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Humanism, Social Realism and Normative Ethics in John Sayles' *Casa de los Babys*

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ABSTRACT

The filmmaker John Sayles has often been described as a humanist, and his works "humanistic dramas." This dissertation inquires into contemporary humanism and its use in cinematic narrative, foregrounding the work of Sayles, and in particular his 2003 international adoption drama *Casa de los Babys*. I situate the humanistic drama among related artistic endeavours, including social realist traditions. In assessing Sayles' use of realist imagery, sound and story tropes, I argue that Sayles regularly attempts to create work that is "invisible", as originally theorised by André Bazin. Contemporary filmic humanism offers a critique of post-Foucaultian film theory by suggesting that realism can ask the viewer to concentrate on ethical engagement with character rather than film as form, and moreover that this process does not require the viewer to be an uncritical observer. A study of humanism as it applies to film places under scrutiny the value of empathic relationship to narrative, in the past chiefly applied to fiction by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum and Brian Boyd.

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INTRODUCTION

If I mention the study of humanism, what am I talking about? As a reader, it would be hard to say; too often we read of humanism without any helpfully clarifying remarks. When we talk about humanism, we could be discussing Renaissance humanism, deliberating on the intercession of divinity and 'man'; we might be wondering if there is a higher order to the human extending beyond pure materialism; we could even refer to humanism's precursors in pre-Christian concepts of reason, in Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. Also, for a long time after the Renaissance, humanism was to many a pedagogical concept, promoting study of the humanities; as Edward Said points out, the purist canonical protectionism of eminent literary scholars such as Harold Bloom has taken this usage of the term to its absolutist extreme in expressing the idea that there is one true canon of classics, which should be studied to enrich the human (Said 27). No matter what we think of canonical humanism and Bloom's work, however, the question of human value in art, and thus relativist trends in assessing the worth of art, is part of humanist dialogue.

Then again, increasingly in popular usage now, humanism appears spuriously distinct from atheism. And then *again*, it is possible when I say humanism that I mean something entirely less Euronormative. Scholars such as María Rosa Menocal, especially in *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, make the point that there are plenty of examples of humanist thought outside of Europe even before Renaissance humanism (6, 57). Ken Seigneurie's work clearly identifies a progression to what he calls Arab humanism in contemporary literature (109).

I prefer to begin from Murray Bookchin's defence of humanist conviction in *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, "the serious thinker must look beyond the 'real' to speculate *what should be* rather than validate *what is*" (258). If this is a pragmatic ethic to start from in encouraging progressive thought, it should also be true of the language we use to describe that thought. In this case, it would be important to define how humanism might be discursively useful, looking forward, rather than assert one true Humanism of yore.

If humanism has a significant challenge in scholarly thought at the moment, it is less an antihumanist attack on human autonomy for positive, progressive or even transhuman change – it is the idea of the posthuman; we cannot say with certainty that we know the parameters of the human. We cannot any longer agree on what a human actually *is*, suggesting it may be an inadequate concept to start from in understanding the workings of the world. In his book *The Posthuman Condition* Robert Pepperell suggests that we cannot pretend the

mind is synonymous with human identity. Neuron activity defines the mind, yet we also have neurons in our stomach – in this case we must consider our stomach a human entity (Pepperell 93-97, for a more sensitive analysis). Also, if we use machines as ambassadors for our thought – recording our ideas on a computer, for instance, which will go on to represent a version of our thoughts – we are already in a position whereby we cannot easily separate our mind and the machine. Nor have we ever been able to pinpoint exactly where life begins or ends, and at the time of my writing this, Japanese researchers (Nayak et al, 2012) have just announced the creation of the first artificial copper sulphide synapse, making the posthumanist discussion all the more urgent. As intriguing and urgent as it is, however, I would like to suggest a way of looking at the human that makes it possible to move beyond the ontology and semantics of the human entity. We can embrace the *fluidity* of the human mind and form at the same time as acknowledging that the human is *what we have to work with*, even if its parameters cannot be known or subject to essentialist certainty. We cannot sample another reality beyond that dictated by the recurring, evolving natural pattern of the human form and the perspective (obviously limited, as Pepperell stresses) it allows. The fact that the human is fluid should not dismiss our striving to understand this perspective and how it works – we must still be able to discuss concepts and entities without reference to essential properties, or all argument devolves to the same ontological impasse. In *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, Brian Boyd dismisses the circular logic of arguments about the construction of human as culturally determined or otherwise (23), and goes on to present a catalogue of some of the possible human functions of storytelling from an evolutionary perspective.

It becomes important to make the distinction here that humanism is not a metaphysical enquiry into any divide between Cartesian rationalism and Hume's empirical scepticism, or our experience of phenomena and noumena (nor does it entertain theological proclivities, as suggested by the parallel importance of secular humanism and various religious humanisms). It is, instead, a kind of methodological naturalism – we proceed with the understanding of the unknowable nature of reality, but it behoves us to accept these limitations and make decisions based on our experience of what is real (as distinct from phenomenologically quantifying our experience of what is real). At the same time we understand our perspective will always be bound to our experience as a human. In deeply understanding other things, thus, we "humanise" them. In effect, anthropomorphising is all that we can do to understand the experience of a life not our own. It is folly to suggest we can have a concept of any other living thing that is not somehow based on our own knowledge

and experience of living within the confines of perception offered by the human form. In phenomenology, this is similar to the experience of intersubjectivity. While the phenomenological perspective is not ordinarily akin to humanist studies – it entertains a degree of ontological assumption about reality in seeking essential properties of experience – the two perspectives certainly do not preclude one another. Humanism inquires into the experience of empathy with an emphasis on the social sciences rather than metaphysics.

It is this empathy derived from experience and a process of imagining what it is like to be other things, somewhat akin to Adam Smith's mutual sympathy (17), which is of interest to humanists and must be understood if we are properly to study humanist storytelling. "Humanising the other" involves a projection of what it might be like to be another entity; we need the imaginative process, this kind of anthropomorphising, in order to incorporate other living things into any system of personal moral accountability, including fellow humans, non-human entities and indistinct entities like animals and machines – we consistently need to imagine what it is like to be them in order to accept them as worthy of ethical inclusion. Normative ethics and this variety of humanism can, then, begin to look like the same thing – the indivisibility of ethical culture and humanism is acknowledged by one of the largest international bodies representing the movement, the International Humanist and Ethical Union. It is perhaps useful to look at humanism as the philosophy around the reasons for foregrounding ethical discussions; the emphasis on ethics results from a humanist position.

So our process of understanding other things *has to* involve some amount of projection; our imaginative capacities cannot exist in a vacuum, they are ordered by our own experience – that is, human experience. This is what storytelling and the storytelling arts offer, and film is well positioned to provide an experience whereby we can exercise our empathy for the other. Furthermore, imagining the experience of another entity, be it another person in a remote location or circumstance, or an animal to be slaughtered for consumption, is going to lead to superior ethical judgments about our engagement with them the more nuanced and realistic our understanding of their circumstance – this is what social realism has sought to provide for the underprivileged. As Boyd puts it:

> But narrative especially helps coordinate groups, by informing their members of one another's actions. It spreads prosocial values, the likeliest to appeal to both tellers and listeners. It develops our capacity to see from different perspectives, and this capacity in

> turn both arises from and aids the evolution of cooperation and the growth of human mental flexibility. (176)

Although his analysis foregrounds the role of gossip in social accountability structures, he does go on to suggest, "But maximum flexibility, in humans as in others, depends on play" (176). If we are to evaluate responses to ethical problems beyond those presented by direct interaction with those in our immediate community, we need hypothetical characters: fiction. Writers such as Alex Neill consider empathy for actual persons and fictional characters as one and the same, as projection of the feelings of another is in essence an imaginative act (257). Hypothetical empathic subjects do not represent the totality of storytelling's place in our lives, of course – stories are much more powerful than that – but these are the functions of storytelling a humanist may be interested in. Kwame Anthony Appiah points to the negotiation of "value terms, meant to shape our responses to the movie. And if the story it tells is truly representative, our discussion of it will help us decide not only what we feel about the characters but how we should act in the world" (Cosmopolitanism 29). Thus, he says of film, "It keeps our vocabulary of evaluation honed, ready to do its work in our lives. And that work, as I say, is first to help us act together" (30). After grappling with the way cosmopolitanism might deal with the antihumanist charge of normalising humanity and disregarding human difference, he settles for the fact that this "acting together" after discussion cannot be a reprehensible moral aim, despite its imperfectability. I also reject the "hazy and elliptical" (Bookchin 184), antihumanist charge advanced by Michel Foucault and contemporaries, particularly in *The Order of Things*, which conflates representation in the human sciences with universalism, masks, 'regimes of truth' and troublesome norms (Foucault 396) – in short, that the empathic process of representing the human normalises identities. We can locate complex understanding of both similarities *and* differences in the experience of the other without needing to refer to human exceptionalism or requiring differences to be quelled; indeed, wonder at difference and similarity alike is an important part of comprehension. Asserting one's vision of the human need not require enforcement by bourgeois authority structures, either. All communication, including cinema, might be flawed and imperfect transmission, but to thus dismiss the efficacy of all communication as thinkers like Foucault and Jacques Derrida have done (except for, apparently, their own) is both "nihilist" (Schwartz 33) in its intrinsic protection of self-absorption and even "fascist" (38) in asserting as immovable the exploitative status quo.

As we will see, John Sayles has often been called a "humanist" filmmaker with little clarification – I hope to illuminate this as the process his films encourage. In the first chapter of my dissertation, I provide a critical chronology and identify some of the recurring discussions his film *oeuvre* inspires. I will analyse existing scholarship around Sayles to uncover unasked questions and paradigms unexplored. Addressing these unasked questions, I suggest new approaches to Sayles offered by the study of social realism, humanism and normative ethics.

In the second chapter, I discuss Sayles' approach to realism, elaborating on questions arising from the study of his filmmaking career in chapter one. I look at literature around social realism and Sayles' own brand of realism, ultimately demonstrating its aptitude for serving humanist dialogues and the open ethical discussion valued by humanists. This chapter foregrounds the work of realist theorists such as André Bazin, and also film ethicist Jane Stadler, one of the few scholars to extend studies around our empathetic relationship with narrative (using as a springboard the works of Martha Nussbaum and Vivian Sobchack) to cinema, and insist on an ethical approach to film analysis, albeit from a phenomenological perspective.

Finally, I will take a close look at an exemplary film: the little-acknowledged international adoption drama *Casa de los Babys* (hereafter *Casa*) from 2003, a close reading of which reveals Sayles' approaches to humanism, realism and ethics. We will see that the ethics raised in *Casa* are valid concerns for discussion around how we choose to value the human; prior studies into Sayles – and film history – have skirted a clear discussion of the humanist philosophy of realist filmmakers. Asking and exploring these questions will shed light on an under-analysed filmmaker, whose unique realism suggests humanism's aptness for addressing contemporary ethical dilemmas we face in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER ONE
AN INTRODUCTION TO JOHN SAYLES

Like innumerable other, more famous cinema-makers cutting their teeth during the 1970s, novelist, former playwright, stage actor and psychology major John Sayles' induction into filmmaking came about through screenwriting work on a number of Roger Corman productions, including his first tongue-in-cheek horror *Piranha* (Joe Dante, 1978), the erratically episodic *The Lady in Red* (Lewis Teague, 1979) and *Star Wars* cash-in *Battle Beyond the Stars* (Jimmy T. Murakami, 1980). He penned two other notable satirical horrors after his work with Corman: *Alligator* (Lewis Teague, 1980) and *The Howling* (Joe Dante, 1981). Working within the conventions of horror, Sayles managed to inject a wry social conscience whilst still hitting Corman's genre marks (a requisite amount of blood and bared flesh), brushing against environmental concerns in *Piranha* for example, "in which nature exacts its revenge after the military machine and real estate speculators have inadvertently colluded to wreak havoc" (Barrett 240). He also occasionally broached intriguingly ambiguous moral considerations, such as *The Howling*'s view of outsider communities creating their own self-serving moral codes – the true horror in the film has at its genesis our familiarity with the werewolves' recognisably human tactics of manipulation in service of the collective. Sayles used the earnings from his first Corman films to begin funding his own features.

Sayles has doctored innumerable studio-produced scripts since writing his early Corman horrors, including *Apollo 13* (Ron Howard, 1995), *Mimic* (Guillermo del Toro, 1997), *Clan of the Cave Bear* (Michael Chapman, 1986) and an unproduced screenplay called *Night Skies*, which was eventually developed into *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982). As an example of his reputation as a go-to screenwriter, in Ron Howard's audio commentary for the *Apollo 13* DVD release, he credits Sayles with introducing the cutaways to the astronauts' families' reactions, raising the stakes considerably by reminding the audience who is implicated in their potential for survival.

Marc Jancovich and James Lyons argue that readings of Sayles have overlooked his screenwriting work in favour of the films he has written and directed, pointing out that Sayles dismisses notions of taste and art in favour of film as "conversation" and that by his own admission, "he is distinguished from the preciousness associated with art and the art film, but also from the terms of the 'auteur theory' ... Sayles' films work to problematize notions of authorial autonomy, operating according to a kind of identity politics which acknowledges the complex and contradictory nature of social and political investments" (283). Despite what

Sayles may have learned about storytelling from his first handful of produced screenplays, his work as a writer/director stands out as unique in a way his genre-bound commissioned screenplays cannot; they are necessarily written to fulfil rather than upend audience expectations and moral predilection. Diane Carson sees the "refusal to capitulate to expectations" as integral to Sayles' storytelling ("John Sayles, independent filmmaker" 137). I will return to questions of authorship in the following chapter.

Although much of what is now called independent cinema is in some way financially tied to the major studios, with a lot of productions bankrolled by their "independent" subsidiaries, Sayles, a pioneer independent filmmaker, typically uses funds raised from his work as screenwriter-for-hire to subsidise his own creative works, or to leverage the search for investors (Berra 96). He thereby mitigates the need for excessive creative interference – despite how lucrative a potential investor might be, Sayles holds that he will turn down the money if it is conditional on changing his narrative intentions (Smith and Sayles 250). He also occasionally performs in his own films – usually a humbling bit part, often as one of the script's more unpleasant characters.

Much of the favourable dialogue around Sayles considers the historical status he has earned in paving an alternative for independent filmmakers who want to retain control of their content, some concluding that his method was the prototype for future American independent cinema (Biskind 16). Cynthia Baron contends that Sayles' films are pitted against the cinematic norm of ignoring systemic injustices, which is shaped by a tacit censorship of radicalism in studio and independent filmmaking, as both have been increasingly beholden to market mechanisms such as ease of publicity and timidity of investors to challenge cultural assumptions, which serve to prevent radical stories entering the production phase ("Sayles Between the Systems"). It is possible, however, that market mechanisms can accommodate radical leftism as long as it is identified as radical leftism – as long as an audience is already familiar with its reductive tropes and archetypes. The problem may not be in elevating politics to the screen, but in allowing nuanced politics to survive untarnished through processes that allow film publicity and attendant soundbites to drive content.

His first self-directed film, *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979; hereafter *Secaucus Seven*), saw Sayles begin to dabble in nuanced character studies linked to political engagement. The film's significance in American film history has been noted: it is preserved in the American Library of Congress (Ryan 295). *Secaucus Seven* is regularly cited as the predecessor to Lawrence Kasdan's popularly celebrated *The Big Chill* (1983), as the story framework is nearly identical: a group of old friends who met in their college years reunite,

and through abstracted demonstrations of their palling political engagement with the world, allow the audience to scrutinise their purported ideals. Although critics called attention to similarities in the central plot device, Sayles has dismissed claims that Kasdan's work is in any way plagiarism, explaining that *The Big Chill* was about "people who thought they were more radical than they were" (Smith and Sayles 65), where his own film is about the people around him, who were involved in tough negotiations and compromise in order to hang onto the radical ideals which galvanised them when younger. What is important to Sayles, then, is not enthrallment with narrative development itself, but the meanings his stories suggest. He denies any allegiance to an ideal of true financial independence, however, asserting that even within the studio system some can satisfy creative independent aims with their stories, being "more independent than someone 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'" (Smith and Sayles 251). For Sayles, ideology and ethics communicated through story has primacy, no matter its mode of production.

As Alex Woloch points out in a chapter on early Sayles cinema in *Sayles Talk* (ed. Carson and Kenaga), the filmmaker's first works have a nostalgic retrospection in common, often studying the painful farewell to youthful ideals – particularly theoretical and political ideals – as they fade into a haze of work and family responsibilities, or old age (I would include his 1977 novel *Union Dues* and short story collection *The Anarchists' Convention* published in 1979; to a lesser extent his first novel *Pride of the Bimbos*, 1975). Works like *Secaucus Seven* and the titular narrative in *The Anarchists' Convention* present, in a tone of tragi-comic melancholy, a reflective knowledge of the importance of political motivation when young. They serve as a reminder that this is an important field of study: the normalising of political identities as we age. Although his characters are at times more competitive about personal and romantic negotiations than their politics, as one reviewer pointed out the space provided for comparison to one another does, at least, help clarify the compromises they have made (Johnson, Rev. of *Secaucus Seven* 486). For a Marxist analyst writing on Sayles like Mark Bould, this process "represents the limitations of reformism and indicts the perpetuation of democracy as a form rather than a practice" (59).

In *Secaucus Seven*, Sayles also saw himself in part as documentarian (Chute 6), committing to screen and page an accurate representation of the social milieu he finds himself in – these are the problems his peers, emerging from their twenties, are struggling with. At this early stage in his career, the clever dialogue and comedy of manners that dominates screen time in *Secaucus Seven* sees Sayles holding himself aloft from the unabashed

moralising that marks later, bolder works, although it does articulately establish one of his primary concerns: the limitations of ideology. He also identifies the indivisibility of the political and the personal, which remains a constant in his career: the characters, taken into the local police station under the mistaken assumption they have illegally shot a deer, are obliged to recite a long list of past arrests from rallies and protests. Maura (Karen Trott) has recently left long-term partner Jeff (Mark Arnott), and after he proudly yet wearily lists his, she is asked for her address and her own arrests. After a pause, she says ruefully, "same as his." Finally, the film announces Sayles' longstanding inclination to close study of communities rather than isolated or heroic individual protagonists – in *Secaucus Seven*, no matter what personal crises develop amongst the friends, they are ultimately rejuvenated by being, as Sayles says, "glad to be around others they don't have to explain their jokes to" (Black and Sayles CAL5). The use of editing and juxtaposition to expose community interconnectivity, as well as the multi-character drama, had precedent in figures like Robert Altman. Sayles has acknowledged the influence of films such as *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975) in interviews (Smith and Sayles 50).

After a brief experiment with playwriting, trying his hand at two one-act plays that went largely unheralded (Molyneux 101), Sayles filmed his next two features back to back, and both released in 1983: the profound yet understated domestic realism of *Lianna*, and *Baby It's You* (sometimes written *Baby, It's You*), which is perhaps Sayles' most nostalgic work. *Secaucus Seven* was popular enough at the U.S. Film Festival (later to become the Sundance Film Festival) and amongst audiences upon release that Sayles was courted by actors-turned-producers Griffin Dunne and Amy Robinson to helm *Baby It's You*, which was inspired by experiences during Robinson's schooldays. Paramount commissioned Sayles to direct the film in full knowledge of the script's narrative arc, but when Sayles turned in his first cut, the film was test screened and Paramount subsequently demanded a high-school comedy akin to popular films of the moment. They took Sayles off the project to install another editor and Sayles requested removal of his credit from the film. Paramount test screened the new edit a month later, then re-installed Sayles, perhaps figuring that the bad publicity of Sayles taking his name off the film was not worth their while. The studio fudged a very limited and poorly publicised release of the film in a handful of states. Thereafter Sayles avoided working within the studio system wherever he could (Molyneaux 121).

Baby It's You depicts the aftermath of a class- and race-divided high-school romance – the expectations and opportunities the couple experience after graduation are so divergent that a wedge is driven between the contemporary Romeo and Juliet; their impulsive young

attraction is no match for the class divisions and values disjunction they will encounter in their late teens. Although as Jack Ryan explains, the $2.9 million afforded by the studio shows in visual and auditory sophistication seldom seen in his earlier works (72), the real triumph of the film is in Sayles' readable determination to fill out the characters into believably ordinary humans rather than archetypes, which has remained a consistent objective throughout his career, despite the pressure in this case to edit out scenes depicting behaviour less familiar in the teen genre at the time (Universal had success in 1982 with *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* [Amy Heckerling], and the studio hoped for a similar emphasis on the narrative's comedic elements). Rosanna Arquette's female lead character Jill, for example, is not the fictitiously, precociously independent heroine of most high school love stories, but a young woman who prizes a sense of belonging among peers and pays the price for adapting to fit in; a confusion in determining her own identity is evident as her options widen. As her Italian partner Sheik is not provided the physical space, familial-emotional encouragement, educational tools or resources to explore identity creation – "the opportunity to locate an authentic identity" (Ryan 66) – the class schism is not misrepresented beyond the limitations of experience available to them, as in the traditional crossed lovers narrative, where the young couple transcends socio-political bounds to be together. In a way, this is Sayles' love letter to what he may see as the most important function of our schooling: very few times in our life are we amongst people with such a breadth of backgrounds (Godfrey 101). In our early socialising, we must try to understand the other in order to maintain social connection – and explore romance.

Lianna also presents a farewell, this one to heterosexual identity for a young woman in a small town, mapping her peers' varied reactions to the disclosure of her new sexual identity. *Lianna* is a unique lesbian film in its relaxed realism. Christine Holmlund looked at the problems around the descriptor 'lesbian film' in *When is a Lesbian Not a Lesbian?*; David R. Shumway, on the other hand, contends that the film looks past sexual identity politics to focus instead on relationships, and sits in better comparison to films by Woody Allen and Paul Mazursky (John Sayles 25).

