian's father has died in tragic but somewhat inevitable circumstances and his mother has not got over her loss. This first story begins to reveal Brian's immediate world. He spends his spare time helping out at a local dog kennel (hence the title), playing basketball and studying the birds and the bees first hand. Brian begins to realise that he is caught in a kind of dead-end cycle and needs to get out.

“Hoop”

Brian has been challenged to a one-on-one game of basketball with Preston. He remembers the lessons that Jockey, his coach has taught him, such as never show you speed and never “rub it in” when you win. He plays, wins and walks away. He remembers also the lessons he has learnt from his bitter unfulfilled father, that you should never stay and accept second best. You should always go where the action is.

“Buffalo”

A very poignant short story(a mere five pages long), where Brian is preparing to go. He is awake in the middle of the night and is studying the map of the U.S on the kitchen table. He thinks about the ancient migratory routes of the buffalo heading west clearly linking his need to go west to survive with theirs. His mother hears him in the kitchen and gets up. He tells her that he is leaving, hardly aware of her pain in the face of his own need. She is obviously a broken woman and can't bear to say the words she needs to, to him. Neither can even say goodbye to each other.

“Fission”

Brian is on the road. He has hitched a lift west with Mary Beth, overweight, dealing in drugs, desperate to be loved. They stop at the abandoned farmhouse where she spent her unhappy childhood. Brian continues west alone and stumbles on another misfit/outsider called Treat, living with his demanding daughter, Derry, in an underground bunker in order to escape the nuclear fallout that he believes is inevitable. Finally Brian escapes their clutches and is back on the road.

“Breed”

Brian has hitched and walked until late and has found somewhere to sleep. He wakes up the next morning on the ground inside a corral with a bison, out in the middle of nowhere. He meets the owner of the bison, Cody Sprague who runs “Cody Sprague's Wild West Buckin' Bison Ride”, except nobody comes past any more since the Interstate was finished. Furthermore, his bison won't buck or run. Brian leaves and heads for the Interstate. He is picked up by a group of hard horse breaking men whom he works with for a

day. By the end of the day it is clear to Brian that they too are trapped in their insular world going nowhere. He heads further west towards the coast.

“Golden State”

This is the last of the Brian stories. Brian gets a lift with some Mexicans, west across the desert and over the mountains to the coast. He sleeps rough until dawn and then heads down to the beach. The first people he meets are winos who sleep out every night and live in the past. He sits with them and shares their wine in the early dawn. They remind him of his father. He leaves soon after dawn, changing direction now, heading south towards the “101”. As the sun begins to climb he continues his journey.

“Tan”

This is a tragic story about Tan, a Vietnamese girl, caught up in the chaos of the people's struggle and war in Vietnam in the sixties. Her family members are systematically killed; either by Communists or government soldiers and Tan eventually becomes a prostitute to survive. She is forced by her American “friend” to take opium into the U.S. hidden in breast implants. His plan is to meet her there, have it removed and sell it. But he is “detained” and never comes. Tan eventually plucks up the courage to have it removed herself and be finally rid of the last of Vietnam that she has carried locked inside her.

“1-80 Nebraska, m. 490-m. 205”

The characters in this story are long haul truck drivers driving at night, passing the night hours and staying awake by chatting to other drivers over the CB radio, gossiping, telling stories and getting reports from each other on road conditions up ahead. But one driver has everyone worried. Calling himself Ryder P. Moses, the other drivers can hear him but never see him. He terrorises the highways, breaking all the rules, spouting his paranoid philosophy and then disappearing into the night. The story ends when his manic death wish is granted and he signs off, his truck crashing in a ball of fire.

The Novels

***Union Dues* (1977)**

The novel is set in the late 1960s and revolves around Hobie McNatt, who runs away from his home in a West Virginian coalmining town to look for his older brother Dar, a Vietnam vet gone ‘bush’, and to find out what he really wants in life. Hobie's mother has recently died and he has been living alone with his coalminer father, Hunter. It has become clear to Hobie that if he stays any longer in this town he will end up trapped here forever. Hunter finds Hobie gone and figuring that he has gone to find his brother, goes after him, knowing that he will not have peace of mind until he can at least talk things over with Hobie.

When Hobie gets to Boston he becomes involved with a group of political activists. Eventually both Hobie and Hunter are in Boston, although neither knows the other is there. Hunter has looked unsuccessfully for Hobie but does manage to track down where his older son Dar is living. He visits Dar up in the hills and discovers that he is scarred and hurting from his Vietnam experiences. The novel ends with Hobie, Hunter and Dar all living in and around Boston. All three are beginning to make some sense of their lives.

***Los Gusanos* (1991)**

This novel is about Cuban exiles and the ongoing loss that they feel. It centres on the de la Pena family who were forced to leave their homeland of Cuba and settle in Miami when their farm was confiscated in the communist takeover of 1959. The central character is Marta, the daughter, now in her thirties and her private plan to avenge both the death of her seventeen-year-old brother in the Bay of Pigs counter invasion and her family's loss of their homeland.

She puts together a plan to sail into Cuba at night on the anniversary of her brother's death and blow up a power station. She and a small band of accomplices carry out their plan, landing safely in the dead of night on a Cuban beach. But things go terribly wrong and Marta ends up running for her life into the Cuban night.

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