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

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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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Contents

Introduction.....	p.1
Chapter One: The Sayles Journey.....	p.14
Chapter Two: The Fiction.....	p.36
Chapter Three: The Earlier Films: <i>Lianna, Matewan, City of Hope, Passion Fish</i>	p.74
Chapter Four: The More Recent Films: <i>The Secret of Roan Inish, Lone Star,</i> <i>Men with Guns, Limbo</i>	p.108
Chapter Five: Concluding words.....	p.136
Appendix A: Filmography.....	p.141
Appendix B: Film Plot Summaries.....	p.156
Appendix C: The Writing.....	p.158
Appendix D: Fiction Plot Summaries.....	p.159
Bibliography.....	p.163

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 disenfranchised 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.