Sayles understands that the situation presented has enough drama without forcing any hysteria or the heightened magnitude of consequence most screen dramas rely on. The film looks at the difficulty of placing equity in relationships above the power imbalances and role-play lifted from the traditional male-female marriage (from which Lianna is an escapee). Recovering from the impulse to construct adjudicator-pupil relationship inequalities requires the characters to become less attached to the reinforcement of these identities through a

familiar routine of unresolved conflict they have both relied on. In effect, the understated realist tone suits part of Sayles' intent: the search for relationship conflict resolution that does not play up to the drama of engendered role-play.

At the time of release, debate focused on whether the film should be rejected or embraced by the lesbian community – the argument covered the divide between foregrounding the differences or similarities in identity: "several alternative reviewers faulted Sayles for his choice of situations like falling in love, loneliness, and boredom to which anyone, gay or straight, could relate" (Holmlund 162). This problematic is particular to humanist studies: of the choice to include representations of experience common to the other and the 'mainstream' viewer, we can ask whether all identities are being normalised. It is, perhaps, more marginalising for those who do not identify with the forms of accepted lesbianism, established by an in-community of style generators as are all accepted identities, to always be identified as other in filmic representation. Holmlund's conclusion is compelling:

> For feminist film theory to dismiss mainstream films like these as manipulative and hegemonic and/or to see the gaze as always and irrevocably male, or for feminist film theory to militate on behalf of an imaginary lesbian reader who, like father, always knows best, would be to ignore the diversity, variability, and tenuousness of the necessary identities and identifications that structure viewing and other social practices. (165)

Representations of otherness, we should not forget, can be equally bound to identity norms – and it is no answer to surrender to those who create a new theoretical norm by regulating a strict view of how the other must be, and be portrayed.

While working on *Baby It's You* John Sayles received the John T. MacArthur "Genius" grant. With a decent amount of money saved from previous jobs and a cheque in the mail every two months from the award, he was able to briefly return to science fiction with *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984; hereafter *Brother*). The film follows a mute alien – appearing as the black "brother" of the title played by Joe Morton – experiencing life among the predominantly African American communities of New York City's Harlem district. Besides the evident 'intergalactic alien/culture of the alienated' analogy, which the filmmakers and actors have fun playing with through a series of comic and poignant vignettes, the "what if" at

the centre of the film is a political fantasy: what if those who profit from drug dependency and maintaining the meagre living conditions of the disenfranchised were able to see and experience the misery they peddle? At the film's climax, the Brother literally removes an eye to show them.

Janani Subramanian identifies an even broader implication in the alien's eye, one that emulates the kind of broad-scale 'seeing' Sayles attempts in future films:

> Vigilance and an expanded perspective, symbolised by Brother's eye ... the alien abilities of a black-like protagonist suggests that social change must come from both inside and outside the community and that a new cityscape requires a new kind of sight, one that can 'see' the external forces affecting the structure and functioning of a minority community. (43)

This marks the beginnings of Sayles' transition to a more strident ethical content in his filmmaking. At the same time the "cheerfully low-budget ... rejection of the frequently unreflexive imagery of cinematic science fiction" (Bould 77) harks back to Sayles' early work with Corman, which Bould contrasts with spectacle-driven alien blockbusters such as *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997) (73-77). *Men in Black* was, however, released the same year as the comparable *Mimic*, script doctored by Sayles – he is still a part of the construction of cinema Bould sees as aesthetically hegemonic, and his work as a writer-for-hire John Berra considers "at odds with his reputation as a worthy, socially conscious film-maker" (97). There is still no film quite comparable to *Brother*, Sayles' collision of sci-fi, black American social realism and comedic vignette; perhaps a closer comparison can be found with literary figures like former American Humanist Association president Kurt Vonnegut, who also blends the fantastical and the real with political satire to illustrate a concern for humanity.

Sayles' next two historical dramas were instrumental in determining the format he would continue to work in: ensemble films confronting political issues head-on, examining socially destructive phenomena – and the occasional triumph of resistance – as the mutual result of a matrix of human interactions between various sections of society. Greg M. Smith points to an aesthetic separating Sayles' films from other multiple protagonist works, including television serials: "On *ER* and *The West Wing* (and in mainstream Hollywood film), we are always aware of who the stars are, and the camera follows them. We know that we are

supposed to watch Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, not the boys they pass on the street ... John Sayles recognizes the way this form validates American ideals of individualism, the romantic notion that one's own actions propel the universe" (128-129). In this way we could see Sayles' films as cinema against solipsism, shouldering the considerable task of correcting the imbalance of self-interest proliferated through the ego-stroking machinations of market-researched and audience-targeted filmmaking; Sayles resists approaching filmmaking as saleable product that must, by necessity, indulge rather than challenge our own fantasies of being more important or worthy of attention than others. This can be achieved merely by encouraging us to identify with characters whose concerns are carefully isolated from an ideal self-governing community. But there is more going on here: it is not just our identification with key figures in conventional narrative that could be considered a problematic norm. The individualist view also maintains our susceptibility to categorise – and rely upon – heroes and villains, rather than contextualise social ills and deal with their systemic roots; we could also easily believe and relax in the belief that one heroic individual in a far-off office – an Erin Brockovich or a Karen Silkwood – will do the good work of saving our communities for us. Sayles' style *implicates* us by its very interconnectivity, working against the vast urban bystander effect that is the blight of contemporary community engagement. Mythic heroes and villains whose moral impact can be totalised do not survive this level of scrutiny.

Matewan (1987), one of Sayles' most widely respected films (although less warmly received by critics at its time of release), looked at events leading up to the Battle of Matewan in 1920, when the West Virginian coal mine workers took strike action and attempted to unionise. The ensemble is populated with characters inspired by real people; however, the central protagonist – unionist and proponent of pacifistic solutions Joe Kenehan – is one of Sayles' own inventions, serving the filmmaker's intent to look at the inevitability of violence given such a colossal scale of oppression, and at the same time query whether it is ultimately unable to be the force of positive change.

The production took a long time to raise enough funds for a green light, and Sayles had attempted to make the film before *Brother*, which he wrote and shot swiftly after leading *Matewan* investors fell through (Molyneux 125). Its story has roots in his early novel *Union Dues*, through which Sayles put to page his extensive research on America's coal mining history and a study of an increasingly splintered workers' movement. In the film *Matewan*, Sayles fleshed out preoccupations predating his filmmaking career, and it certainly shows through his highly developed characters, familiarity with the human background of need-

threat driving the conflicting political and theological interests on display, and Nora Chavooshian's painstaking reconstruction of era-specific production design.

The film is not without problems, however. Despite some fine reminders about the cultural heritage of America – such as the convergence of musical instruments and cooking styles traded between Italian and African Americans, and Caucasian locals – the villains are much too villainous, perhaps even comically so, leading to an uneasy sense of disingenuous didacticism on Sayles' part. Historical inaccuracies were denounced, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the journal *Labor History* – possibly missing the point of making a film featuring both historical and invented characters, but also acknowledging its "stereotypically defined" characterisations (Dubofsky 488). Mark C. Carnes, however, points to the fact that this was not the most representative point of view and that American historians have rated *Matewan* highly in polls (206). It is also unclear to anyone unfamiliar with the episode of American history that the Matewan massacre was just the very beginning of an era marked by violent disputes across the mining district. Those looking for further dramatic enactments of resultant violence would have to wait until playwright Jean Battlo wrote his 2000 play *Terror of the Tug*, covering the violence erupting during a strike on July 1 and events leading up to the assassination of Police Chief Sid Hatfield (played by David Strathairn in *Matewan*) on August 1, 1921. The murder eventually led to the Battle of Blair Mountain, one of the largest civil uprisings in American history. See Howard B. Lee's *Bloodletting in Appalachia* for a historical account (52-57 explores Matewan). Shumway again contextualises *Matewan* by demonstrating its subject's scarcity of precedent, in film as well as literature, reemphasising Sayles' role in asserting film as educative medium (John Sayles 46), although he also excuses Sayles' dependence on stereotypes by reference to conventions of the Western (48, 57), an argument not available to the humanist realist, valuing a complex vision of the human above all.

Up until *Matewan*, visual elements in Sayles' films had been rudimentary, to say the least. It took him four films to become assured in manipulation of the camera, to immerse rather than jar an audience, as he intended. He had been accused of just putting a camera in front of a script in numerous reviews, a fair charge; *Village Voice*'s reviews of his early pictures reveal the sentiment, as one reviewer wrote of *Lianna* "Sayles's tongue is quick but his camera is static" (Rev. of *Lianna* 28) and staff writers said that in *Brother* he "didn't know where to put the camera" (Rev. of *Brother* np). Both are typical of a view that Sayles was a visually unsophisticated filmmaker rather than merely shooting on a highly limited budget. Sayles seemed to support their view somewhat by adamantly sticking to his humanist maxim

of "making films about people. I'm not interested in cinematic art" (Auster and Quart 330). As his work with Michael Balhaus on *Baby It's You* demonstrated, however, this does not necessarily mean he would not make visually sophisticated films given the means, just that humans have primacy over 'high art' affectation.

In his first films, the evidence of wrangling with hired editing equipment is also clear. While it may have been refreshing for script- and performance-based works to be placed ahead of visual wham-bam entertainment-bait, the combination of both graced *Matewan*, potentially due to the guidance of lenser Haskell Wexler. Sayles evidently learned much from Wexler, as ensuing films had undeniable visual finesse well matched to narrative, without becoming distracting. Sayles found means to better serve the script with filmmaking technique without detracting from the ethical impact of his stories. Wexler has since joked that Sayles is "getting the message that writing is only part of making a film" (Molyneaux 254).

Eight Men Out (1988) looked at the 1919 Black Sox Scandal, when the White Sox baseball team became involved in match fixing during the World Series. The film combined the force of Sayles' nascent unapologetic morality with palpable human understanding of the pressures and responsibilities confronted by those who eventually are corrupted by peer coercion. He investigates the idea of 'pure' baseball as a microcosm of the idealised 'pure' America, and demonstrates that, given the culture of masculine competition that hides under the ideal of professionalism – often played out as fiscal contest – an uncorrupted or pure form of baseball (or America) is a fantasy. He riffs on the best-man-wins fantasy of a sports game monetised to the extent baseball had been by 1919. Sayles explains:

> To me the movie is about male confrontation and competition, and the things that men do to each other, and the question, Is there anything left that's pure, that can survive in the world? And it can't ... Most of those confrontations are about the way men work on each other. It could be the scene between Joe Jackson and Swede Risberg, who comes to him and says, "Joe, all the guys are going in on this conspiracy, and they're going to think you're an asshole if you don't," and he turns him. (Smith and Sayles 151)

In the end, it is the players who stand in court and pay the price for the deal – even those who were not involved in the fixing – while the gamblers and money-movers who withheld the profits remain unscathed. *Eight Men Out* was also the first screenplay Sayles ever wrote,

adapted from Eliot Asinof's book of the same name. Sayles had been seeking financial support for the script in Hollywood for a decade before he made the film. He used the proceeds from *Brother* to purchase, with producers Midge Sanford and Sarah Pillsbury, the option for the story. Again, the film attracted attention from historians, but this time with a more positive view from the *American Historical Review*, calling it "as smart and subtle in its handling of American cultural history as any recent movie I have seen" (Scobey 1143). Scholars have also favourably compared *Eight Men Out* against other texts evoking the scandal, such as the 1989 feature *Field of Dreams* (Phil Robinson), with similar respect for Sayles' diligent research and realism above transcendent myth-making (Ardolino 45, Ryan 155) and focus on the psychology of the players (Shumway, John Sayles 60).

Sayles made another overtly political ensemble drama, *City of Hope* (1991), before returning to more intimate narratives with *Passion Fish* (1992) and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994; hereafter *Roan Inish*). *City of Hope*'s characters were associated by locality, laying down the societal cross-section approach to his ensemble narratives that he would later refine (rather than examination of a specific historical event, or community such as coal miners, baseballers or old college friends).

City of Hope, however, is unique amongst Sayles' *oeuvre* in its approach to character revelation, camera movement and editing technique. Working for the second time with cinematographer Robert Richardson to enhance their representation of social connection in *Eight Men Out*, *City of Hope* exploited new steadicam technology to initiate what has been described as Sayles' signature shot: "a long unbroken take meandering from group to group, picking up phrases and showing how all these people connect up" (Kemp 223). Of around fifty speaking parts, no single character is presented as the protagonist, more important or more capable of profound effect on others. Characters initially appearing to be peripheral – or simply narrative devices connecting disparate people – are all revealed to have some effect on what happens in the city, how it develops and changes and effects the lives of other inhabitants.

Greg M. Smith interrogates the political implications of this one-off technique and identifies it as one of Sayles' most urban narratives. It is easy, he points out, to show social and moral interconnectivity in small communities, but to capture inter-responsibility in city life is a feat few films attempt. He describes a replication of the urban experience through camera movement: "The passing maneuver duplicates and extends one of the basic experiences of being in a city: the sideways glance. It is acceptable to look briefly at the homeless guy or the loudly arguing housewives, but one cannot stare without making contact with a stranger"

(119). The technique does not avoid depth of character study, but instead upends traditional editing to get at something deeper in urban experience. Rather than suggesting meanings by calling attention to juxtaposition through a series of cuts, Sayles' script works hard to actively demonstrate rather than imply chains of cause and effect, and how disparate people are implicated in one another's decisions.

Through this unique vision, Sayles investigates how good change can result from antisocially motivated events, and how apparently antisocial misdemeanours can also be grounded in noble motivations. A mugging sparks community outrage, which is harnessed by a Congressman to justify socially aware policy; the policemen in the narrative also reveal how their actions, which often seem like harassment, can be motivated by empathy, self-doubt and even a desire to lift others from the poverty they similarly experienced when younger (Smith 123). Sayles amplifies a deep, lonely sadness inherent in our inability to see direct effects of our actions, and the sense of self-control that is lost in the urbanised world. David Strathairn's character Asteroid wanders through scenes voicing phrases overheard on television and radio: "We need help!" he repeats at one point; Sayles intuits his audience's desire for an absent saviour, or a figurehead for positive change.

While the difficult tracking shots and consequent lighting design may be pioneering, the framing is often cluttered, ramshackle and representative of Sayles' very dark vision of urban life. In this, potentially his most dismal film, everyone in the city is involved in moral gridlock over one issue or another and the noblest appear to be losing each battle for each cause they most believe in. The laudable complexity of his most sweeping multi-character drama, with insights into political compromise and moral ambiguity within a whole city's worth of allegorical characters, amounts to a condemnation of urban tribalism – and perhaps it is unfair (the same impulse to read urbanity as morally degrading can be witnessed in Sayles' screenplay for *Wild Thing* [Max Reid, 1987]). Cities can of course foster their share of cultural turf war, resistance to communal responsibility and bleak living standards, but so too can the semi-rural societies he at times idolises, such as that of his subsequent film. The cosmopolitan humanist, arguing for our capacity for moral inclusiveness, might suggest not everyone involved in city life is waylaid by this extent of duty-to-tribe – it is possible to lead a happy and moral life within a metropolis, or recent human history would surely look markedly different. Film has provided a breadth of views of urbanity – it is unhelpful to generalise about cinema and the city. Some are covered in *Cinema and the City* (Shiel and Fitzmaurice) and in *Film and the Inner City* Leonard Quart and William Kornblum provide one of the only essays to situate *City of Hope* amongst contemporary filmic views of the city (99). Sayles' view of

urbanity, however, is not without precedent. Through the 1980s depictions of the city in cinema relentlessly presented – and often satirised – a municipality harbouring a dangerously volatile, at times arbitrarily motivated tribal morality and inescapable urban wildness, from *After Hours* (Martin Scorsese, 1985) to *Adventures in Babysitting* (Chris Columbus, 1987).

His next work presented an escape from the city. *Passion Fish*, perhaps his most homiletic and synchronously his least political film, is the effort that earned Sayles wide recognition for his screenwriting: he received a nomination for an Academy Award (he also accepted the same honour four years later for the *Lone Star* screenplay) and critics – including those traditionally hostile to Sayles dramas – fell over themselves to praise it as the director's masterpiece. One *Village Voice* critic called it "a movie for those who don't like Sayles's movies" (Brown np) and even Roger Ebert pitched in "he has rarely written more three-dimensional characters than this time" (Four Star Reviews 581). Andrew Sarris completely revised his until-now negative assessment of Sayles after viewing *Passion Fish* ("*Baby It's You*: An Honest Man" 28-30). Emanuel Levy, one of a few reviewers who have closely followed Sayles' career, also heralded the film, recognising the idyll's mythologising of rural culture: "The bayou country–its myths and charms–is integrated into the texture of the film. A boat trip into the swamps represents a journey of renewal backward in time: The country's folk tradition alters the women's urban consciousness" (Rev. of *Passion Fish* np).

In *Passion Fish*, Mary McDonnell plays an embittered and self-absorbed quadriplegic ex-soap star, who has to learn to get on with the people around her again – she makes steps toward social niceties through the aid of her caregiver (Alfre Woodard), who cannot afford to lose her job. The 135-minute feature runs too long for the subject matter, labouring its point about the need for companionship. It also features some unpleasant stereotyped visions of vacuous Southwestern women and brainless television celebrities, overplayed for laughs and betraying Sayles' occasional weakness for allowing two-dimensional "bad" characters into his scripts. *Passion Fish* is otherwise, however, a performance piece for McDonnell, Woodard and love interests Vondie Curtis-Hall and David Strathairn. Strathairn delivers a character he commonly plays in Sayles films – the kindly heartthrob can-do man's man with a potholed past – only this time with a perfectly timed comedic social awkwardness.

The same year as *City of Hope* (1991), director Lawrence Kasdan came out with his own multi-character urban condemnation drama *Grand Canyon*. McDonnell and Woodard appeared together in *Grand Canyon* a year before playing opposite one another in *Passion Fish* – again Sayles and Kasdan appear to directly influence one another's creative choices.

McDonnell and Woodard show obvious relish for their roles in both movies, and lend an atmosphere of gentle fun to *Passion Fish*.

Two years later Sayles made his only film for children, also a quiet, personal narrative as opposed to the political polemics he had become known for (although not without political resonance). *Roan Inish* is a fascinating use of naturalist aesthetics to explore the concept of the selkie (half seal, half human) in Irish folklore. Sayles himself has Irish-German heritage (Carson, Interviews xix); his parents are both half-Irish (Allen and Sayles np). The film, lensed by *Matewan* cinematographer Wexler, utilises the grainy, gritty heritage of social realist cinematic imagery with haunting results. He puts these visual elements down to Kodak stocks 5293 and 5245, with "extremely fine grain and the excellent definition on landscapes" (Heuring 34). The only images not created in camera are a few movements of seals in the distant ocean – nearly unrecognisable as a visual effect. Relying on our wonder in the natural world to create fantasy, as well as good use of Sayles' usual composer Mason Daring's Irish-themed score, opened a niche in the genre: a kind of social realist fantasy. It is not magic realism but instead realist magic, where the true magic *is* the realist setting, rather than an unquestioned intervention in the fabric of the reality presented. The children of *Roan Inish* are the beneficiaries of a severely inhospitable geography and a history of hard labour. A resultant blending of landscapes, animal and human identities is symptomatic of a closeness to cycles of death and rebirth the inhabitants of the Irish coast embody, and an entirely necessary adoption of communal responsibility very closely linked to their own survival. Although the film could be seen as working within a hypocritical realism, reinforcing romanticism of the Irish "hard life" as real Irishness as pilloried by Luke Gibbons in a chapter on *Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema* (194-203), Sayles obviously intended his story to have wider implications and not merely represent Ireland. Stories passed between generations, as they are in *Roan Inish*, are requisitely grounded in communal duty and closer to locating resonances of reality in fantasy tales – approaching with curiosity rather than shirking or reacting to the unknown parts of living and dying. The reverie the young protagonist finds herself in incorporates a comprehension of heritable responsibility and is no poorer as fantasy for it. This does not carry the familiar escapism of Hollywood fantasy films; Maureen Turim and Mika Turim-Nygren identify echoes of Greek Sirens (144) and the shapeshifting serpentine women of Japanese folk tales (147). Likewise the selkie stands for indivisibility between Irish families and the other fauna the land provides a home for. In cinema history, *Roan Inish* can thus be positioned between other hard realist depictions of what Peter Blegvad has labelled the "tutelary familiar" (np), a magical or otherwise

transcendent early bond with an animal, such as *Kes* (Ken Loach, 1969), and on the other hand a tradition of American fantasy films pitched at children in which reality intervenes somewhat painfully, such as *The Kid* (Jon Turteltaub, 2000).

Gerry Molyneaux manages to find a unifying theme in the closer character studies of *Passion Fish* and *Roan Inish*, articulating the political undercurrent thusly: "Both films question the advantages of physical relocation for money and success when traded for community heritage and family traditions. In these women-related features, money has separated the characters from their roots" (199). In *Roan Inish*, a displacement theme appears which will later dominate films such as *Limbo* (1999) and *Sunshine State* (2002): the taming of wild nature by urban wealth, mediating undeveloped culture and land into a safer parody of itself, and the original inhabitants' estrangement from their locale-bound customs. After the Irish inhabitants of *Roan Inish* are forced to relinquish their lingual heritage through British occupation, they are gradually forced to move from their houses by the sea as the allure and romance of rural living brings holiday-homers into their territory. On the other hand, in *Passion Fish* McDonnell's character moves through a slow arc of shedding her brash and competitive New York City behaviours as she resettles into her home community. Sayles could again be charged with idealising rural and semi-rural communities as more virtuous than their urban equivalents across these films – but his interest in human values wherever they are found keeps him from being too divisive on the issue. A character in *Roan Inish* admits, "Life in the mainland can be hard too." People, wherever they are, will have hardships worth empathising with.

Aesthetically, both *Roan Inish* and Sayles' next film, *Lone Star* (1996) explored cinematic means to blend reality and representation. Both screenplays rely on a similar structure whereby the protagonist gathers stories and perspectives from townsfolk to patch together their own truth, and Sayles attempts to blur the lines between what is being spoken and what is being lived. Where *Roan Inish* depicts fantastical goings-on in the visual tones of social realist cinema (natural light, production design reflecting lower socio-economic conditions and Wexler's choice of film stocks, for example), *Lone Star* relies on a recurring camera movement to blend history and representation into a heightened reality much more alive in collective memory: "Repeatedly, Sayles emphasizes his central theme: history is merely a collection of highly subjective appraisals. In several scenes, Sayles gracefully glides his camera from a flashback to a contemporary scene, allowing past and present to exist simultaneously in the same tracking shot" ("Rev. of *Lone Star*" np).

With *Lone Star*, Sayles turned to American border politics to explore, with articulate and nuanced precision, the many questions wrapped up in contemporary American/Latin American relations. His characters speak frankly about the interwoven history of conflict and haphazard alliance Caucasian and Latin populations share with minorities such as the black and indigenous communities of the southern states – these past conflicts can no longer reasonably define their identities. He marries his characters' forensic journeys in *Lone Star* and ensuing films to his own investigation into the postcolonial conditions of intercession confronted by these increasingly inseparable cultures. Kimberley Sultze elaborates on *Lone Star*'s frontier politics in *Rewriting the West as Multi-Cultural* (19-25); *Lone Star*, in fact, has received more academic consideration than any other Sayles film and is justifiably remembered as one of his most eloquent and insightful works. It took $12 million in United States box office receipts (Box Office Mojo), an improved return on his previous features.

Lone Star meticulously ties the political to the personal, lest Sayles' postcolonial and anti-essentialist notions seem too theoretical or unreal; much of the time, the human face he provides to the South's cultural heritage is seen through the lens of parent-child anxieties. His two romantic leads, Texan sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) and Latina school teacher Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Peña), are revealed at the film's conclusion to be half-siblings (a narrative twist seen in other films of the 1990s including *The Crow* [Alex Proyas, 1994] and *The Devil's Advocate* [Taylor Hackford, 1997] and with literary precedents such as V.C. Andrews' *Flowers in the Attic* in 1979); thus we have a personal replication of the situation greater America and Latin America find themselves in. Do they forget the past in order to move on, or let it continue to haunt them and keep them apart?

Lone Star is concerned not only with the inadequacy of old racial and national markers to determine identities, social currencies and privileges, but also with contradictory representations of history, how we ascribe value to representations of history and how useful retellings of history really are in resolving current mysteries of social causality and political inequities. The film's famous closing line, "forget the Alamo" inverts the popular idea that we should always remember mistakes made in past in order to improve. The new historicist reformulation admits the possibility that retellings of the past – especially those presenting as in any way 'official' representations – adapt to incorporate contemporised values, and can be instrumental in updating and reinforcing old conflicts, racial and class divisions. Glenn Whitehouse suggests that Sam, by the end of the film, has earned deeper empathy through questioning the hero and villain symbols cultural history relies on: he cannot escape the moral ambiguity faced by his ancestors, himself, his loved one or his peers, and it leads to a

responsibility to confront current ambiguities with enriched compassion and clarity (306). *Lone Star* collides postcolonial, new historical and Oedipal concepts in order to foreground human stories silenced by doctrinaire paradigm-based readings of narrative importance, for example, "the film challenges the conventional, short-sighted view of the region's history as a homogeneous colonization epic" (Francisco 410). Within this tale of historical antagonism and the hard road to a conflict resolution based on complex understanding, is a fulcrum based on love and connection: while none of the aforementioned scholars writing on *Lone Star* mention humanism directly, they do clearly demonstrate Sayles' approach to the humanist values of storytelling. *Lone Star* emphasises conflict resolution in lieu of rigid identity politics, which can be used to overstate the value of recognising boundaries and conflicts between groups. Their reiteration can potentially make the rifts between communities appear more important than they should be, due to our comfort with the traditions of and dialogue around identity conflict.

Sayles' next two films expounded two of the main thematic preoccupations in *Lone Star*. *Hombres armados (Men With Guns)* (1997) delved into Latin America to investigate how our displaced understanding of the problems faced by rural communities are affected by remote humanitarian interference, and uses a different nested story structure to upset holistic historical narrative from a distanced perspective (Embry 172, Rodriguez 172); *Limbo* (1999) is very much about storytelling and representation, and how they direct our attitudes.

Lone Star's box office performance proved Sayles could entice multiplex viewers as well as arthouse audiences. He once again found himself courted by Hollywood, with the studios showing interest in producing his next film. In a typical display of determined independence, Sayles showed them the script for *Men With Guns* – his first primarily non-English language film, in Spanish and Mexican indigenous dialects, candidly and uncompromisingly looked at our complicity with oppression in Latin America. Unsurprisingly they would not touch it, so Sayles embarked on one of his most daring projects, relying on another delicate balancing act of investors and his own money. Even Sayles' long-time partner and producer Maggie Renzi almost pulled out of the project, realistically predicting the economic and indeed physical dangers involved in shooting his hard-hitting drama and getting it distributed. Tales from the set in Chiapas, Mexico are sobering; Sayles explained "It was not unusual to see a pickup full of guys not in uniform, with semi-automatic weapons" (Caro 8).

Men With Guns is perhaps Sayles' most challenging film, as it looks at people with a complete lack of autonomy, and implies our own participation in their plight (Embry 175) – it

traces the effects of an ostensibly good-willed humanitarian cause which has harmed the people it sought to empower, due to romanticised assumptions of indigenous health problems as isolated from political interests. Our complicit involvement is not specified but implied through knowledge of counterinsurgencies subsidised by the United States. Both Steven G. Kellman and Joshua L. Miller emphasise the consistent reminders, emblematised by multilingualism, that we have kept well away from understanding or confronting the horrors we encouraged amongst the most oppressed in geopolitical conflict; Kellman presents the case in a 2000 article for *American Studies in Scandinavia* and Miller in a chapter for the 2003 book *Bilingual Games*. Anyone with the power to help the indigenous communities had been killed, and the recipients of aid punished by men with guns. The final images of *Men With Guns* describe how people with no choices could possibly construct hope for themselves: for some it is giving oneself to the aid of others, even with the high possibility of failure; for some it is maintaining a fantasy of a better life somewhere else just beyond reach; and for some it will be joining the army, becoming one of the men with guns, in order to have a semblance of autonomy.

Men with Guns sees another connection between the careers of Loach and Sayles, as a year earlier Loach similarly attempted a realist look at both military and naïve humanitarian interference in Central America with *Carla's Song* (1996). Although audiences stayed away from *Men with Guns* and critics broadcast their disappointment, it is encouraging to note that the film industry continued to embrace the filmmaker. This and his subsequent film, *Limbo*, cemented a partnership with distributor Sony Pictures Classics; the Sony division had already competently released *Lone Star* and a deal with producers Renzi and Sarah Green in 1997 afforded the filmmaking team financial support with artistic control (Molyneux 250). He also received the Writers Guild Award for career achievement in 1998 and the John Steinbeck Award from the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies. The center's director, Dr. Susan Shillinglaw, drew comparison between the humanisms of author and filmmaker: "Steinbeck said that the only reason he wrote was to make people understand one another. I think John Sayles does that in film after film" (qtd. in Busack).

Limbo is almost as resolute as *Men With Guns* in its need to reveal hard truths to Sayles' audience, but the truths are of a completely different nature. The film again contains a number of stories-within-stories, almost all inconclusive. The film periodically topples narrative expectations (transmuting from traditional Saylesian drama to adventure movie halfway through) and considers amongst all this our increasingly uneasy relationship to the natural world, and the inability to be prepared for every adversity the world may throw at us.

Most importantly, *Limbo* has no end. The film ceases in the middle of a practical dilemma with no obvious response. *Limbo* sits in opposition to narrative norm not merely by a humdrum absence of a conclusion, but because the absence of conclusion in its multiple nested stories can be read as its defining challenge, as the conclusion would have told us *what we ought to do*. The challenge is that we can assume through conventional narrative that it is possible for correct procedural or moral decisions to be made, as we have the benefit of hindsight. But this is untrue to life, and in a way *Limbo* acts as an antidote to Sayles' stridently moral narratives – it is quite possibly the product of Sayles grappling with mid-career reconsiderations of the role of storytelling in our lives. He certainly expresses discomfort with the simulation of risk offered by the safely confined – and ultimately unstirring – emotional manipulations of genre convention, drawing comparisons between his screenwriting work for studios, the commodification of Alaskan wilderness in *Limbo* and the "illusion of risk" offered by rollercoasters (West and West 31).

Limbo extends Sayles' deconstructive border politics to a new region: the spurious distinction between the natural world and tourist-baiting representations of nature, of which the film's Alaskan setting is a fine example. Ironically, the maintenance of a sanitised Alaskan history usurps industry and manufacture in the region, and ultimately serves as tenuous conservation; but the recreations of nature are a façade, a safer version of 'natural' which confuses the nature/artifice binary further – lurking behind the commercialised nature is a less mediated natural world into which the characters are ejected (Barrett 240-243). *Limbo* can still be seen as a narrative heavily engaged with the mutability of reality and representation: sharing centre stage with two other primary characters is Sayles' great American, at times Byronic and always metaphoric hero – a man struggling to move on from his dark past, while village rumours and retellings follow him, keeping past mistakes alive in the collective consciousness. Finally, the film serves as a jolt to addicts of representational reality, consumers of the sanitised culture being questioned at the film's core. Although the obvious counterpoint to *Limbo*'s generic upset is *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme, 1986), as Sayles also played a police officer in the screwball-cum-thriller, there also exists a similarity to the work of another British filmmaker: Lindsay Anderson flicking between genres to make socio-political points in a film like *O Lucky Man!* (1973). The absence of conclusion also puts Shumway in mind of serialised television (John Sayles 114-115). Unfortunately, at its Cannes Film Festival bow, critics once again balked when asked to venture beyond story conventions they are so intimate with, and the film was roundly rejected, and apparently booed (Levy, Rev. of *Limbo* np).

Sayles' next three films, *Sunshine State*, *Casa* and *Silver City*, released consecutively in 2002, 2003 and 2004, are all signature Sayles ensemble dramas looking at a cross-section of society, attempting to explain and challenge political corruption and at the same time expose attitudes that make injustice possible. These films mark an end to Sayles' experimentation with story structure through the 90s, and Shumway notes a contemporaneous tonal shift, allowing wit (albeit darkly comic wit, often drawn from his characters' grief) and repartee to the fore after nearly two decades of sterner pictures, which he again associates with the likes of Woody Allen (John Sayles 122); the emphasis on comedic dialogue reaches back to *Secaucus Seven*. *Sunshine State* and *Silver City* are both largely concerned with environmentally and socially unheeding development, how lucrative deals are steamrolled through community consultation, how dissent is silenced, and who pays through this process. Although potentially the people who suffer the most are unprotected workers such as the dead illegal migrant worker at the centre of *Silver City*'s murder mystery, the final image of *Sunshine State*, depicting the developers golfing on a tiny strip of green between their monstrous creations, makes it clear that everyone loses from the process of political corruption and development for financial gain rather than social benefit.

Sunshine State looks at the flipside of the *Limbo* coin. By journeying down to the southern tip of America, Sayles looks at a Floridian island as the end point of the commodification of American nature and history. The state is almost entirely developed into representations of itself – an unfacilitated nature no longer remains. It tackles the subject (rarely approached in cinema) of American cultural sanitisation head-on with no-nonsense dialogue. One character explains how to reassert a town's cultural identity to attract newcomers: "You Disney-fy it a little bit and they will come back for more – all you need is a hook. I once worked this place up in Wisconsin; the whole thing was built on 'wurst' [pronounced 'worst'] ... weisswurst, bratwurst, knockwurst, Bavarian people! Lots of strudel shops and people in leather shorts, dirndls." This attitude is juxtaposed with the stories of locals affected by the way the land changes around them: the backdrop to the drama of their everyday lives. While the behemoth developer concocts devious methods in a bid to buy out land with prospective "growth" opportunities, we see how the people whose lives, customs and identity are intimately connected with their locality have the least say in the process – aside from holding on to a few nostalgic remnants of their history as long as their hip pocket allows. They are at the mercy of anyone with dollars, such as the golfer-developers they will never meet, but who will install organisations they will in future be employed by, sacrificing the sovereignty of identity offered by locally-owned businesses to the anonymity of

corporatisation; when this kind of autonomy in a community belongs to absentees, business cannot have the interests of people at heart. These observations are tempered by knowledge of the inevitability of change and the concurrent price of freedoms – desegregation in American businesses, for example, was pioneered by large corporations looking to maximise gains. Sayles sums up his observations across these last few development narratives in a quote at the beginning of the film: "nature on a leash." The kitsch has no deeper meaning in anyone's lives. Once again, wealth does not enrich connection between humans. If we refuse to accept this, our communal life will be at the mercy of the morally uncommitted and politically motivated; in *Sunshine State*, "parallel and isolated communities and people need to pay closer attention to themselves and to each other. Otherwise, someone else will tell people how to think about themselves, their history, and their community" (Ryan 244). This does not come down to the influence of a few unseemly individuals, however. It is a collective gridlock in attempting to decide on the future of place – nation, town and home – and Roger Ebert points out the way Sayles deviates from expected subject treatment in a way many other critics have consistently failed to recognise, misreading clarity as screenwriter sermon:

> Because we are so familiar with the conventional approach to a story like this, it takes time to catch on that Sayles is not repeating the old progressive line about the little guy against big capital ... It is about the next generation of those issues and the people they involve. Racism has faded to the point where Eunice's proud home on Lincoln Beach no longer makes the same statement. Big business is not monolithic but bumbling. The little motel is an eyesore. The young people who got out, like Desiree, have prospered. Those who stayed, like Marly, have been trapped. (np)

Using *Sunshine State* as an example, Baron explains one of the most damaging moral reductionisms Sayles' works oppose:

> In contrast to mainstream political thrillers that vacillate between the vision of the lone hero saving the day for all the lesser humans and the vision that social ills are caused by forces so evil, so pervasive, and so mysterious that society cannot be changed for the better, Sayles's films serve as a series of picaresque vignettes of people whose

> cooperation makes a small, sometimes inadvertent, but still potentially positive impact on their environment. Sayles's depiction of the mutual assistance that emerges out of conflicts between characters in films like *Matewan* and *Sunshine State* gives expression to the effect ostensibly private interactions can have on larger social-political circumstances ... Sayles's bankers, lawyers, and businessmen are often no more or less well intended, no more or less fallible, no more or less accountable, no more or less deserving of circumspect compassion than other characters in his stories. (31)

A key to understanding Sayles' films and novels is to unpack the relationship of the political to the personal, inclusive of these "private interactions" with greater socio-political ramifications. If personal ethics can be read as having political implications, in movies such as *Sunshine State* and *Silver City*, Sayles is matching these local responsibilities with a look at the interpersonal and social ramifications wrought by dismissal of ethics by those engaged in political processes – not just politicians, but the media, the judiciary and other representatives at different levels of the political process. The two-way view of responsibility is rare to see on film, and exhilarating to politically active viewers. Andrew Tudor has another view:

> For Sayles politics is unavoidable. "If you're just making a movie about human beings, there's going to be social politics in it," he told an interviewer: "there's going to be class politics and race politics, and sexual politics, and ethnic politics. That's the world that we live in." In his best films he catches precisely that combination, articulating a vision of the intricate connections between our personal quandaries and crises and those larger issues of morality and action that inform our social world. Lest that sound didactic, however, it is worth stressing that Sayles is a compelling story–teller, a sensitive director of actors, and a fine writer. (Tudor np)

Interestingly, Tudor also goes on to note that, "even Sayles now seems to be in retreat in the face of his country's numbing political landscape. His three most recent films – *Limbo*, *Sunshine State* and *Casa* – have attended rather more to personal than to public issues. Of course they still traverse Sayles' familiar concerns, but they lack the ferocity of *Matewan*, *Lone Star* or *City of Hope*" (np). This assumes that his illumination of the personal is somehow

opposed to political involvement, and possibly misinterprets the nature of Sayles' political intentions. He explained in a conversation with Beverly Gage, "You know, when people say, 'Your movies are so political,' I really just say, 'Look, they're *not* necessarily even that political. What they are is politically conscious as opposed to being politically *un*conscious.' And 'politically unconscious' means that you just accept the status quo and you don't ask questions" (193). When Sayles talks of the "political" then, he means engagement with the ethics of questioning how we ought to live, which incorporates the personal and contextual elements his films explore.

Casa de los Babys, the subject of this dissertation, places the interrogation of attitudes – and the way in which socially conscious and politically aware people attempt to mediate racist or harmful attitudes – ahead of Sayles' contemporary focus on the mechanics of corruption. Its subject, the ethics of international adoption, is a first for Sayles and is under-represented in cinema. It was his second production shot in Mexico; IFC Films financed the movie, which cost around $1 million, but was seen by few audiences with a small publicity budget and limited release (Shumway, John Sayles 134).

Silver City, although darker and more sardonic in tone than most of Sayles' works, cleverly pairs its characters' moral journey with a romantic one in the manner of some of the best political romantic comedies made around the same time, such as *Two Weeks Notice* (Marc Lawrence, 2002) or *The Girl in the Café* (David Yates, 2005), and earlier films from *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) to *Broadcast News* (James L. Brooks, 1987). In these films, the characters' romantic choices reflect their struggle with political beliefs, such as *Silver City*'s Nora Allardyce (Maria Bello), caught between the societally sanctioned comfort of marrying the attractive, well-off developer/lobbyist Chandler (Billy Zane), or reuniting with her ex-lover Danny (Danny Huston), a jaded journalist-turned-private investigator, slowly regaining his faith in principled resistance. Bould offers a penetrating analysis of the manipulative language and all the hegemonic practises that Chandler represents (15-20), but in the end he fails to win Nora over, not understanding people on a human level, only as pieces in a game of power and capital. Romance in its capacity as a political or moral motivator may be a common narrative device identifiable across the history of cinema, but had made only rare appearances in Sayles' films since *Secaucus Seven* (*Passion Fish*, *Limbo* and *Sunshine State* all sideline their romantic narratives to varying extent) and now comes to the surface of this electoral detective story. The technique also emblematises *Silver City*'s central theme in studying the struggle against inertia: striving together against corruption has inherent value, even when the systematic amorality of political process seems ingrained and can only be

challenged "despite self-interest" and despite the unglamorised, realistic detective-journalist not being very good at his job (Shumway, John Sayles 138-139). When we unite in demonstrating our rejection of exploitation, cynical dismissal of morality is revealed as the tool holding us from all possible hope for positive systematic change; a space opens up where the costs of exploitation can be revealed, and the entertainment distractions favoured by monopolised media ownership are rendered transparent (142), as in *Silver City*'s climax.

Critics once again seldom read the film beyond their perception of surface leftist politics, however Sayles' next film was more warmly received than any of his recent works – although as Shumway points out, with more respect than enthusiasm (John Sayles 149). *Honeydripper* (2007) returns Sayles to his role as historian, as he captures a slice of life in Alabama, 1950. Sayles depicts the subjugation of African Americans as routine and commonplace to the point of being mundane – the characters are so familiar with their powerlessness that they find whatever means possible to maintain their own sovereignty: they learn to laugh at the absurdity of their oppression, they do what they can to compromise their persecutors through their labour-intensive prison service (filling bags of cotton with rocks), and most importantly, use their cultural heritage as the site of resistance. At the centre of the narrative is an aged blues house, which Tyrone (Danny Glover) attempts to revive despite crippling debt. Sayles' challenge to empirical history can be seen as analogous to his discussion on the impermanence of musical genre (Ryan 289): the fluidity of humanity and human expression – and our resistance to reductive categorisation, which diminishes our complexity – again takes the spotlight.

More than most of Sayles' work, the film aims to charm rather than challenge – to win us over with entertaining and sympathetic characters. He says of his protagonist, "somehow he ends up being a guy who lies, cheats and steals, and we're still rooting for him at the end of the movie" ("John Sayles on Honeydripper" np). Sayles' films still struggle to find distribution beyond a dedicated niche audience; he is clearly aware of his audience's solidarity with the liberalist movement in pre-civil rights America, and so need not preach. Running through the film are familiar Sayles concerns of official history and its enforcement of myth through retellings, resistance to violence amongst disaffected minorities (who are also the subjects of hegemonic wedge politics), and a protagonist attempting to come to terms with rumours about his past and the communal reiteration of bygone mistakes. Richard H. King also points out that the supernatural elements in the film can be seen as part of a trend in American cinema of remythologising Southern music (86). With *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Coen Bros.,

2000) in many ways leading the charge, the trend has had concurrent implications for the music industry; Southern is once again "hip."

His latest film *Amigo* (2010), like his 2011 novel *A Day in the Sun* looking at the Philippine-American war, has taken a long time to find a distributor. It is unfortunately doubtful his newest bilingual film (using Tagalog-speaking actors) will be widely seen beyond a handful of festival audiences. At this time, I am awaiting a chance to view the film; the only showing it has received in Australia was at 2011's Adelaide Film Festival. A United States commercial DVD release is planned for 2013 – three years after production. The highly limited distribution speaks to the collapse of a model of independent cinema Sayles pioneered and then relied on to lift his thoughtful dramas to the screen. His last three films have been made entirely with his and Renzi's own money, and have not been profitable (Godfrey 101). Given reduced revenue, reduced audiences for his films and less interest from investors and distributors, the trajectory of Sayles demonstrates the urgent need for us to address the future of intellectual property that has no PR interests attached, before we consign our creative future to those harnessing entertainment as advertisement and the few giants in the industry peddling merchandisable visual and attitudinal platitudes in two hour blocks.

The only film in his career for which Sayles allowed another director to take the reins on one of his own scripts was *Breaking In* (1989), helmed by the redoubtable Bill Forsyth, noted for quirky anti-corporate dominance film *Local Hero* (1983), as well as coming-of-age comedy *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and coming-of-age drama *Housekeeping* (1987). The experiment did not work, however: *Breaking In* was not the sum of its parts, and is bafflingly devoid of intrigue, political resonance, or any interesting social observations. Sayles has also filmed a number of Bruce Springsteen's music videos and in 1990 created a television series, *Shannon's Deal.*

In addition to writing, directing, editing and at times acting in his own films, as well as the occasional appearance in or production credit on other American independents' films, Sayles has penned plays and novels. His works of fiction include *Los Gusanos* in 1991, a sprawling dissection of the communities around Cuban diaspora in Miami, and 2011's *A Moment in the Sun*. Both have a structure akin to *City of Hope*, as the author will follow a character for a few pages before meeting another en route, abandoning the former to flesh out a new story. Both also exhume generations' worth of exploitation and counter-exploitation, and the culture of personal rivalry propagated by such magnitude of ongoing political upheaval. Both occasionally lapse into non-English dialogue, and English-language readers must piece together what is being said from reactions to the dialogue.

As a novelist, Sayles explores similar concerns as those found in his cinema, displays the same rigorous research around the communities he explores, and emphasises psychological inquest into his characters' motivations through behavioural exposition, narrating events as the third person behind a fourth wall or camera would see them. His works of fiction have often been positioned in relation to his film, and described as fulfilling the same task of mapping social strata (Bould 15), however Ryan insists in his glowing appraisal that "his fiction, often ignored, remains impressive ... Sayles's early fiction stands apart from his film work" (8). Sayles describes his fiction as "mosaics" (Smith and Sayles 151) and they match the description. His work is almost purist third person: he very rarely gets inside anyone's head, letting their actions and dialogue do the work (with years of screenwriting behind his pen, realistic and incisive dialogue is one of the great joys of his novels). He has maintained an aloofness in his prose – an unwillingness to permit unhindered sympathy or emotively empathic language; even while he describes characters undergoing great hardship, his prose is matter-of-fact. Via this detachment, his written work often reads as more sardonic – his humour is regularly at the fore – and at times more fatalistic than his film work.

In 2004, Sayles also published his second collection of short stories, *Dillinger in Hollywood*. The book includes a brisk narrative telling of *Casa* (the story was the inspiration for the screenplay), describing most events in the film with more emphasis on the story's six prospective American mothers, and only half of the Latin characters from the film. Where the written account does add some revealing backstory or motivational extrapolation for a handful of characters, it is mostly dialogue heavy and the prose is clinically efficient – a shorthand exposition moving the characters equably from scene to scene.

His recent films and novels submit the possibility of a hybrid society rather than one ruled by national or racial borders – and the reasons for this are at once deeply personal and encapsulate a political dialogue. Martin F. Norden noted that Bruce MacMillan pointed out in an oral presentation that "Sayles is one of the few authors and artists to explore not only the familiar sentiment, 'The personal is the political,' but also its reversal by translating abstract political concepts into situations that average people face daily" (Norden 113). Thus, recurring dramatic devices and motifs in Sayles' plots come to represent something more pragmatic. These devices include an exploration of the limitations of political ideology and humanitarian compassion, the way in which unarticulated communal consciousness can keep old class and racial divisions alive, and questions to do with the efficacy of fictional storytelling in political debate.

At the most fundamental level, the films of John Sayles are humanist and ethical because their personal interrogation reminds us of the real human reasons for engaging in political change. He presents an empathic understanding of the impediments to communitarian change confronting us in the social world, illumination of the way humans still benefit from working past their differences to create better outcomes together, and thus a belief that human autonomy *can* create a better world for all, even when the outlook is grim. Of course, none of this is easy – it is, in fact, infinitely complex as our context changes rapidly while we attempt to resolve human disputes, and the nature of being human adapts to the contexts we manipulate and recreate. So the human must be acknowledged as a dynamic and changing entity – this posthuman entity also characterises Sayles' moral puzzles for the screen. The discursive anatomy of all these interrogations I would submit as "humanist studies."

CHAPTER TWO
HUMANISM, SOCIAL REALISM AND NORMATIVE ETHICS

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2008, Shumway asked the question *Why Doesn't Cultural Studies Love John Sayles?* He pointed out that, at the time of writing, there had been very few scholarly appraisals of Sayles' work and of those he perused, assessments regularly ranged from ambivalent to critical. He went on to identify larger problems with current trends in cultural theory:

> In general, however, cultural-studies scholars who typically deal with contemporary film and popular culture have seemed uninterested in Sayles's politics, or more generally in art that takes an explicitly left or progressive stance. The movement doesn't seem to know what to do with works that openly share its politics ... In talking to colleagues and listening to comments at conferences where I have given papers on Sayles, I often hear that, while his politics may be admirable, his films are, to put it more bluntly than they do, not very good. This is an odd response coming from cultural studies, which has been famously averse to questions of taste and which has devoted a great deal of attention to "cultural productions" that no one would argue have much aesthetic merit. (np)

The question of aesthetic merit holds the key – as Sayles' films often work in a realist mode, it is fair to say the objection has something to do with realist aesthetics. It is important to note here that, in a field to some extent concerned with questioning the agency of value application to cultural artefacts, Shumway has identified some hypocrisy in the denigration of Sayles' work as being not very good. However, as I will discuss later in this chapter, in order to define the realist humanism we find in the films of Sayles and many of his independent contemporaries, the problematic of human value in art (as opposed to universal value) is unavoidable and cannot be easily dismissed.

Shumway goes on to put Sayles' aesthetics in broader perspective: "Realism and other traditional styles have been in disfavor on the academic left since even before the advent of European theory in the 1970s, and that event only strengthened the aversion ... many in cultural studies remain caught up in the idea that new artistic forms will bring about social change. Sayles's films provide a clear alternative in using traditional forms to promote

nontraditional politics" (np). So what is the problem? Why is realism so undervalued if much of the time its content, its earnest messages are aligned with the academic left, as those few scholars mounting a defence of Sayles' films have suggested? To look at why realism appears to sit in opposition to cultural studies, we will have to divorce realism from other filmic expressions – what does it mean, now, to be an aesthetic realist? We also need to look carefully at claims made about Sayles' didacticism and visual naivety to locate his own realism.

Before taking a historical look at realist theory, it is worth outlining the difference between realism and social realism. First of all, while by no means exclusively so, contemporary social realism in filmmaking is typically associated with the cinema of Britain. Samantha Lay explores recent examples in both *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit-grit* and "Good intentions, high hopes and low budgets: Contemporary social realist film-making in Britain", although precursors can be identified worldwide and the British New Wave found its roots in various European neorealist traditions, especially Italian neorealism. Although Robert Murphy is at pains to emphasise, "Once one delves into the history of British cinema, it becomes obvious that the realist films are a small, and in box-office terms insignificant, minority" (2), today social realism is still an important component of British filmmaking identity as it is clearly distinct from other global cultural products and its traditions persist across the work of those filmmakers who have not defected to Hollywood (Ken Loach and Andrea Arnold, for example). For the purposes of this essay, social realism can be thought of as a realism depicting the working class, underprivileged or disenfranchised communities – in Sayles' case, often diaspora – investigating its subjects' lives through circumstantial pressures to explore their humanity (Hallam and Marshment 190). By carefully depicting as much detail in situational context as available (the grime on the kitchen sink) and emphasising struggle against economic odds, social realism also depicts the injustice of inequity on the clearly human terms of narrative. Realism, on the other hand, generally need not be about those experiencing economic hardship, and need not pursue a particular end associated with the style. Also distinct to social realism, as Hallam and Marshment point out, is an emphasis on "the relationship between location and identity" (184), often looking at development of the self through environmental factors, which is certainly true of Sayles' films. Other social realist elements they identify can be clearly traced through Sayles' *oeuvre*: "social realism is associated with ensemble casts and multi-stranded narratives with narrative motivation dispersed across a range of diverse characters, events and situations" (190) and "social realism is associated with a lack of stylistic artifice and a transparent naturalism ... the

use of a documentary 'look' achieved by coupling simple continuity editing strategies with observational camerawork" (192). Where social realism has been taken up in American film, it has been less popularly noted. Recent examples could include *Duane Hopwood* (Matt Mulhern, 2005) and *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008). It is more common to see the aesthetics of social realism used to augment narratives and themes from other genres, such as the thriller (for example, *Winter's Bone* [Debra Granik, 2010]) or war drama (for example, *Under Fire* [Roger Spottiswoode, 1983]).

Scott Forsyth, writing on director Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married* at the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival, notes the very close relationship between realism and melodrama: "While often a colloquial term, derisively posed against realism, melodrama has always been historically related to realism—think of Dickens, Flaubert or Balzac—and here the veracity of realist performance is organized and displayed by the high points of melodrama-sudden death, tortuous family rivalry and love, madness and disease, terrible coincidence and fateful repetition" (39). These themes are common to social realism, as the torment inherent in melodrama can be closely linked to circumstance, yet realism per se does not necessarily always tend to the melodramatic. Martha Nussbaum goes some way to explaining why this is necessary: "tragedies acquaint young people with the bad things that may happen in human life, long before life itself does so: they thus enable concern for others who are suffering what the spectator has not suffered" ("Compassion" 39). The difference between the classical tragedies she refers to and social realism, however, is that tragedies tend to focus on ruling classes (40), where social realism focuses compassion on the disenfranchised.

A film like *Casa* presents a paradox: it certainly portrays economic hardship, and aesthetically the dilapidated surrounds of the oppressed are clear, but it is far from melodramatic. In fact, this is one of the interesting things about the film – we expect melodrama, rather than a depiction of hardship as so ingrained it has become mundane and routine. As the *Vancouver Courier* staff reviewers noted: "Sayles has honed a unique unadorned style of realism that places the audience in the role of eavesdropping observer ... Sayles is characteristically objective on the matter, casting himself as a chronicler of the human condition, not a commentator" (35). This position is at odds with social realism – intriguingly by placing human observation, compassion and understanding above didactic intent, which is one of the main complaints from critics of Sayles' realism. This unadorned realism is therefore Sayles' own kind of social realism: his character subjects are regularly, although not always, economically challenged and he is concerned with mapping their

circumstances to broadcast their humanity. He retains some of the aesthetic language of social realism, but eschews much of the melodrama (see my analysis of *Lianna* in the previous chapter for an example). His insistence on human moral considerations having primacy in his stories also means he can comfortably be called a social realist where his narratives focus on the underprivileged; I will explore this further in relation to *Casa* in the ensuing chapter.

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André Bazin may be an unlikely ambassador for realism in the twenty-first century, given his allegiance to antiquated ideas that in the photographic image an objective reality could be replicated, free of the constraints of time and place, and in cinema an "objectivity in time" (14). Critics tend to return to Bazin's nascent and easily refuted empiricism to dismiss realism out of hand (see MacCabe 60-64), but he brought some important distinctions to the table. For the debate over the value of realist art, he established quite clearly the unfashionable importance of discerning artistic endeavours of form and content; he insisted that the "quarrel over realism in art stems from a misunderstanding, from a confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological" (12). The distinction is important when understanding what realism can do for an audience – a realist may not necessarily believe the form carries inherent communicative value in itself, but that the psychological elements of story have primacy over formal structure, and so it is important to reach for a cinema that is less likely to augment reality or draw attention to itself. Respecting the complex relationship between form and content – he draws some lines in the sand between what he calls montage cinema, illusory aesthetics and plastic cinema – Bazin has at the very least recognised a distinction in intent: communication embodied in form (the value of aesthetics to say something about life) and the drive to surpass presentational form to say something more specific about human interaction not bound to symbols. In his essay on *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, he explains further, "The real revolution took place more on the level of subject matter than of style. Is not neorealism primarily a kind of humanism and only secondarily a style of film-making?" (29). Here Bazin began to suggest that for a neorealist filmmaker, what may be more important is the human itself and what we can learn about the human through stories, not the mode of representation of the human, which may become effectively "invisible" in aid of foregrounding the human functions of narrative. The stylistic allegiance to reality aided the viewer in forgetting the form to engage in a closer study of human behaviour. This is not to say that form and content are ultimately extricable, just that

the object of thought and discussion can be the film itself, or the subject matter raised in the film, and realism attempts to direct attention to the latter.

Of course, Noël Burch has famously called into question the language itself, especially the supremacy of classical Hollywood narrative style and the "dominant institutional mode of representation" (Life to those Shadows), which set the ground rules for the language we are so adept at reading today. As Burch would have it, the language itself encapsulates bourgeois-authoritarian values, which should not be accepted as a norm; in effect, the spectator immersed in a filmic perspective of reality is unable to critique the object of the film itself, beholden to the normalising manipulation of conventional filmmaking, was therefore uncritical and thus the impetus for creating such language is class-bound in that it favours institutional imposition and the construction of an ideological norm.

The same point has been made countless times throughout the history of film theory: naturalist or allegedly invisible stylistic choices can only represent a dominant ideology because they don't draw attention to their own artifice of form – see also Colin MacCabe, who repeatedly equates realism with empiricism (34-39 provides a good example). Apparently if we are immersed in narrative considerations rather than considerations of filmmaking style and its embodied assumptions, we are powerless to challenge political norms or truly transfer revolutionary ideas. I could not disagree more. With the best intentions, movements seeking to avoid an ideological norm still must develop their own language, which in the case of the French New Wave, for example, often inherits an intellectual elite's jealous guarding of full comprehension in reading. The alternative techniques established then are subsumed into mainstream filmmaking, anyway (Bould 9). Of course it is important to analyse implied meanings and limitations of any language, but to suggest that we all stop to be aware of the language at all times when it is used means that we wouldn't ever get around to using the language to speak of anything other than the language itself. The narrative style is not a bourgeois imposition from some great height, but a pragmatic development to allow us to be more specific in communication through the medium. While one might suggest that spectatorship and ethical considerations of narrative are indivisible, as our empathic response to character is guided by the camera, as analysts I believe we should be able to do both: assess the language of film as well as the morality of the dialogue and action. Otherwise, we run the risk of always assuming a kind of filmic illiteracy in audiences, thereby asking films to always play to the most naïve spectator, and simultaneously narrowing the scope of what can be communicated in cinema.

Conversely, there is another important assumption buttressing these theories: that it is somehow possible for us to assess cultural products as a kind of automaton of reason – that it is possible to shed emotional engagement. In asserting the values of a primal response in flexing empathy and compassion, scholars have had to mount a defence against the rational absolute; Nussbaum thereby defends our right to pity ("Compassion" 44-50), Lugones defends playfulness (14-17), Appiah defends honour (The Honour Code) and others still suggest that story can be synonymous with friendship, trust and even love (Hendry, Britzman); Tarja Laine collates some similar perspectives on film in *Feeling Cinema* and Carl R. Plantinga unites notions of affect with studies of film spectatorship in *Moving Viewers*. All are insisting that in order to approach an accurate narrative ethic, the reality of emotional engagement must be admitted. They are motivated from an awareness that the ideal of approaching art from a perspective of pure reason not only reduces its power to lift us from ethical inertia, to motivate moral revolution which begins with emotional rousing, but also that precisely this impossible ethos allows marketeers and advertisers a way to justify their own manipulations of desire: the conservative-libertarian view that it is our personal responsibility not to have intuitive reactions to manipulative media, and thus in a deregulated market we are at fault for any number of social ills arising from the conduct of organisations studying means for psychological influence; gambling addiction, obesity and celebrity culture infatuation are contemporary examples.

In fact, what critics of realism seem to have a problem with is a majority audience they perceive as unwillingly entering a contract of trust with the filmmakers, which is, in large part, a misdirected call for cinematic literacy. This should not be a problem if we are *aware* we are offering the filmmakers that space, whereby we trust them to make their point, and then assess the film accordingly. These concerns also point to another part of humanist empathic process: the will to engage with another's perspective is embodied in art-making itself – we don't only exercise our empathy through fictional characters, but also by striving to understand the perspective of the storyteller. In her conclusion, Stadler makes the important distinction between becoming "immersed, but not submerged in the circumstances, situation, and identity of another" (243); immersion does not connote acceptance, nor does it mean that we cannot evaluate another's point of view. Instead of calling for filmmakers to always direct their films at the cinematically illiterate by way of self-acknowledgment – under which circumstances we would lose a large body of wonderful work, including that of Sayles – perhaps we could either trust that audiences aren't as credulous as this theory suggests, or encourage cinema literacy instead so we are able to say more through the medium. We need

not compromise the scope of the medium to pitch to the majority, or we are no different from a studio attempting to reach every demographic, and winding up saying nothing. To dispel the emotive is an equally unrealistic way of addressing any problems we may have with media literacy.

Here is the nub of difference between realist and other forms of filmic expression: the former *attempts* to be representational; the latter *accepts* being presentational. In 2011 Lucia Nagib offered a distillation of Burch's seminal theories, locating a good explanation of the difference (not so binary as has been suggested in past, but certainly a difference) between the cinematic modes: "'Representational' cinema was directed towards producing an 'impression of reality', whereas 'presentational' cinema was quite at ease in acknowledging its own artifice" (4). Acknowledging, and in the case of realism, attempting to surmount – not by pretending there is no artifice, but by ensuring the artifice is not the subject, which is fundamentally what Bazin suggested when he expounded the invisibility of the director (74): the point is to conceal the hand of the filmmaker. However, there is a clear difference between attempting to conceal the hand of the filmmaker and ignoring the fact that there is a filmmaker altogether. Attempting to look and sound more like the world around us can be read more accurately as a courtesy to the viewer: they can relax from trying to dissect the world and language of the film and critical thought can be focused elsewhere. Once again, the "post theory" culture has done what it has naturally evolved to do best: dismissed a cause because it is not perfectible. As a particularly relevant example, Bookchin scathingly critiques Foucault's aversion to all forms of power and all institutions (183). The challenge to realism is twofold; first, that accepted film language is a power structure and therefore bad (with Bookchin, I believe this is impracticable as it must include all organised human interaction), and second, that the real cannot be known or presented absolutely faithfully by any mode of human communication, so why make art that tries to articulate the real world? Sayles puts it bluntly: "Whenever a movie could get me into the story so I'd stop thinking about how it was made, that interested me" (Carson, Interviews 172). Again, realism allows the audience more time to consider something that is not the world of the text itself.

Being representational need not be a perfectible enterprise. It is a matter of what we want to be considering when we watch a film: the mode of expression used, or the implications of the story. To devalue realism because it does not ask us to be in constant consideration of filmmaking technique, but instead asks us to participate in a debate stirred by story engagement, misses a great breadth of articulate communication that film can provide. Finally, to respect the intelligence of potential audiences, it doesn't really matter to

what extent the film's version of 'reality' is grounded in the filmmakers' assumptions – we can accept that it is an artwork with its own perspective on human life and we will take issue with those assumptions accordingly – the point is that realism can allow our attentions to be guided away from the technique itself and into *what it is that the film is considering*, usually observations about human interaction.

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Sayles is even more confusing when social realist polemics are applied, as aside from a handful of his films (*Matewan* in particular), he is rarely seen to be borrowing from the rulebook of aesthetic conventions – his own appropriation of filmic realism can be better described as formal. Where much of the past debate around realism has focused on that which aesthetic conventions have or have not been able to achieve, it is more confusing to see a director work with image-makers known for stylisation (including the near-unparalleled breadth of world-class cinematographers Sayles has worked with) to shape different techniques suited to each story and genre-play, but bound to a script which sticks closely to an often humanly mundane or parochial unfolding of events, unwavering dedication to representing the vicissitudes of speech in his dialogue, and characters whose dramatic life events are represented as no more important than anyone else's. Even in a film like *Limbo*, one of his most divergent and unlikely narratives with elements common to thriller movies, the audience is asked to take a turn of events to the life threatening in its stride. With the possibility of spectacle, Sayles makes no appeal to the spectacular and in so doing crafts a much more involving tale – because it is not playing up to our appetite for visceral involvement in narrative, it is free to move toward other, more human considerations. No lurking camera, no sudden attacks of dissonant orchestral strings; just an attempt to use the invisibility of cinematic storytelling convention to represent a clear-headed view of what it might be like to be stuck there. Spectacle-shunning attempts at realist tone can be just as involving, just as entertaining. To be entertained is to achieve absorption in a presentation; it is just that this presentation requires moral thought rather than emotional reaction. Another not-so-strictly-realist filmmaker making his own verisimilitudinous cinema, Mike Leigh elaborates on entertainment and so-called escapism:

> People say, 'Ah, yes, but audiences just want to escape.' I think, that if people see a film like "Secrets and Lies", where the stuff that's going on relates to things that they really care about, then it's more of an escape. Because you become so engaged in it and enthralled by it that you forget those things. They answer 'Well, yes, but then the audience worries about real life things,' but it's fulfilling, it's enriching, it's not like just eating candy for an hour and three quarters. It's actually really communing with something and feeling like you've been through something that comes out making you feel better able to go back and worry about the specific things that are your problems ... My aim is to entertain, meaning, literally, what the word means. People forget what that word means. It means to make you stay here, to keep you in your seat. ("Listening to the World" np)

Sayles agrees, "people forget that entertainment for entertainment's sake has a political message too" (O'Sullivan 87). Given emotive content, where many would choose to *present* with the tools at hand, filmmakers like Sayles and Leigh attempt to just *show*, allowing the audience the distance of perspective in not having to share the characters' emotional journey, but rather having an empathic relationship based on deeper thought and consideration for their circumstance.

There is another kind of realism at work here too – the detail of place taking precedence over the reduction to stylisation. Says Sayles: "while the mythic is stirring, it can make you think 'this really doesn't have anything to do with *me*, those are allegorical figures up there on the screen.' So I tried to particularize, to humanize, to provide historical and domestic detail" (Thinking in Pictures 21). What Sayles suggests here is that it is easier to escape the moral implications to the self of the viewer without contextual details, which are inherently realist as they eschew the diversion of attention involved in refracting information through esoteric or conceptual film language – signs and symbols. Lubica Ucnik, for example, is concerned with the politicisation of the everyday and neorealism's transformation of cinematic idealised reality into spaces where the entire mis-en-scene acknowledges ethical dimensions – everything therein is imbued with our autonomy of ethical choice (drained from the placating posture of Hollywood's reductive, idealised stagecraft): "the creation of a space by and for filmmakers to account for the ethical freedom of the individual in the face of the overwhelming reality of globalization" (55). This is an obvious reference for many contemporary filmmaking realists for whom the substance is in their detail. Effectively, ethics

become more immediate when realist as there is no conceptual leap to be made in the mind. The human dilemma is presented as simply as possible *given* the language of cinema, so that complexity of detail can arrive through circumstance and place, and once again analysis can be grounded in an understanding of the position the characters find themselves in.

In the above quote, Sayles is talking about the decisions he made when filming *Matewan*, one of his films more closely aligned with the imagery of social realism. Working with director of photography Haskell Wexler, he crafted a dusty, bleached and worn image suitable for the context – a West Virginian mining town in 1920. The image quality remained consistent, and beyond that, Sayles and his production team went to work filling in the frame with detail specific to the circumstance; the worn edges of a kitchen table, soot in places hard to clean. He wasn't trying to say anything symbolic through production elements, he was trying to, as adequately as he could, picture what life might be like there, and then hope the story would be more resonant when placed in a marginally more accurate context.

How much of this insight is provided by the aesthetics and art direction, though? When does social realism become a genre to be read using its conventions-as-symbols rather than with the human dilemmas it portrays? An inherent problem with realism is revealed: the pursuit of remaining invisible relies on a popularly accepted language, and soon the language itself becomes just as, if not more important to discuss as a movement or paradigm than the content – because it reveals more about a shared perspective, and can therefore be thought to be of sociological interest. It happened in European neorealism and in the social realism emerging from the British New Wave, Andrew Higson drawing attention to "That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill" (154) being a fine example. As much as the filmmakers may not have wanted the form to become the meaning or the medium to become the message, it did.

Therein lies the paradox faced by the director wishing to be invisible: relying on common language for easier, direct communication going to the heart of important ethics, but knowing that this language eventually evolves to say more about perspectives behind the film than the intended story. Then filmmakers must ask: what are the important aspects of the language and what part of this language of realism must be challenged in order to say what I want to say about humans and about life? And will breaking this convention distract to the point of losing my intent to spur ethical engagement? I submit that this is what it means to be a realist: consistently asking this question to refine communication.

Sayles does not work strictly as a realist all the time. His fantasy films, *Brother* and *Roan Inish* beguilingly retain selected elements of realism, however, and where appropriate he looks to other stylistic decisions, such as use of the allegorical and sometimes magical

meta-narrative, explicit in *Men with Guns* and implicit in the recent *Honeydripper*. In fact, he strives to devise a new cohesive aesthetic for each film, befitting the story and only occasionally recognisable as visually realist. He provides an explanation for his choice of aesthetics to avoid genre: "You can't ask people to think about things that are difficult unless you can make them care about and identify with the characters in the story on a deeper level than genre movies are usually willing or able to evoke" (Thinking in Pictures 27). Once again, the point is to get to the problems facing real humans, and this means resisting genre codes, as they can cease to be appropriate to the enterprise.

Indeed, the little-discussed area of sound design is much more likely to suggest realism in Sayles' films. For example, he tends to a loud 'atmos' track, suggestive of documentary filmmaking, and uses about as much if not less incidental music than filmmakers like Ken Loach. Sayles generally keeps music out of the way until there is a lull in dialogue – and in Sayles' films, a lull in dialogue is rare. While he might punctuate his narrative with commentary through song, in the manner of a Greek chorus, or an incidental riff like the guitar licks in *Passion Fish*, music rarely appears over the top of thematically important scenes but rather between them. He says, "I use music sparingly, though, and this is the reason some people come out of my films saying, 'What was that?' We don't have wall-to-wall orchestral music telling them how to feel" (D'Ambrosio np). So if Sayles could be described as realist, it is probably more accurately and consistently identifiable in his sound design than his aesthetics. Sayles himself links his sound choices to one of his most vital and recognisable narrative formulas: "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. It's like the way that I mix sound" (Smith and Sayles 232).

Given Sayles' approach to realism, a good maxim might be to use the existing cinematic language for communicating one's story, except where genre shorthand has come to misrepresent the human narrative, by reducing necessary complexity or becoming dishonest about the world we live in and the way humans interact; then specific qualities of the language must be challenged, and conventions broken, but not the whole language – only the problematic conventions.

So the "realism" we identify in the filmmaking of Sayles is encapsulated in his straightforwardness and his unwillingness to rely on social realist genre conventions where they muddy ethical debate, using them only when appropriate to his intent. This variety of realism serves clarity; it paves the way for complex discussions of human dilemmas rather

than cinema style. However, there is another reason Sayles' work is emphatically undervalued in cultural studies, which centres on the claim of "didacticism."

Didacticism in cinema, if it means having an ethical argument to make and using film to make that argument, should not be a problem. Putting forth reasoned opinions, attempting instruction or guidance, are some of the many things film should be able to do – if story were only able to "ask questions not offer answers," as the old dictum goes, we would be limiting its potential for discussion and debate beyond our reasonable expectations of any other language; we would stunt the power of story. Shumway agrees that "Sayles has often been taken to task for didacticism. But it should be remembered that, prior to the advent of modernism with its assumption of *l'art pour l'art*, it was assumed that great works of art would teach" (John Sayles 10). Robert Murphy has linked didacticism with realism in his description of the traditional dichotomy between the realist and the populist in British cinema:

> Strictures against moronic audiences and soppy, artificial films derived from a didactic tradition which contended that what is pleasurable should also be instructional, and consequently that films which seemed to make no serious statement about life were trivial, time-wasting, and in the long run pernicious. The fantasy life of the masses, it was feared, was becoming morbidly infected, and films which overwhelmed the audience with sensations or encouraged them to become uncritically absorbed were necessarily bad. Hence the appeal of sober, responsible realism which seemed to have an educational as well as an entertainment value. (200)

We must be allowed the space to fantasise and not be harangued for it, but when fantasy is conflated with realist style, such as magical intervention in realist dilemmas, realism is problematized. For Sayles, fantastical intervention to solve real problems dispenses of the narrative power of magic realism:

> One of the interesting things about magic realism is that people have certain powers or certain things happen to them that are supernatural, but it doesn't help them get out of their situation. It's very unlike the rash of American movies in the last seven or eight

> years with angels or ghosts in them, where usually that connection with the afterlife saves somebody's life or wins the ballgame through intercession, like in *Angels in the Outfield*. In the Latin American stories, there are these powers – but you're still fucked at the end of the story. (Smith and Sayles 242)

Buttressing his analysis is the assumption that any kind of realism has responsibility attached.

So besides those averse to moral argument per se and desirous of art-as-fantasy only, the complaint must have to do with the *kind* of didacticism employed by a filmmaker like Sayles. The term, derogatorily used, also suggests simplicity of moral argument – that one has a message they will not sway from, to the point of prejudicial exclusion of other relevant details or evidence to the contrary. But this is plainly not true of Sayles' multi-character narratives, which take a scope much broader than most films, include multiple compelling perspectives, consider the human implications of a complex web of interactions between various levels of society with both benevolent and malicious intent, and are often irresolute about the best course of action in moral dilemmas. *Limbo* even concludes with such a challenge, as does *Lone Star*; *Casa* in particular, while considering courses of moral action, offers no clear didactic view on what should be done about the many ethical dilemmas faced in the clash of two means-imbalanced cultures. Although all of Sayles' films do have some demonstration of behaviours that are clearly ethically unviable, they are rarely the focus of the narrative, and one who suggests that they are may be missing the greater breadth of discussion available.

The charge of didacticism possibly has much more to do with language use. Sayles' dialogue is quite clear about the morals faced in his films, which could lead one to believe there was no subtext or that he had nothing else to say, or that he "doesn't demonstrate, just tells"; however the complexity in his cinema arises not from contorted or obscurant expression of morality, but from complex knowledge of situational moral dilemmas. Situational dilemmas are demonstrative, and he is effectively choosing not to hide behind our understanding of non-verbal communiqué or the dramatic tension of ambiguous intent to incite a sense of profundity. In other words, we are not asking, "what is this film trying to say to me?" or "what does this film end up saying to me?" so much as, "I can see how complex this situation is; so how should we behave?" Without hiding behind such ambiguity, Sayles is free to make normative ethics the priority: "for me," he says, "the movies are about how you decide what you believe in and how you go about implementing it" (Rickey 3). If we have a

good understanding of them, normative ethics are inherently complex: this is the complexity Sayles attempts to achieve.

So here is what Sayles has done to attract such derision: he does not offer the opportunity for us to assume we are elite through our recognition of non-verbal communiqué. Although non-verbal communiqué exists in his films (and in every film) it is not that which provides the narratives' deeper meanings. Beyond any technique serving the story, it is the dialogue that matters the most in a Sayles film: being as clear as possible about real human problems that are inherently complex, and do not need his added complexity of expression. He explains, "I don't like it when I see a romantic movie and the minute the two people see each other, the next thing is three minutes of montage where they're walking on the beach and I don't hear what they're saying. I want to know what they're saying. How did they get to fall in love? That's the shit that's useful if you're trying to do it yourself. Nobody does a montage for you in real life" (Smith and Sayles 35). Sayles reveals his belief that cinema should be in some way helpful to the viewer in guiding their ideas of how they can, or ought to live – the conviction that cinema can actively make ethical or procedural propositions to consider.

Where Sayles eschews realism, often through use of expository dialogue but at times in symbolic gestures (the conclusion of *Lone Star* sees its central characters facing a dilemma both human and real, and symbolic of identity dilemmas faced by a larger population), it is to assert a more nuanced understanding of a particular field of reference, in order to be more specific about meaning and the discussion he would like to have within the situational ethics his characters face. It is in this way that Sayles wants his films to be "useful." He values the idea that someone may be able to watch his films and learn enough, or be spurred to question enough through them, to apply the ideas to real life. This seems to necessitate a study of the important and complex interactions in our lives, and that has to include verbal communication:

> *Secaucus Seven* was, in fact, a story that couldn't be told only in visual terms, no matter how much time, money or experience we had. It is a story about the complex relationships of human beings, and since human beings do most of their communicating verbally (even when they lie), to make these characters mute would be to reduce them to stereotypes. This goes against most concepts of 'pure cinema,' but pure cinema is at

its weakest when trying to deal with human beings in a narrative form. (Sayles, Making of Matewan 6)

Here Sayles approaches a closer definition of what he's getting at: he wants the focus to be on the human – humans generally communicate complex ideas with words, so why should we want less of that in film? The question is out there begging for an answer: why do we locate more value in the visual than we do in the verbal? Sarah Kozloff's *Overhearing Film Dialogue* at times reads like a list of antagonistic attitudes toward dialogue extended by the major canonical film theorists. I would suggest we value visual communication because the unarticulated allows for a feeling of profundity in drama which many may be seeking in filmed entertainment; when verbalised and thereby made considerably less ambiguous, our concerns can appear less grandiose but are at the same time much more manageable. For anyone interested in the pragmatism of their work, this must be paramount.

Visual communication is not inferior or unnecessary, or opposed to humanist ethics, but we are wrong to proclaim the visual as superior. The sense of profundity imagery can kindle is valuable to us and worth exploring (although highly exploitable, as we discover in an advertising-drenched world), as is the power of art, regardless of content or meaning, to bring us together in one spot to be with each other (cinemas persist despite historically intermittent challenges from television, video and the internet). Art provides a lot beyond moral discourse, but visual storytelling often serves a different part of the discussion a film might instigate, and crucially, it's a discussion cultural studies is well equipped to engage with. If we have spent our working life learning how to read the language of the screen, we want the screen to give us something to assess with this knowledge; hence our reliance on deconstruction of aesthetics, and hence also our aversion to realism and dialogue-driven films. I wouldn't argue that these studies are unimportant, but I would suggest that there's a world of other possibilities available in film: perhaps we could take a philosophical look at the implications of the story itself rather than how the story is told, as realism implores us to do. As Shumway puts it:

What interests me about the reaction of scholars to Sayles is not that they judge him aesthetically, but the grounds on which they apparently do so. The aesthetic they invoke seems to be modernist, which values stylistic innovation, an ironic stance, and a

> rejection of bourgeois proprieties. So a film like Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), which combines all of those qualities, is pleasing in a way that none of Sayles's films are. Sayles's films are for the most part realistic, not only in their depiction of society, but also in the sense that we are meant to pay more attention to what is being depicted than to the style of that depiction. (Why Doesn't Cultural Studies np)

Sayles in effect rips the carpet out from under us by saying that we can have these politicised conversations without need for such specialised understanding of the language itself, but this does make conversation more egalitarian. You do not have to decode visual presentations to get to the stuff that matters: the ethical questions.

We have established that what the form does best is to allow discussion of human interaction by removing need for excessive discussion of film language; this is why it tends toward humanistic themes. So what is it that Sayles wants us to focus on when not focusing on his technique? What is he saying about the human experience?

If we are to ask these questions, we will have to open up some concurrent questions of authority and authorship. Auteur theory is, I believe, irrelevant. Consider first that Sayles insists on referring to "our" film across his interviews (Smith and Sayles, Carson); also consider Sayles' creative disputes with cinematographer Haskell Wexler on their two films together, whereby the tension between two aesthetic intents resulted in a unique imagery unparalleled in other films, and with Sławomir Idziak on *Men with Guns*, ending with images neither of the two intended or particularly liked (Molyneux 242). We will have to accept to some extent not just film as a collaborative medium but film as fluid text (if preserved, the film stocks will change over time; if digitally stored, the bit rate and of course the viewing medium will change the image, none of this intended by the filmmakers shooting the movie). But other discussions are worthwhile: Who has the right to drive these dialogues? Are we right to place such primacy on the filmmakers' intent?

When I say filmmakers' intent, this is what I mean; I do not mean Sayles' intent. We can say that as Sayles writes, directs and edits his own films for the most part outside of studio influence and irrespective of marketplace demands, he has more control over communicating his own intent, however he still has teams of collaborators who work with him on and off set, whose own ideas and skills (in some cases lack thereof) will drive some of the intent we register when viewing a cut of the film. By referring to "our" film he readily acknowledges this. Sayles occasionally takes advice from others, also – every film is a cocktail of intent. In

fact, all art amounts to a cocktail of intent, and it is not necessarily always useful to speculate on the identity of those who were involved. In the film industry especially, we cannot even presume to know who wrote a script, or who contributed ideas to the scenes for which only one sales-enhancing 'name' will be finally used in publicity materials (just as some literary authors are in fact teams of writers, written under pseudonyms or ghost-written, the final credit cannot reliably tell us who wrote the larger part of a screenplay). A merry-go-round of workers or whole departments can sometimes be distilled to one credit. The director's varying degrees of artistic control cannot be accounted for by fixed auteurism. For writers like Sarris, auteur theory presents an evaluative shortcut (Meskin 18), yet it rests on an anti-communitarian and perhaps elitist fantasy of film production. Even if auteurism devalues the majority of film workers, I do see that it is important, still, to query intent.

We can accept that intent does not belong to one person and still pay respect to the fact that a number of collaborating people with, at times, conflicting intent – and attendant environmental factors at play – can still come up with something interesting to say together: "there are a range of ways that groups may organize themselves to produce unified and coherent outputs" (Meskin 24). Once again, the imperfectability of complex communication has provided many theorists – especially since Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* – with the means to dismiss the entire enterprise; they have sold out human interaction in the process. Any analyst whose curiosity trumps their egocentricity surely must strive to comprehend the perspectives and opinions of others (or 'authors') from all intellectual and creative pursuits to avoid isolating oneself in a discourse or groupthink sectioned off from theoretical interlopers. Otherwise, we risk discussing only that which we are already familiar with. It is best to assume others have something worthwhile to say and proceed thusly, rather than let our anxiety about the authority of the knowledge-giver allow us to dismiss even a cursory acknowledgment that an artist or team of artists just might have something to divulge. Thus there is virtue in querying a cocktail of intent and locating the worthwhile values a filmic text and all of its contributors have communicated, and importantly, we do not have to know who *owns* each idea to evaluate it.

Taking issue with auteur theory needn't mean ignoring artistic recurrences in anyone's work, or denying that some film personalities are more capable of asserting their ideas and clearly have more influence than others in any production. One might say, as we can see a clear unity of ideas and aesthetic across his work, and he has largely avoided studio interference, that this makes Sayles an auteur. But the same can be said for many other filmmakers – we can attempt to trace the concerns, stylistic repetition and career

development not just of directors, but of most creative talent, from costume designer and wardrobe to the editing team to cinematographer and camera operators. By comparing films they have worked on, we can make an educated guess as to which ideas might be generated by each individual – their distinct style does not make them the author of the film, however. The point that there is no clear author of a film should not preclude us from studying the output of any one of these important filmmakers, from production talent to writer/directors like Sayles.

So if we allow our filmmakers this, what do we find in these films? What purpose lies behind the Saylesian realism? I have established that Sayles' use of form and aesthetic are intended to foreground ethics, but they also have another aim: to ground our ethics in a complex understanding of the human.

Although humanism has arrived at multitudinous meanings for different scholars across the globe since the Renaissance, I would like to suggest what it could mean for humanist filmmakers and storytellers of recent years. Sayles has regularly been described as a "humanist" with little discussion of what this might actually entail. As Sayles says, "If storytelling has a positive function it's to put us in touch with other people's lives, to help us connect and draw strength or knowledge from people we'll never meet, to help us see beyond our own experience" (Making of Matewan 11). In valuing a deeper understanding of the human, especially those unfamiliar to us, humanism acknowledges that where our comprehension is more complex and detailed, we naturally develop greater compassion and wonder in each other. Both emotive and gratifying, this humanising process encourages us to see one another as worthy of ethical consideration, and so are we encouraged to work together to create a more inclusively representative cosmopolitanist society – hopefully globally. In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said insists that real positive change has been made over years in which we have been engaged with humanist thinking, redeeming a belief in human autonomy:

> People all over the world can be and are moved by ideals of justice and equality–the South African victory in the liberation struggle is a perfect case in point–and the affiliated notion that humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well. And despite the (in my opinion) shallow but influential ideas of a certain

> facile type of radical antifoundationalism, with its insistence that real events are at most linguistic effects, and its close relative, the end-of-history thesis, these are so contradicted by the historical impact of human agency and labor as to make a detailed refutation of them here unnecessary. Change is human history, and human history as made by human action and understood accordingly is the very ground of the humanities. (10)

Humanism thus believes in human autonomy to create a better civil society and values social sciences and science of the mind. Humanism should adapt to discoveries in these fields so that our interactions and moral decisions are bound to the most realistically complex understanding of the human available. V.M. Tarkunde points out of humanism, "it is always open to revision on the basis of fresh additions to human knowledge" (5). This also means that in film studies, we should not sacrifice science for the sake of theory. Stadler goes some way to acknowledging this in a chapter on the influence of media violence, explaining, "there can be a productive interface between different research disciplines by bringing together text-based research and audience-based research" (100). It is telling, in fact, that she spends some amount of time thusly justifying the inclusion of media effects research in her study. In a way, not admitting the striving for scientific knowledge to inform film theory suggests that arts and media are not really important enough for the rigours of social science – however considering the immense part they play in most lives, they are indeed important.

Fundamentally, Sayles' stories acknowledge the things that matter most to people are other people, even when our priorities are diverted into other aims, assets, self-interested or non-human ends, such as money, material goods or ideals which are not grounded themselves in human ends. So his films also function as a reminder that we can go back to Karl Popper's famous summary of Immanuel Kant's humanist perspective on ethics: "Always recognize that human individuals are ends, and do not use them as means to your end" (102). Working on our understanding of and relationship to each other is the most important endeavour in humanism.

If Sayles intends to complicate our understanding of the human, investigating the complexity of human experience to inspire wonder and compassion, another dilemma opens up: whether compassion is always a good thing, and whether it can be used to divert attention from those who most deserve compassion to those who are good at driving the dialogue of compassion to excuse antisocial acts. Humanists must accept that greater understanding of

and curiosity in the human opens a dichotomy between responsibility and culpability for antisocial behaviour. A more nuanced humanism takes this on board and carefully separates guilt and the myth of human evil from pragmatic culpability, whereby punishment is based on practical outcomes and scientific method rather than need for vengeance. Compassion can also be limited where it replaces self-actualisation (the actualisation theories employed by humanist psychologists including Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, not that employed by innumerable have-what-you-want self-help texts), and can prolong the suffering of others if it stands in the way of their self-development. This is clear when we are speaking of inter-personal relations, but we must also ask where the rest of the world might figure in this matrix of responsibility, if others we will never meet are also implicated in our day-to-day consumer decisions and lives as oft-unwitting political agents. *Men With Guns* looks at the limitations of compassion on a broader scale: "a critique of liberal humanitarianism based on a macro-structured model of international aid that negates 'micro' forms of political agency ... Through the persona of Dr. Fuentes and his interaction with the 'minor' characters of the film, Sayles complicates the privileging of a universal point of view over the more situated perspectives" (Oliver 566). In other words, being confronted with the real lives of those his humanitarian course strove to assist, protagonist Dr. Fuentes learns how much a more experiential and practical understanding of their circumstance is instrumental to challenging the political structures keeping them oppressed.

Sayles explains his inspiration thus:

> It's somewhat based on experiences that the parents and uncles of a couple of friends of mine had in Latin America. What interested me was that in both experiences they were very intelligent guys who were worldly in some ways but they didn't know or want to believe the extent to which the people that they were ostensibly working for were sponsoring them in bad faith and did not want the people they were trying to help to have a better life, they wanted them poor. That lack of curiosity, that willing innocence led to them getting people involved in things that got them killed ... In both cases the local people that they sent back to their villages were considered subversives by the government because they were making people self-sufficient, which meant that they weren't available to go pick coffee beans or do whatever the slave wage gig it was that the country's power structure wanted them to do. You could find the same story in any developing country. (Smith and Sayles 236)

So although the doctor taught compassion through his humanitarian course, and believed his legacy entailed the aid of others, they were not equipped with enough local knowledge to stay alive and make the kind of difference Dr. Fuentes wanted to make. This was partially due to Fuentes' lack of curiosity in the complex, highly dangerous situations the intended beneficiaries of the program were living in.

Compassion needs to arise from complex understanding of the subject's divergent circumstances – if not, our compassion can be based on idealised conceptions of the other, and if we act as moral agents on their behalf (as global trade and media increasingly necessitate) from the boundaries of this undeveloped schema, we run the risk of disastrous consequences for those involved. If we are to act at all in a morally enforcing capacity – including exercising compassionate behaviours – we must act with enough information to warrant intrusion. This could entail first-hand experience, but for most that is not always possible. In the case of the travelling Americans in *Men With Guns*, "one of those things is the emotional knowledge of powerlessness" (Smith and Sayles 244). So curiosity-driven compassion is perhaps the best they can achieve. And so we have stories, and this is where the responsibility of the storyteller to human complexity is most important.

Dr. Fuentes lacks spirituality or a culture of religiosity, as well as the sense of community allegiance this brings, but has within him a drive for compassion, which eventually leads him to search for the truth of his humanitarian legacy. Sayles recounts that through this character he asked, "how far does this humanist thing take you? And when do you get off that boat? When it becomes inconvenient? How much are you willing to pay for that?" (Smith and Sayles 243). Embedded in this is the idea that humanist assiduity needs to be, although irreligious, as serious as religious commitment, involving equivalent if not more substantial personal sacrifice.

Humans need not be a higher universal order or in any way transcendent for us to understand that the human is what we have to work with – again, methodological naturalism – nor does it exclude openness to any posthuman bodies such as digital-human synthesis or animals. Complex humanism sees the human as part of a naturalist concept of the world and as fluid as all other matter. There cannot be a definitive "human." But this also translates to ethics: Sartre rejects Kant's use of the human as a higher moral order, but contends that his existential philosophies are also part of the humanist understanding of the world, as they envision a process of mutual autonomy to constantly create the subjective, evolving humanity,

which is all we can know to be real. He writes, "If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is ... When we say man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men" (Sartre 29). So because we construct the only world we know together, we are all implicated in the same process of defining what "human" is.

Humanism can encapsulate both the fluidity of what humans are – the static version of humanity, with creationist heritage, has long since been discarded in theoretical discourse – as well as the knowledge that there is no ethical essence of human writ in the law of the universe. But we do come up with ethics, mutually, which suit us and define what we are, because it helps us locate more prosperous and pleasurable lives through mutual obligations. We do not have to label ethical formulae as objective reality in choosing to adhere to ethics toward the aim of a longer, healthier and more fulfilling life for all.

These issues and the prevalence of humanism on the screen demonstrate why humanist studies need to be revived for the twenty-first century. In assessing the aims of contemporary realist and social realist filmmaking, if we are to take their ethics seriously, it is imperative for scholars to define humanist studies and exhume the possibilities for theory and discussion these filmmakers have suggested for us.

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While scholars skirt prescriptive value application to cultural products and artefacts, we do devise paradigms by which to assess these artefacts, and end up discussing their 'usefulness' to the cause of the paradigm, which is a value judgment in itself, once-removed but still by association a valuation. Such valuations may actually be quite sensible: they reveal that what matters most about a film or story is the ideology it is able to suggest, so we can discuss that – but it is still a value judgment on the worth of the art itself *as reflection of ideology*, even where that ideology has to do with the elusive value of aesthetics. Shumway uncovered such a contradiction in his colleagues' assessment of Sayles – the value judgment in analysis is unavoidable, even when assessing what films are 'useful' to our discussion or cause. If we are to talk about normative or prescriptive ethics in film, we are going to have to open a dialogue about the human impact and worth of these cultural products. It is a discussion we should not be avoiding.

Social psychologist and morality researcher Jonathan Haidt points out that recent transnational history has seen us attempt a new and flawed morality project as diversity of

opinion between cultures became something we could not avoid and still live harmoniously together:

> The first American colonists created enclaves of ethnic, religious, and moral homogeneity, but the history of America ever since has been one of increasing diversity. In response, educators have struggled to identify the ever-shrinking set of moral ideas everyone could agree upon. This shrinking reached its logical conclusion in the 1960s with the popular "values clarification" movement, which taught no morality at all. Values clarification taught children how to find their own values, and it urged teachers to refrain from imposing values on anyone. (176)

Haidt's research caused him to question this approach and he presents the view that our psychology suggests we learn morals partially through training and repetition, so the ideal does not work. Moreover, he makes the important distinction to reveal the fallacious conflation of demographic and moral diversity we use as a defence of cultural relativism:

> For many liberals, diversity has become an unquestioned good – like justice, freedom, and happiness, the more diversity, the better. My research on morality, however, spurred me to question it ... I quickly realized there were two main kinds of diversity – demographic and moral. Demographic diversity is about socio-demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, age, and handicapped status. Calling for demographic diversity is in large measure calling for justice, for the inclusion of previously excluded groups. Moral diversity, on the other hand, is essentially what Durkheim described as anomie: a lack of consensus on moral norms and values. Once you make this distinction, you see that nobody can coherently even *want* moral diversity. (177)

Although many agree that wrangling prescriptive morals democratically and finding the best means to teach and police them is a useful social function – not universal or ideal, but useful for common good – we cannot seem to agree that this is also reasonable for application

in art, so we still hide behind the relativist response, perhaps because the effect art has on us is not so well understood, so it seems somewhat less important. But we all have a deep relationship with images and stories and we intrinsically know, as we could not do without it, art is important for something, and that something seems to be social. Appiah advocates the use of art and story to upset unquestioned perspectives and hone mutual values; and to keep this process alive, so we never settle for reductionist morality:

> Folktales, drama, opera, novels, short stories; biographies, histories, ethnographies; fiction or nonfiction; painting, music, sculpture, and dance: every human civilization has ways to reveal to us values we had not previously recognized or undermine our commitment to values that we had settled into. Armed with these terms, fortified with a shared language of value, we can often guide one another, in the cosmopolitan spirit, to shared responses. (Cosmopolitanism 30)

He then identifies mutual values negotiation as something worth striving for, asserting the importance of the language these value-juggling media provide: "without a shared world, what is there to discuss? People often recommend relativism because they think it will lead to tolerance. But if we can't learn from each other what it is right to think and feel and do, then conversation between us will be pointless" (31).

As most studies of humanist identification and the role of empathy in narrative experience have concentrated on the written word, film ethicists like Stadler should be commended for beginning the extension of these concepts to cinema. The narratology project, and writers like Boyd, have begun to map the field of anthropological functions of stories, and this is where humanistic purpose comes in: I advocate a study of the effects of stories in value creation and social cohesion, and where those values benefit the greater amount of humans, after a utilitarian-cosmopolitan fashion, we should be allowed to call it "good." Humanistically, "good."

CHAPTER THREE

CASE STUDY: *CASA DE LOS BABYS*

The centrepiece of John Sayles' 2003 film *Casa de los Babys* is a scene featuring a complex, paralingual communication between two women: Asunción, played by Vanessa Martínez, and Eileen, played by Susan Lynch. Asunción is a maid working at La Posada Santa Marta, a hotel in an undisclosed Latin American city where six Anglo-American women are waiting to adopt children. One of those women is Eileen, a financially struggling Irish immigrant with idealistic visions of parenthood, an intuitively egalitarian generosity and demonstratively inclusive compassion.

While Asunción cleans her room, Eileen cannot hold herself from divulging her childrearing fantasies, via a monologue tracing sentimentalised images of maternal care – for example, describing her prospective child as a warm "bump" in the bed on a snowy school day. Although Asunción is unable to understand English, the narrative is already familiar to them both: the women who pass through the hotel are all dreaming of the pleasures of motherhood. Likewise, Asunción is representative of the service Latin America provides due to a gulf in economic status between north and south – both the hotel service, which is starkly contrasted with the living arrangements of the working poor, and more importantly, the child Asunción gave up for adoption when she was younger.

Emerging from reverie, Eileen realises a folly in her stream of English verbiage; why should this young working woman care about her personal narrative, and considering the thankless workload she already faces, why should she try to comprehend? Indeed, Asunción's life is almost all work: she forfeited the possibility of education to provide for her younger siblings after her early pregnancy. This sacrifice is positioned as a common story among her peers, but Asunción does not scorn Eileen; instead, she begins to tell her side of the story, and Eileen is mortified how little she understands. Asunción explains that when she gave her child, Esmeralda, for adoption, she wanted so much for her to go to a good home that she still dreams of the life her child could be living; a life where she is cared for both by loving parents and by the financial means she herself has been deprived of.

The sadness opens up when we realise just how much her hopes rely on the autonomy of others. She has to believe in the goodness of the American mothers passing through to maintain her vision of Esmeralda's life, as she is limited in how she can exercise her own capacity for maternal love. Her expertise in childrearing is revealed through care for her siblings, but due to financial restriction, she cannot be a mother to her own child. "Sometimes

when a new group of mothers comes," she says, "I pick one. A good one. And I try to imagine her face, her voice." She explains that she selects a mother like Eileen, knowing Eileen will not completely understand her Spanish. Despite the obvious barriers between them, it is mutually beneficial for them to both believe in the humanity and capacity for good parenthood the other possesses.

Later, we learn that Eileen has understood enough of the story to want to name her adopted child after the baby Asunción gave for adoption years ago. Something of Eileen's drive to tell her story moved Asunción also: it could be the indiscriminate nature of her sharing the tale, revealing an ability to treat everyone as equal, or her expressive narration as she describes a visualisation of the maternal attention Asunción missed and wishes she could provide. It is telling too that Eileen's most earnest moment is a description of herself as "just another mother," pointing to her heart, emphasising with incredulity, as though she almost cannot fathom being permitted such social inclusion. The scene recognises the normalising of motherhood inherent in Eileen's desire for inclusion, however there is no sense that this longing is a terrible thing. The core of each story has moved them both; these two women are sharing demonstrations of their ability to care about what happens to their children despite the location, national or racial identity or parenthood of the child, because the children are symbolic of a better future.

In this scene, Sayles' challenge to his own politically progressive audience is that both women's narratives equally deserve attention and by extension our compassion – an equal compassion. In fact, one of the chief challenges of the entire film lies in this juxtaposition: we spend almost equal screen time with the Latin American characters and the six American women. Simply by placing their narratives next to each other Sayles tells us: we need to understand the complexity of *all* of these lives to know how best to respond to the ethical dilemmas we face in a globalised world. But it does not end with compassion, as the ethical questions of when to interfere and attempt to correct adversity – particularly the kind of adversity embodied by Marcia Gay Harden's Nan, a symbol of the selfishness embedded in America-centric solipsism, racial essentialism and dogmatic parenting – are just as important in *Casa*.

Humanism holds that the tool of compassion is not by nature apologist or lacking in attention to culpability and pragmatic response to culpability. Sayles, for example, does not defend the cultural imperialism inherent in the adoption process across national borders. He acknowledges, "For me, there's a whiff of cultural imperialism in the transaction. You don't

see people from Korea coming here to adopt babies" (qtd. in Engel et al 263). He elaborates in an interview for *Adoptive Families* magazine:

> Ultimately, there is this uncomfortable realization that no matter how well the agencies are run—and some of them are run very, very well—you're able to adopt because you have the money to do it. And, very often, the person who placed that child for adoption did it because of economic reasons, because they didn't feel that they could raise that kid with the amount of money they had. (Kracklauer np)

Issues around international child adoption were new to the films of Sayles when he filmed *Casa*, although domestic adoption featured in his script for 1980 TV movie *A Perfect Match*. While adoption from Latin America is a phenomenon considerable enough to warrant more attention from filmmakers, the body of fictional cinematic works dealing with foreign adoption have largely focused on Asian adoption schemes – in particular the Korean adoption narratives of *Susanne Brink* (Kil-soo Chang, 1991) and *Tie a Yellow Ribbon* (Joy Dietrich, 2007). The prevalence of these narratives can be explained by the predominance of adoption from Korea for 40 years leading up until the early 1990s, while the country underwent considerable developmental changes (Tessler et al 36) and adoption policy change (Hollingsworth 210); prevalence of North American adoption from Latin America also appears proportional to political upheaval in the region (Engel et al 260). Some of the contact we have with themes of international adoption arrives through the lens of celebrity adoption narratives, such as that of Madonna or Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. After actor Kristin Davis adopted a girl from China as her character did in the series *Sex and the City*, news outlets mused on the real-life influence of such narratives (Jordan np). Taking the lead of IKEA in 2001, corporations also harnessed images of the bicultural family as a badge of progressive recognition (Tessler et al 35), leading to other corporations doing the same. The impact of adoption narrative on our consideration of related issues is substantial.

The clearest comparison to be made with *Casa* is the recent Australian film *The Waiting City* (Claire McCarthy, 2009), featuring a couple waiting to adopt a child in India. Despite broaching some adoption and cultural ethics, the film moves quickly on to focus instead on the couple's relationship strife and, more intriguingly, foregrounds the prospective mother's religious ambivalence. In American film and television, the majority of references to

international adoption submit adoption from China as an option: notably the television show *Modern Family*, which to an extent turns the motives for international adoption into farce, and features *Gigantic* (Matt Aselton, 2009) and *Then She Found Me* (Helen Hunt, 2007). In the latter, the decision leads to a resolution that is without doubt affirmative, given plentiful close-up shots of a happy Chinese girl over comforting acoustic music (closing the film with an emotively emphasised major chord), suggestive of contentment in the protagonist's life after the decision. In the film, the protagonist's birth mother advises her to adopt from China due to the nation's population surplus. This view of adoption also has an equalising concern at heart: it holds that a spread of population across nations is better than population bubbles in locations unable to support them, which can foster poverty, and a knowledge that brutality can be involved in population control; in the case of China, with female babies occasionally being targeted. The question is, if these children would otherwise end up on the street, is it a good idea for individuals within wealthier nations to use adoption to make a small difference? There are separate ethical disputes around gestational surrogacy (see Twine) and embryo adoption (see Batsedis), but they are not addressed in these films.

In *Casa*, Sayles does not display allegiance to any perspective on international adoption, leading some reviewers to remark on his approach to the subject being "documentarian" (Ebert, Rev. of *Casa* np). International adoption is not easy to morally categorise: it has a range of wonderful and worrying outcomes, which makes it interesting subject matter for a humanist film looking at complex interpersonal ethics.

The character Nan is in part a mouthpiece for the self-justifying imperialist ideology underlying the transaction; perfectly calibrated to inspire an audience's desire for supremacist posturing to be quelled, as we are consistently confronted with the ill effects of her entitled thinking. At the film's conclusion, she leaves with a baby she has attempted to bribe and harass her lawyer to obtain, informing the other great challenge of Sayles' narrative in how we address abuse of power on a personal rather than structural level. Humanists like Said have considered the role of the intellectual as constant tension and balance between addressing personal and structural/political responsibilities, shifting as they do while our social circumstances rapidly change, as in his concluding chapter on *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals* (119-144).

In another important scene of wordless communication, we see Asunción peering through blinds at a lonely schoolgirl in a playground across the street from the hotel. The subject of her gaze is watching the other children playing around her, appearing to desperately misunderstand their schoolyard games. Asunción identifies with the child's

loneliness and distance from her peers; her hand moves to her heart and we see her crying behind the blinds, the foregrounding effect of the horizontal lines with concurrent slow zoom in making her alienation appear all the more painfully concealed. Resultantly, the burial of her sadness is even more affecting when it is haltingly shared with Eileen later in the film.

During this early moment in *Casa*, the audience is not yet privy to Asunción's own adoption narrative, but we see that she has internalised an alienation as she empathises with the child. The human cost of ingrained means disparity begins to become clearer here, tandem to thematic content scrutinising our attitudes to early childhood: constraining the social development we undergo when young, replaced by intensive labour and concomitant familial responsibilities so early in life, its absence can only manifest as alienation. Asunción is one of the "army of the underpaid" (Sayles, Casa 114) who appear making their way to work over the film's title sequence, while a song plays in Spanish bemoaning the difficulty of getting up every day in a life of gruelling labour.

Sayles opts for implied meaning rather than categorical declaration of Asunción's grief in this scene, so to an extent we are left to wonder why Asunción is taken with melancholy upon witnessing this schoolgirl's fretfulness. However, we do know that school was not an option for her and earlier scenes have exposed vast contrast in the day-to-day lives of the working poor and wealthier locals such as Guillermo Iván's character Reynaldo and Martha Higareda's Celia. Shumway confirms, "Her pregnancy also meant the end of her schooling, consigning her to the kind of job she now has" (John Sayles 132). Later it becomes evident that she is imagining her own biological daughter, perhaps culturally isolated in the north. Showing the human face of these tragedies is one of the many powerful capabilities of cinematic narrative: confronting an audience with the moral dilemmas around how we can treat humans equally despite structural disadvantage, and to reduce structural disadvantage. The scene provides a fine example of Stadler's inversion of popular theories of spectatorship, in which film elicits active intellectual and ethical engagement, which she describes as the "ethical gaze" (211, 215). Narratives such as this are also required to counteract the less contextualised and humanly reductive messages we receive about adoption:

> Many of the children's faces are flashed across the television or computer screen, on the one hand personalizing their tragedies, while on the other hand presenting them as separate from their individual cultural contexts. Today this occurs frequently in the course of news reports, specials dedicated to the topic of adoption, series (including

"Adoption Stories", broadcast daily on Discovery Health Channel), and also advertisements by agencies promoting adoptions. (Engel et al 258)

However, it is also important to address imbalance in our view of biological/adoptive dichotomies too: "Adopting parents are oppressed by the stigma that a family built through adoption is inferior to a biological one. These parents or prospective parents require a pedagogy of liberation" (Post 434). These are some of the subtleties those who seek to represent adoption in story – shouldering the considerable task of providing much-needed context – must take into account.

There are a handful of reviews and very few critical analyses of *Casa* to be found in current academic literature; short readings grace chapters in Sayles chronologies by Ryan (244-257), Bould (167-174) and the recently released book by Shumway (127-134), who says "*Casa de los Babys* is likely to be the best Sayles film you have never heard of. The film seems to have less written about it, including fewer interviews" (127). Shirley Sealy's remark that "This one's not at full Sayles" (42) expresses the prevalent dismissive and ambivalent critical response. As evidence of the groupthink involved in contemporary film criticism, a cursory glance over the reviews reveals a majority complaining of the film being overly "schematic" (see Rooney, Hornaday, Howe, Levy), some displaying limited understanding of what the term means, but seemingly indistinct from 'didactic.' Despite this critical reaction, much has been made of the extended, central scene between Eileen and Asunción. Even one of the film's most severe critics, *Variety*'s David Rooney who complained that the film was "numbingly earnest ... slips frequently into didactic mode" (12) named this scene as the only one with "any real emotional weight" (13). For a viewer sympathetic to Sayles' vision, the scene is affecting as it gets to the heart of what storytelling can do best: it shows two people from very different backgrounds trying to understand each other, using any means possible.

Sayles has often portrayed the struggle against linguistic barriers as emblematic of this conciliatory process. Mark Bould's analysis of this scene, however, connects Eileen's maternal desire with the commodification of babies by calling the babies "material objects" on which she projects a "fetishisation" (173). This only holds if we accept babies as being in any way the same as material objects. In fact, what is happening here is quite the opposite; the babies are de-commoditised by acknowledgment of the worth of human interaction – they become more than material objects. If anything should be the product of such deep desire, it is connection to another human being, such as that provided by motherhood. It is appropriate to desire

connection to other humans *above* material objects – the desire itself does not *make them* material objects. Although problems around the treatment of human life as capital cannot be denied (explored more fully in other scenes, and later in this chapter), it is fallacious to blame Eileen's maternal longings for dehumanising behaviours in the marketplace. Jack Ryan defends Sayles' technique and challenges Mark Bould's concept of Eileen as fetishising life:

> Reducing Eileen's openness, which Susan Lynch communicates with élan, to fetishisation diminishes Sayles's humanism. On film and in the story, Sayles presents two mothers attempting to communicate across a linguistic barrier. At certain times, the women seem to reach each other, empathic moments that challenge verbal borders. Sayles uses a similar technique in both *Lone Star* and *Men with Guns*, albeit to a lesser degree. The humanness at the center of the sequence has to do with character construction ... Asuncion and Eileen work to connect. (252)

In this instance, Ryan uses the concept of humanism to suggest the way we reconcile difference with empathy, emphasising the value of work and striving toward a common goal of understanding one another's deeper experiences; the experiences which often go unspoken, including strongly felt desires such as maternal instinct. Moreover, he recognises why nuanced character construction is important – without it, there is nothing to connect over. The actual *work* we do to move closer to these details of other humanness is real communication.

Reviewer Geoff Revere's appraisal of *Casa* also connects Sayles' humanism to the acknowledgment of complexity: "Over the years, John Sayles' increasingly old-school humanism has been refined to an utterly unmistakable style. If his early films seemed to cast around somewhat clumsily for a form that best expressed their content, his recent works are marvels of understated nuance and complexity" (54). Recognised in the *New Humanist*'s review is the way a confluence of sensitive dialogue and performance is needed to express this complex picture of human acuity and connection: "The writing is so well judged, and the delivery so perfectly understated, that a scene which could easily fall into sentimentality rises instead to genuine empathy and perception" (Tudor np). Of course, this does not stop some reviewers from complaining that "the film tries to do so much" (Sells np), effectively asking for an easier picture to digest, one that can be easily summarised into schema.

Given this view of humanism as striving for character complexity, what meaning, then, does Eileen's "openness" possess? Eileen is partially symbolic of one kind of character trait: thinking the best of everyone, even when it will likely lead her to exploitation. Examples include her purchasing the picture book *La Cabra* for Tito (Ignacio de Anda) as he attempts to steal her handbag and her acceptance of Nan's lies right until the end of the film, when Nan tells Eileen she'd "put in a good word" for her at the adoption agency. Despite this typification, her character is complete with a consideration of the relationship between fantasy and worry, as well as economic and cultural relativity.

To begin, Eileen's openness is a kind of naivety – it does not do her any good to fail to see through Nan's lies or to leave her handbag lying around in a busy Latin American marketplace. Sayles is not lauding her behaviour, and so not fetishising openness, but nor is it condemned. Inherent in the character is a question: can we create positive behavioural change in others merely by expecting the best of them as moral agents, and leading by example with our own acts of selflessness? Research into the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) suggests that expectations on our behaviour can have a serious impact.

There are good results: she is able to see through barriers of class, race, nationality and culture and treat others equally. She speaks to Asunción exactly the same way she speaks to everyone else – most of the American women change their tone when addressing the Latin service staff. She does not expect there should be a barrier when she begins to talk to Asunción. Asunción obviously values this and allows her professional guard down in order to connect, sitting on the bed, listening, then sharing her own story, ultimately admitting that she hopes her child ended up with a mother like Eileen. Once these barriers of difference are broken through, they can connect through shared experiences: they both inhabit a relative position toward the bottom of the socio-economic scale in their respective nations, which is obviously a starting point, but moreover they connect through a deep sense of longing, loss and even suffering. Lynch speaks consistently with a furrowed brow betraying Eileen's anxiety; Asunción cannot hold back her tears at the end of the scene.

Sayles explained some of his intent for this scene to *Slant* journalist Ed Gonzalez:

> I'm always interested in the stuff that separates people, whether it's race, class or sex. Language is also a big separator. These are two people that struggle to get passed it [sic], but don't really understand the details. They sense some kind of affinity for each other. These are two women that would probably be very good friends if they spoke the same

> language or were in the same place. I told Susan Lynch that her character probably came to the United States and cleaned hotel rooms and did the kind of jobs that Vanessa's character does in the film. They're working class women and they're both Catholics. But, more important, they're on the same wavelength. (np)

Eileen reveals a desire to fit in with the American mothers at home, but this impulse may come at a cost of having obscured her relationship to others sharing a similar background; however, working to rediscover and reconnect with her formative experiences of otherness proves beneficial as it reveals what Sayles calls "the stuff that separates people." So their empathic exchange does not normalise the experience or identity of either woman: their complex understanding unmistakeably appreciates both their differences (most clearly identified in the language divide) and similarities (most clearly identified in maternal longing).

When the scene begins, Asunción walks into Eileen's room to clean; Eileen requests Asunción work around her, and begins to speak. Sayles keeps both women on the screen through her monologue by having Martínez in the mirror behind Lynch – it leaves Martínez free to move around without cutting away from Lynch and breaking the reverie. Martínez's figure also moves in and out of the left of the frame, effectively sandwiching Lynch between two obscured images of Asunción; we are swept away in her story, but not encouraged to forget who is listening. Halfway through, Asunción cottons on to the magnitude of the dreams pouring out of Eileen, and sits on the bed to listen. The camera subtly tracks her as she sits on the bed, signalling a change in dynamic – she now has Asunción's full attention, and we are reminded to listen from Asunción's point of view. Sayles is free, now, to offer both women equal screen time. The scene is perhaps overlong, but the equalising coverage serves the purpose of demonstrating the lack of separation between their experiences. Resultantly, they are both deeply moved by the mutuality of their experience, buoyed by the demonstration of goodwill, potentially feeling less alone and assured that their cultural differences don't equate to any lack of benevolence.

But openness cannot do everything. Tito is selling *La Cabra* at the end of the film; her goodwill cannot change his circumstance. Eileen is also easily led by Nan's brash confidence – if they all were so easily led, no one would challenge her at all. (Although interestingly, Eileen begins the film much more assertive with Nan than she ends up, contradicting Nan's opinion on the relative happiness of dogs on the beach in their initial scene together.) Sayles does not

present an uncritical view of openness to others. Instead, in this film we are asked to consider what openness can and cannot do, its importance in human interaction and its inadequacies as a moral philosophy. The counterpoint to this point of view is embodied in New York intellectual Leslie (Lili Taylor), and the film equally considers what her cynical realism can and cannot do. Sayles reveals that her disposition is no less accommodating of humanist exchange:

> This character was conceived as someone whose basic take on the world is ironic, sometimes to a fault; sometimes she's so protective with her irony that she misses out on some real emotions. But she's working it through, and she's made this strange alliance with Mary Steenburgen's character, who's a born again Christian – and they're a very unlikely pair. So you realize that although she has a lot of defences, she opened them up, at least in that case, to someone she ordinarily would have prejudices against. ("Audio Commentary: John Sayles")

In *Casa*, Sayles uses the character Nan, and the other American women's reaction to Nan, to explore one of the great humanist questions: when to intervene as a moral agent. Throughout the film, Sayles' characters intermittently discuss Nan's misdeeds, encouraging his audience to wonder if there will be a revolt mounted by these women against Nan's atrocious behaviour. Much of their concern has to do with her fitness for motherhood – the tacit dilemma becomes vocalised in a scene toward the end of the film, shortly before Nan receives a child, between Leslie and the non-sententiously Christian recovering alcoholic Gayle (Steenburgen). The two share gossip about the other women at the hotel. They discover that Nan is a compulsive liar as well as having pilfered inexpensive items from the maid's cart; they also see through Nan's hubris, recognising the way she appears confident and authoritative as a rhetorical tactic of persuasion – as Gayle says, "she always seems so in control." Sayles elaborates in his short story, "Nan rarely asks a question, her voice nailing each sentence with a flat certitude sure to overwhelm the faint of opinion" (119), evident in Harden's witheringly shrill performance. Gayle, who has previously come to Nan's defence in her moral impulse to think the best of everyone, now has enough evidence of Nan's sociopathic tendencies to engage her self-doubt at her own inaction. She asks Leslie if they should do anything to stop Nan receiving a baby.

Leslie, having been Nan's most strident critic and the most self-assertive member of the group, reflects her true values underneath the moralising rhetoric. She offers two conclusions on her approach to this kind of wrongdoing: firstly, that Nan is also exercising her views and should not be vilified for them, the relativist response: "we just don't like her, that's all – the kid, whoever it is, will survive." Secondly, if this is unsatisfactory and they need to feel they are correcting an imbalance of goodwill in the world, then the best they can do is exhibit the behaviour they would like to see in others. "I don't know," says Leslie, and she means it, as her vocal exasperation confirms she has considered these ethical quandaries before, "be really good mothers to ours." Interestingly also in this scene, we see Leslie's discomfort with being pressed on these issues as she attempts to dismiss the seriousness at hand with jokes. Their roles become reversed and unexpectedly Gayle is pointing out the inconsistency in their thoughts and actions: "So we're what, afraid to rock the boat, get the ministry riled up, throw a little hitch into that adoption schedule?"

The coverage in Leslie and Gayle's scene retains a naturalist standard: Sayles wants us to concentrate on the two characters rather than distract with technique. There is no incidental music, unprovoked camera movement, or emphasis on visual elements other than the characters. The camera begins with an equally tight medium shot on both characters: we are not encouraged to think the scene is going to reveal more about one woman, or that one woman is more important for us to empathise with. Gayle stands against an unremarkably bland wall, her posture emphasising her discomfort relative to Leslie's self-assurance, with feet up on the bed, snuggled into the pillows. Gayle orbits the bed, picking up a bedside table and moving it; she plays with the sleeves of her blouse. Her subtle agitations reveal that the concerns she will raise have been preying somewhat on her mind, and provides a culmination of nearly imperceptible tension for the audience. The opening small talk is also loaded with tension, as the film has set a precedent of expository dialogue laden with a depth of both explicit and implicit meanings.

When Gayle finally sits down, there is a moment of silence before she launches into the debate, signalling one of the most important dialogues of the film. When she introduces the debate, Gayle receives a tighter close-up. The lengthier pauses in conversation are subtly punctuated by the sound of traffic passing outside. When she delivers the line, "then why are we letting her have a child?" Sayles – who also edits his own films – cuts to a brief scene in which Nan delivers some offhand racist remarks in a restaurant, and instructs the other women how to be authoritarian to get what they want, reminding us of why Gayle and Leslie's conclusions are so important.

When we return to Gayle and Leslie, and Leslie is pressed on the issue of what they ought to do, Sayles moves the camera in marginally closer to Leslie also, and Leslie becomes subtly agitated, leaning forward away from the pillows, signifying their role reversal. Leslie closes the scene with the line, "the kid, whoever it is, will survive." The final remark is important as it points to innate human resilience. Besides encouraging wonder and awe in the ability of human life to subsist through difficult situations, find meaning and carry on, it also emboldens comprehension of this resilience, which is necessary if we are to put faith in people to lead rich and fulfilling lives despite adversity. Of course, this is a theme familiar in Latin American filmmaking. Despite the difficulty of representing national cinema in Latin America as defined by the drama of oppression and hegemony (the problematic of national identity is fully explored in the volume *Latin American Cinema*, edited by Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison), this cinematic process of asserting the meaning in compromised lives stands against an identifiable hegemonic media influence. Sayles, then, has a difficult task on his hands in representing a culture not his own – perhaps why he chose not to single out a particular nation-as-setting, as in his previous Latin-set film *Men with Guns* – from his distanced North American perspective. However, in attempting to place "local culture" on the screen, he points to no particular essential nature in Latin America, favouring instead complex cultural negotiations and a breadth of personalities, and encouraging us to wonder at the experience of all the people his camera passes.

Seigneurie's research in recent Arab humanist literature stands as a fine parallel, as he locates regions of ongoing conflict and compromised autonomy – similar to the setting of *Casa* – as the site where contemporary humanism thrives. He finds a parallel in their resistance to abandoning the human dignity of productive intervention, in spite of the prevailing mood in postmodern literature with antihumanist focus on the inadequacies of language, which sidelines the possibility of social reconstruction. Writing on authors like Hoda Barakat, Hassan Daoud and Rashid al-Daif, he says, "Nor did they go for the optimism of utopian commitment, nor for the hand-wringing of alienated consciousness, nor either for the opportunistic complicity with ongoing war ... It was both clear-sighted admission of human limitations and a voluntaristic adherence to humanism nonetheless" (109). If people did not survive through adversity, we would not change. Therefore, humanists must take heart in the determination to keep living and attempts to improve circumstances when the odds are against us. In *Casa*, Sayles complicates this remark also, however, by cutting immediately to the street children, who we suspect will not all survive past their youth given their

homelessness, lack of means and drug use. We are reminded once more that we cannot romanticise this kind of adversity.

A final moral action Gayle and Leslie consider is ostracism, which Sayles hints at in his audio commentary:

> One of the specific things I was going for within this group of women is that men and women do react in some different ways to group situations. If there's a bunch of guys who hang out together and some of them go out to a bar, and they forget to call one guy, and he calls them on it, they're likely to say 'hey dude, sorry, we just forgot.' Whereas the women know that if they're excluded from the usual group, it was not thoughtless, it was thought out very carefully, so you can't get away with that excuse. ("Audio Commentary: John Sayles")

Nan is even introduced as a figure excluded from conversation by both body language and the camera: a tableau over Leslie's shoulder, with Nan in the background entering herself into the conversation despite Leslie's back to her. Nan remains in the background, receiving no close-up through the scene, while we are privy to Leslie's look of exasperation when Nan speaks.

As a predictor of behavioural change, ostracism studies have not been definitive; it is a recent field of study, despite being an everyday occurrence (Williams and Sommer, 1997, Warburton et al., 2006, and Goodacre and Zadro, 2010 demonstrate the open-ended nature of this research). Sayles knows, however, that social ostracism is a primary method of manipulation in group politics and it makes up a large part of the interactions between the American women in *Casa*. Interestingly, it is very rare for so many people who share so little in common to be thrown together into social situations like this. He goes on to explain:

> One of the things that I thought about when I decided to make this into a movie ... was how many feature films there are about groups of men, whether it's army movies or sports movies, gang movies or business movies, or whatever, and there are very, very few movies that deal with dynamics between groups of women. This is a somewhat temporary, artificial situation where these women are from different walks of life and different parts of the world, and they're spending a lot more time with each other than

they ordinarily would, and they form their cliques, they form their kind of power structure within the women who are waiting there – and have to deal with each other. Partly cause they're isolated by language and culture. ("Audio Commentary: John Sayles")

The other major time this melting pot of culture influences our lives is during our schooling, and Sayles has also expressed his belief in high school as the "last bastion of American democracy" (Osborne 36); being impelled to work with people from different backgrounds is a positive thing. It is also, possibly, why their allegiances and implicit rivalries are somewhat reminiscent of schoolyard politics.

The film asks us to consider both gossip and ostracism as ethically dynamic behaviours, although we will not know the long-term effects of the women's ostracism, as we are only privy to the events of roughly 24 hours. Implicit is the knowledge that sometimes we must intrude into others' autonomy, but how do we decide when this is necessary? In scenes like this, Sayles is presenting and interrogating the options available along with their potential consequences, as well as celebrating the discussions that force us to elucidate our position and monitor our care for others and the validity of our moral assumptions.

Another character used in this inquiry is Diómedes, played by Bruno Bichir. Diómedes is introduced looking for work at the hotel, where he is turned away by Señora Muñoz (Rita Moreno), setting up the understanding that even an articulate, educated and considerate man like himself can be out of work in this city. He later offers his services as a guide to Skipper (Daryl Hannah) and Jennifer (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Here the process of cultural interaction becomes complicated. Diómedes has learned English from watching American films, but this has come at a cost of him beginning to believe what he sees on the screen – a fantastical and reductionist view of an ideal America. The extent of his misapprehension is revealed when he tells the two women that he wants to see Philadelphia because it is "the cradle of liberty", and they cannot help but look shocked and sympathetic.

Besides being representative of the need for storytellers to be realistic rather than sell an ideal (in this case, of the American concept of liberty), Sayles is inquiring into exactly how America sells concepts through cultural products, which attempt to direct attitudes. Subsequently, Diómedes has a great desire to visit the United States, yet he also uses the English he learned from watching these movies to teach the women about his own cultural heritage and complicate their vision of Latin American identity. Even when one culture

appears so compromised and powerless, the process of cultural interaction cannot be completely diluted to aggressor and recipient; through the resourcefulness of people like Diómedes a kind of trade-off takes place.

The two women then consider whether Diómedes would be offended if they give him extra money. They understand what their money is symbolic of: of course he needs the cash, but it also represents their situational power over him, and they recognise that their money is part of the process which leads to his cultural identity being compromised by – and even homogenised into – their own cultural heritage.

The conclusion of Diómedes' narrative is heartbreaking and speaks to the distressing emotional effects of the sale of America's cultural norms as higher value: he pins his yearnings on a lottery ticket, hoping to win the money to buy a fake American passport. He does not win. Sayles uses the lottery, however, to thematically consolidate the disparate personal narratives of *Casa* over a montage sequence at the climax of the film.

On one level the humanist meanings here are explicit – life is like a lottery, and we are all equally at the mercy of a randomly assigned circumstance – yet there are numerous other resonances in the lottery montage sequence. The New Age, horoscope-inspired gibberish spoken by the lottery presenter over the montage has a set of important assumptions bursting out of its near-nonsense verse. The presenter speaks of choosing one's fate, winners and losers. This is what we have to work against: what Miguel Angel Centeno identifies as developing nations replicating a philosophy of meritocracy from the United States: "a rhetoric of individual meritocracy has developed that allows the privileged to see any efforts to level the playing field as illegitimate" (18). Attendant to the ideal of meritocracy is an antihumanist ethic stating that we deserve what we get in life, that we should be able to direct our own fortunes at all times rather than ever being at the mercy of chance, that competition is healthy because our circumstances are all equal when we are the directors of our own fate, and that this competition should necessitate winners and losers rather than mutual benefit and common good.

This amounts to the sale of the American dream into places least equipped to deal with its economic myths of level playing fields and meritocracy – like the nation and city we see a snapshot of in *Casa*. Worse, Centeno identifies use of "the very language of meritocracy to deny the possibility of any active policy intervention in education and employment" (21). The same rhetoric could be applied equally to dismiss personal interventions such as that faced by Leslie and Gayle; a horoscope speech over the lottery montage shows the insidious personal level this dialogue can reach. It is married to the hopes and aspirations of all the lottery

participants, watching the television through a shopfront window and leaving one by one as their numbers fail to show, until only the bereft Diómedes remains. The dialogue of meritocracy also marks the point where a very careful line must be drawn. Where humanism requires an assumption of some human autonomy, and requires humans to exercise this autonomy where possible toward common benefit, it does *not* mean that it is always possible for us to choose what autonomy we have, or that we are always provided the means to change our circumstance.

There are two other important points of reference for the lottery presenter's monologue. First of all, the film appears more critical of New Age spirituality than it does organised religion, so long as the religious ideals serve a moral code valuing the human, as per Gayle's Christian humanism – for her, caring for the human is a higher order, albeit divinely ordained. Daryl Hannah's character Skipper has given birth to three children with fatal anatomic abnormalities, the longest staying alive for a week. When this is revealed to Jennifer halfway through the film, the reason for Skipper's punishing exercise schedule is apparent – she blames her body for her repeated failed pregnancies. She has also found the means to sustain this misattribution in New Age beliefs such as chakra healing, which she is practising on Jennifer when she offers her story. After she lists her three traumatic birth experiences, Skipper looks at Jennifer's foot and tells her, "You're not drinking enough water. Your kidneys – this tells me you're not flushing them," demonstrating that she also subscribes to alternative medicinal health practises such as homeopathy.

The extent to which she seeks solace in the New Age is apparent in the closing lines of their scene. "How do you get past that, losing three babies?" asks Jennifer.

"Imagine that you're made of light, and that you're spreading outward into a black sky," Skipper instructs, and continues to work.

Although she has retreated to the New Age to explain her condition, and there is no suggestion that she should have been wiser or is at fault for seeking answers to ease the emotional pain of her trauma, there is a foundational problem with these alternative health methods. Practices such as chakra healing are antihumanist as they indulge the assumption of an invisible bodily vice, an inherent immaterial wrong in our psyche or unnaturalness to a human body. Besides the evident antihumanist prerequisite of faith above science to explain alternative medicine, the assumption of supernatural defects or characterisation of corporeal and psychical abnormalities as existing outside of an idealised positive or 'natural' being is another harmful fallacy. Bookchin frequently addresses the "arrogant" New Age and antihumanism as the same anti-rational and misanthropic fallacy (3, 12, 137, 164). Scholars

such as Kate Soper have asserted a more nuanced human exceptionalism, suggesting the possibility that the proper question may be "a matter of degree rather than a difference of kind" (42). No matter where we fall on the philosophical divide of artificiality in nature, through the character Skipper we still must face the abuse of conceptual 'nature' as an idealised construct opposed to the very scientific credibility that humanism touts, ignoring rather than explaining the complex workings of the world around us. The assumption that human life and human manipulation of environments can be 'unnatural' appears in the marketplace to sell a variety of magical products, including "nun's pee" in *Casa*, the ludicrousness of which is defended by Skipper. Bould even draws parallels between Skipper's toxicity ideal and Nan's complaints of racial contamination in the Latin children (168). The sale of disempowering tools to victims of health trauma, imposing blame and mistrust of their own bodies, extends to almost all of the American women and the fraught relationship can be seen as both symptomatic of capitalist commodification and exploited by it (Bould 170). When an alleged human defect can only be corrected by mystical health techniques requiring products, services or knowledge distributed by New Age practitioners, leveraging the misery of others for financial gain is revealed as unethical.

The other point of reference in the monologue lies in the street kids, who are also representative of the ethical minefield uncovered when we begin to treat one another as capital. Before the montage sequence, the children are shown inhaling spray paint. Afterward they walk to the beach, where one child – Tito – hallucinates visions of shooting stars over the ocean. Where there are no means for people to have autonomy over their own lives, the options are to create hope in unattainable and unrealistic goals, as in Diómedes' dreams of America, or the escape from reality offered by drugs. The stars are glowing golden, so we know they are probably not real, yet at the same time stimulate a sense of wonder at something greater, unachievable for the youths in their daily lives.

The presenter's speech concludes, "Our fortune is not accidental but a confluence of energy, negative or positive. Great days are coming! You have unlimited potential. We must remember that life offers as many opportunities as there are stars in the sky. The Heavens don't determine our destiny, but if we listen carefully to their signals we can smile at tomorrow!" Tito's hallucinogenic experience uncovers their impetus for paint sniffing: the drug-induced stars are the closest they can get to the hope of autonomy, as the presenter has imbued within the stars the idea that they are "opportunities." Sayles notes in his fiction account that achieving a simulation of love for other living things is also what the paint-sniffing youths are reaching for: "The dogs are out then, pest-ridden bands of five, ten, twelve,

but after the paint Pito loves them too much to throw anything" (167). Sayles opens the film with orphanage nurse Doña Mercedes explaining to a younger nun that children need love and to be held. Also in the short story, he explains her views: "It's important to pick them up even when they aren't crying. They need to eat and to sleep and be warm, and they need some *cariño*, some tight warm holding and a loving voice, or they won't grow" (122), recalling Harry Harlow's famous wire monkey experiments in 1957-1963 ("The Nature of Love"). The street children have apparently gone without this, and their yearning for the feeling of loving connectedness – if the barriers to achieving this without paint are insurmountable – is understandable.

Throughout the film, we witness various adults yelling at the children and treating them as though their lives are inferior or worthless. Before the montage, the fake passport salesman who also sells the children the paints calls them "little shits" as they leave his shop. The children are actively encouraged to have contempt for their own lives. The salesman shows how debased human interaction becomes in a world where we are required to treat other humans as capital just to survive: in order to sell them the paints, he has to not care about the children, he has to have disdain for them – and this requires a view of some people as inherently less than others. A conversation between Jennifer and her husband Henley from Sayles' story clearly demarks the widespread view of these children as capital:

> "I talked to my Korean connection again."
> "We agreed to drop that."
> "You maximize your options, you maximize your chances of achieving your goal."
> "I've heard your seminar, darling. Many times."
> "It works."
> "We're not dealing with commodities here."
> "You don't think so? The same rules apply. There's supply, there's demand–" (145)

An analogous character appears earlier: the bookselling woman who attempts to take back the book, *La Cabra (The Goat)*, that the cash-strapped Eileen gifts to Tito on a whim, moments before he (unbeknownst to her) attempts to pilfer her purse. Instead, he receives a book he cannot read, due to illiteracy – the bookseller instructs him to give it back and tries to pull it from his hands, but he will not give it up, and takes it with him. Importantly, Sayles has

La Cabra in Tito's hand as he hallucinates, demonstrating that the gesture may have meant something to him. But in the end, even this is unsustainable, and the conclusion of Tito's narrative is as heartbreaking as that of Diómedes – he is trying to sell the book for the cash to survive, and presumably to escape from reality again.

The film suggests the children's disregard for life, including their own lives, is the consequence of a culture in which fighting for the basics of survival is the majority norm; collectively, the city's inhabitants cannot maintain care for children without parents, and scavenging for out-of-body experiences is the closest simulation of hope they have available to them. A holistic view of international adoption ethics acknowledges that while there is power imbalance between nations to address, we still cannot ignore the many who are caught in poverty in the meantime – international adoption still, to a small extent, mitigates the impact of poverty in a world where the spread of population is as imbalanced as the spread of wealth. Even critics of the social justice implications of international adoption such as Leslie Doty Hollingsworth point out that, despite the need to address disadvantage which makes the adoption market so unequal and at times dangerous to the children in question, adoption is still necessary to address the suffering of some of those children. She advocates better understanding of the ethics and politics driving the conditions of international adoption, especially for social workers (216). More worrying is the possibility of reinforcing the imbalance: "International adoptions also tend to remove healthy children from sending countries, leaving behind many older and disabled orphans for long-term institutional care" (Tessler et al 39).

Importantly, however, Latin America is not completely powerless. At the most basic level, in *Casa* it is seen to be producing something that those with financial means desire: babies. This provides leverage to negotiate with. Unfortunately this may be unsustainable as it commodifies humanity, however the commodification of babies is used to advantage by a whole system of locals: the nation decides on a residency requirement to determine whether the prospective parents are realistic about the commitment (at the time of Sayles' research for *Casa*, Chile had the longest of such residency requirements at 2 months or more [Kracklauer np]), and to experience the culture they are adopting from before their application clears. During this time, they bring money into the country which hotel workers and orphanage nurses, lawyers and bureaucrats, restaurateurs, marketeers and tour guides are all seen at some point to be receiving. The by-product of bringing Americans into the country is the generation of means for more balanced and advanced cultural interactions. As we see at various times, the American women are put in a more compromising situation when they are

unfamiliar with the customs around them, as soon as they venture outside the hotel and gringo restaurants. The film itself can also be seen as part of this interface – an American filmmaker working south of the border with a local crew. Making a film about socio-political interactions in this way is a cultural exchange of itself. Scholars have traditionally emphasised the use of cinema in Latin America to promote political consciousness and resistance (see Burton, "The Camera As 'Gun': Two Decades of Culture and Resistance in Latin America") and although *Casa* cannot be thought of strictly as Latin American cinema, it participates in this dialogue. At the film's close, two children are seen being brought to their adoptive mothers – and one child appears significantly older. Perhaps the revenge the lawyer has taken on Nan, who maintains that she wants to receive a younger baby before it is somehow culturally damaged by its Latin homeland, is to give her an older child.

Sayles demonstrates that cultural influence happens in two directions, and presents a view that America and Latin America are co-dependent rather than the traditional view of them being opposed forces; although the power imbalance maintains a precedent of American imperial gains, which must be recognised in their complexity to be dismantled. This cultural scramble – along with the inadequacy of national and racial identity markers in a postcolonial context – is very specifically employed as an argument against militancy as the means to disseminate power between nations. Muñoz's son Búho (Juan Carlos Vives) has a beer-fuelled political conversation with his friends, in which they galvanise their awareness of the reasons for progressive change. Demonstrating a familiarity with one another's arguments and the impasse they must regularly arrive at, with no obvious way to overthrow the power structures they despise, they consider a violent solution in taking up arms against America. But they are forced to concede that if they did, the American military would be predominantly made up of people with Latin American cultural heritage and people from circumstances not dissimilar to their own. "Hector, my Cuban friend," says one, "he was in Panama when they kidnapped Noriega, and he told me that the yanki invaders were from every race! Chinese, Latinos, Blacks, Whites."

"Exactly my point," replies Búho, "that's what I'm saying too! If it comes to a showdown the little bastards shooting at us will be our own."

Stumped, his friend takes another drink.

The scene, somewhat jarringly, breaks with the point-of-view conventions set up with a largely static camera throughout the film prior. Sayles and cinematographer Mauricio Rubinstein employ a fluid-camera technique popularised by director Oliver Stone: a dolly around a circular table conversation tracks argument and reaction between the characters,

through perpetual, bidirectional movement and brisk editing. The technique is used chiefly to underpin the invigorated forward momentum of high-stakes debate: driving the viewer's fluctuating perspective indicates conversation energised enough to warrant abandoning the norm of inertia. It also offers the removal of privileged perspective of one or two characters sitting opposite, established in narrative convention set-up shots, determining 'the line' in all scenes involving more than one character. The more characters involved beyond two, the more problematic the line becomes for audiences primed to be shown who to identify or empathise with. The technique can also implicate the viewer in the debate by encouraging us to feel like an active rather than passive spectator.

The motions of the camera tracking the characters' faces with a diminishing depth-of-field, and the apposition of muted backlighting with darkly blurred plants on the canteen wall connote their drunkenness. The camera begins moving in one direction, but occasionally lurches back the way it came, conflating amassed complications in the debate with emphasis on their inebriation. There are also two movements to consider, which can be taxing for a viewer's concentration on the dialogue: the circle being traced around the table and the independent movement of the camera operator on the dolly – panning and tilting, introducing another dimension of movement. For the closing image, featuring Búho's dejected friend looking down and sipping his drink, the dolly again pulls back in the opposite direction: the alcohol-heightened conversation, propelled by camera movement, has been enjoyably buoyant until now, but being this seriously stumped, the perspective shifts gears one more time and the voices fade out, leaving just the 'atmos' track; another moment of reflection, but uneasy. The effect jolts the audience in the final moments of reflection Sayles has allowed at the end of important scenes. The drawback of these techniques lies in wrenching the viewer out of the narrative, in a film mostly reliant on the conventions of social realism. Such stylisation also divides our cognition between the technique and the substance of the scene. It could be regarded as a Brechtian device, breaking with realist conventions to make sure we are aware of the scene's implications to the audience.

To top off the near-garishness, Sayles has chosen a song about Che Guevara, no less, to play in the background of their scene. The majority of the music Sayles has chosen for *Casa* serves a similar purpose; it comments, often overtly, on the action. The first song we hear is Doña Mercedes singing in Spanish, "If you don't go to sleep the white monster will come and eat your hands and feet off." Over the opening credits, as the army of the underpaid stream down the hillside into the city, we hear "Face to the Wall," a song about trying to find a reason to get up in the morning. When Sayles takes a break in the drama, he allows us some

downtime from serious concerns for affective close-up shots of babies in the orphanage – the reminder of their innocence serves its own apparent purpose; however, Sayles also uses Moreno singing in Spanish as a kind of a Greek chorus. *Casa*'s few moments of incidental music are never inappropriate, including the melancholic whimsy of the tune playing over the climactic montage sequence at the end of the film, and the disconcerting synth sounds as we witness street kids washing windscreens and juggling for traffic at the film's opening.

Despite these occasional Brechtian cues, *Casa* sees Sayles very much in realist mode: on the streets of a busy city with little money in his pocket, hoping the bustle around the set won't interfere to the point of dialogue drowned or camera obstructed. This gives the audience the impression of a documentary, and in the editing room Sayles has done little to disguise the fact – although as in Búho's scene, occasional visual flourishes can be found. *Casa* maintains an impressively real sound design, with a loud 'atmos' track reminiscent of documentary filmmaking, without interfering needlessly in the dialogue. While this is often the result of a low budget – without a controlled set or the means to clear large areas of people for filming on location, one must adapt to whatever unexpected sounds turn up on the dialogue track, such as the frequent loud bus sounds – Sayles has found his own way of dealing with this. He explains on the DVD commentary, "Generally what you end up doing is – if you don't want to loop the whole scene, which I didn't want to do – is adding layers of noise to match the layers of noise that are married to the dialogue. So things get louder and louder." This works magnificently, as most filmmaking underplays non-dialogue sounds; the technique manages to be atmospherically immersive – which is important for a film about cultural immersion.

Some flourishes in the sound editing process are evident, but minor, such as an abrupt cut on the sounds of children in the playground as Asunción observes the lonely child, with a long decay reverberation effect applied. The resulting echo is suggestive of blurry, distant memories, although not gratuitous enough to call attention to itself.

More faltering are some extended, music-less and action-less shots in which we learn almost nothing, usually tracking Skipper as she punishes her body through extended exercise. For example, Sayles allows lengthy pauses while she swims two laps of a pool or runs down a beach. Sayles holds the shot to emphasise the physical demands she is placing on her body, but the audience is left wondering why we need this long to consider such a simple revelation. As a counterpoint, on occasion the extended close-ups on various characters toward the end of a dialogue-driven scene reveal emotional resonance that speaks to their hypothetical lives outside the action of the film.

The technique directly addresses the question of how we locate human dignity for the oppressed without misrepresenting the capacity for autonomy over circumstance. Even if current models of governance are not where we want to be, and not the ends we are striving for, we still must acknowledge the work done within these confines; in *Casa* this process at once illustrates common ambitions between those seeking empowerment of the obscured worker through feminist and postcolonial storytelling. It is very easy for us, if we uphold social equity across all human identities as the highest order of our own work, to devalue the work and humanity of those not *directly* involved in political change. Muñoz, for example, questions the laziness of her layabout son, wondering if she has provided him with too much as he is now thirty and to her mind "good for nothing." It leads her to reflect on her relationship with his father, and inherent in her monologue is a challenge to a lineage of myopic self-absorption in male identities – even her son's perpetually dirty spectacles could be read as a symbol for this myopia. In Spanish, Muñoz opines, "His father gets mixed up in politics, goes into exile ... First the government wanted to kill him, now I do. Living with a Spanish girl who's half his age, right? The man is totally shameless. Off playing the fool while I'm stuck with these whining mothers and all the bills to pay. Men get mixed up in politics like it's no big deal. Then get the military pissed off. And who's left to order the linens?" Sayles holds the camera on Moreno at the end of the monologue, without an immediate cut – an increasingly underused technique in frenetically paced Hollywood filmmaking. It allows us to see her reflection on her own complaint. Her lip quivers and she looks desperately around before attempting to shrug it off – we have the moment to realise this has been her entire life. Moreno and Sayles are inviting us to pay respect to the variety of lives implicated in the political structures we like to consider. We can easily forget and devalue those left to the less exciting work of doing the linens, but it has to be done, and they often receive the raw end of the deal – a dearth of recognition. Recognising the humanity of these people is not necessarily opposed to deconstructing capitalist entities.

I reject that *Casa*'s "naturalist bent causes it to depict contingent reality as fixed and unchangeable" (Bould 174). I agree with Shumway that, "Sayles brings no overarching preconception about the nature of reality to his films, assuming neither that history is a dialectical march toward utopia, nor that the current social arrangements are natural and inevitable" (John Sayles 7). Bould's analysis suggests the film is only worthwhile where encouraging class-consciousness and consideration of class barriers. There are other options, however: "the either/or of revolution or passive acceptance is not a premise Sayles would accept. His films often suggest that change is possible, but they don't imply it will be easy or

that it can happen overnight" (Shumway, John Sayles 11). Humanism points to a range of experiences both class-related and otherwise, but they are all worth exploring and none are static or assumed as a norm. *Casa* certainly does not ignore class conflict, treat it as social fact or unchangeable – indeed, it quite directly asks what we can do about it, how we will surmount, not ignore it – and working together is the way this happens, so we uncover deeper differences and similarities in our circumstances in order to move beyond class confines, through curiosity, enquiry and a broadening of mutual assistance. As Said puts it, "far from humanistic effort being determined (or for that matter predetermined) by socioeconomic circumstances, it is the dialectic of opposites, of antagonism between those circumstances and the individual humanist that is of the deepest interest, not conformity or identity" (43).

None of these naturalist devices, it should be noted, overpower Sayles' direct dialogue or allow the viewer to abandon the obvious question thrown up by Sayles' filmic meditation on cultural relativity. We keep returning to the issue: what is the answer to correcting power imbalances, and if we do not address people who perpetuate the ideologies these imbalances are founded on, such as Nan, what is it possible to achieve? As many reviewers have pointed out, the film offers questions with no definitive moral instruction: "Sayles is a moralist of the secular-humanist school, but he doesn't impose any heavy-handed messages on this film" (Hulse 17).

Perhaps the best answer to the problem of addressing misuse of power is evident in Sayles' filmic structure: the multi-character drama is inherently positioned against individualist monocausality. The majority of the players in this film are kind people trying to make their own difference, occasionally just trying to survive – together, their work has the potential to amount to a greater goodwill which can dwarf, and perhaps even moderate the ill-effects of Nan's power. Effectively, the film's structure suggests we cannot rely on one person for this task and implicates the viewer; in respecting the limits of what we can do as an individual moral agent, we see that others who care about achieving the best for everyone offset our individual resourcefulness. Even by arguing with Nan and invigorating a humanist position with people like Gayle, Leslie can foster doubt in Nan's self-regarding beliefs – this is what Leslie is good at doing.

After visiting with the lawyer and verbally abusing him to receive preferential treatment (although he is principled and does not take her bribe, he grants her a baby to get rid of her), Nan strides alone out of his meagrely equipped office and across the grand lobby of the building he works in. In his audio commentary, Sayles says, "Certainly we know who Nan is, but there was just something about the lobby of this building that we shot in. I felt like

just seeing her march out of there all alone. It said something about her." It suggests that her crusade is a lonely one, as she is isolated amongst the majority of people trying to do the right thing. Everyone is part of the process: this complex moral interaction is invisible, but film is exactly the kind of medium capable of making these connections visible. Writing on *Lone Star* and *Men With Guns*, Rebecca M. Gordon points out that, "Sayles's films demonstrate that the singular nature of history, story and culture that keeps the paternal legacy afloat (and defines 'the nation') will be challenged in a hybrid society" (217). This remains true in *Casa*. Of course, the film focuses almost exclusively on the negotiation of maternal legacies – the film opens with a passive aggressive dispute between inter-generational nurses at the orphanage, as they argue about the best parenting practices for their charges – but the hybrid society's challenge to cultural norms becomes very real in this picture.

Sayles may not like the one-way process of international adoption, but he has always admitted that good outcomes can arise as a by-product of political ills (especially in *City of Hope*). The babies crossing borders will be part of a hybrid culture that the globalised world is hurtling toward, and fostering a fairer hybrid culture will happen as people of various identities travel throughout the world and national boundaries and identities are broken down. Some critics of international adoption have focused on the right to racial heritage, particularly black racial heritage, in transracial and cross-cultural adoption (see Hollingsworth, Fogg-Davis), as well as the stigma the adoptees may face in being the odd one out in their adoptive communities, but we cannot use the existence of prejudice to justify cultural segregation or purity, or avoid dealing with racism by protecting those who feel discomforted by otherness; nor should we prevent social transracial contact between ethnicities, as contact reduces prejudice. Fortunately, adoptive parents regularly recognize this – they have been shown to promote ethnic exploration and bicultural socialisation to positive effect (Tessler et al 37).

> Through their associations with children adopted internationally, many white Americans are having their first meaningful relationships with persons born in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, other extended family members, and friends are becoming attached to these children and sometimes joining in celebrations of their birth cultures. In addition, neighbors, co-workers, teachers, childcare providers, and others who might not ordinarily come into contact with recent immigrants are getting first-hand experience with foreign-born persons of color ...

> Families that were created through international adoption can be part of this international dialogue for improving understanding and building goodwill globally. (Tessler et al 38)

The results of encountering such stigma do not seem to be too adverse either. As Stephen G. Post points out, "Adopted children do well in life, even though they confront degrees of stigma. How we depict the outcomes of adoption for children is itself an ethical issue, for antiadoption ideologies have gone so far as to suggest the existence of adoption disease" (434). Post points to studies showing that adopted children's self-esteem compares favourably with a national sample of 12-18 year olds (435). This includes internationally adopted children (Hollingsworth 216).

So we come to focus instead on parenting style rather than orthodoxy of the family unit – the challenge is to identify what is important in the methodology of parenthood. Much of the film is taken up with these questions of parenting practice. The six women sit around, eat and discuss their philosophies for childrearing; their strongly held values obviously mean a lot to them, as they have galvanised their confidence in an inherent maternal impulse with the strength of their parenting beliefs. Other expectations of maternity and parental influence are explored in the characters Celia (Martha Higareda), Celia's mother (Tony Marcin) and Reynaldo (Guillermo Iván). Parenting dogma, nature and nurture and fantasies of sole influence are all covered, but perhaps these issues are less important as long as Doña Mercedes' requisite amount of love is provided, and harmful attitudes such as Nan's racial essentialism, exemplified by her "they'll have some catching up to do" remark, are not taught.

None of these fantasies or expectations holds in the face of the film's final truth. The image of the two babies being brought out to their new mothers, captured on a freeze frame before the credits roll, has transcending implications. Sayles builds up to the final image with a simple two-shot of Nan and Eileen, using no cutaways to capture the highly charged emotional interaction between the two, expertly handled. Harden portrays a Nan unable to stop controlling the situation or juggling manipulative agendas, or let her guard down to experience genuine emotion or connection with Eileen. Lynch, on the other hand, inspires the audience's sympathy: her character is overwhelmed with emotion, simultaneously shocked, joyed and saddened by the magnitude of the event. She chokes up and cannot contain it; the conflicting emotions are highly readable.

Sayles provides in his audio commentary:

> There's a lot of imagery in the movie about luck and chance, and if you think of how many possible chromosome combinations there are, there's that kind of odds, but there's also this incredible thing: that one of these kids is going to end up with one of these mothers, and the other with the other. And it's pretty much eeny, meeny, miny, moe. And they're going to be together a long time. (np)

At which the babies are brought out to what is presumably to be the biggest determinant of the lives they will face.

Confronted by this reality, it is impossible to assume that their identities will be unaffected by the lottery of two mothers they have unwittingly entered. It is impossible to assume that they could be held accountable for the results of this lottery. It is impossible to entertain absolutist sentiments of human development or the myth of pure evil in humans. These two children are going to lead markedly different lives, based largely on chance, tempered with as much human intervention as those who care (like Doña Mercedes) can muster, and no one is ultimately to blame for this process that will build a large part of their identities.

CONCLUSION

As I write this conclusion, Shumway's book *John Sayles* has just been released and I have had the chance to review my work in light of its contents. Shumway's astute contextualising of Sayles' films and their reception, as well as Ryan's recent publication, point to renewed interest in Sayles. Despite this, Shumway also represents yet another writer somewhat antagonistic to the idea that care for the human can be replicated, exercised and enhanced by reaching for story complexity. His attitude is revealed in a complaint he makes of *Eight Men Out*: "in not simplifying, the film fails to engage narratively and therefore it does not help viewers develop a strong emotional investment in the story or the characters" (66). The suggestion that we cannot connect emotionally to more realistically complex characters or interactions, and even that emotional connection should be the primary road into taking narrative seriously, short-changes our ethical response to narrative – in this case, we cannot connect with and discuss ideas existing in the real world, only in the world of film convention.

Perhaps it is best to look at humanism as a responsibility or fealty, then, a filmmaker or storyteller might feel to resist narrative pitfalls that may make us think less generously about one another's infinitely complex humanity: not to misrepresent one another as symbols, to resist drawing characters in a contextual vacuum, to eschew unscientifically grounded depictions of human evil and to place our capacity for prosocial living under a microscope to learn more about our ethical behaviours. Sayles presents complex understanding of humans as primarily social animals, for whom meaning is largely generated by interaction with others – we can easily miss out on this understanding in the heroic narrative formula and its oft-unspoken ideological individualism.

This concept of narrative process, which I am presenting as "storytelling humanism", has begun to take popular hold. Take, for example, Peter Singer's recent summary of a point made in Steven Pinker's 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*:

> The invention of printing, and the development of a cosmopolitan "Republic of Letters" in the 17th and 18th centuries helped to spread ideas that led to the humanitarian revolution. That was pushed further in the 19th century by popular novels like "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Oliver Twist" that, by encouraging readers to put themselves in the position of someone very different from themselves, expanded the sphere of our moral concern. (BR1)

Some humanist scholars have recognised narrative as the site for understanding this process, as Paul Sheehan insists, "It is *fiction* that can perform this task, not philosophy" (4). Nussbaum, who has written extensively on empathy, also notes that the process has to begin from one's own understanding of lived experience:

> The narrative imagination is not uncritical: for we always bring ourselves and our own judgments to the encounter with another, and when we identify with a character in a novel, or a distant person whose life story we imagine, we inevitably will not merely identify, we will also judge that story in the light of our own goals and aspirations. But the first step of understanding the world from the point of view of the other is essential to any responsible act of judgment. ("Education for Citizenship" 299)

Paul Ricoeur has recognised the way stories translate our ethical decisions into outcomes of "happiness and misfortune" (23), thus making real the value of ethical engagement, which Stadler extends to a concept of the film's "afterlife" (2) – that the effects of this ethical attention may echo in a Riceourian fashion beyond our conscious investment in the story itself at the time of engagement. We may, perhaps, internalise and later reach for an instinctive understanding of our effect on others, ordered by emotive engagement with narrative. If this is the case, then it is a powerful position for narrative – and narrators – to be in.

I advocate greater research into this process, especially as regards film – with Stadler and writers taking the ethics of character identification seriously, such as Murray Smith, I recognise cinema as a powerful medium for storytelling, today dominating much of our experience of unserialised fiction.

There are still many questions left unanswered in this dissertation I hope others will pick up on. The impulse to empathise with fictional characters should be remembered as highly exploitable and not inherently good – for example, consider the production assistance given to *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) by the United States Navy, financial negotiations between the Navy and production, and the film's ultimate use as a naval public relations campaign (Robb 180-182); or recently *Red Dog* (Kriv Stenders, 2011) in Australia, in part leveraging the humanising of miners to direct our attitudes toward the Australian mining industry as a whole (Burnside np). We can also end up empathising with a type, or a character representing

a humanity that doesn't exist, such as the idealised other – this is not going to help us make decisions, be they humanitarian, consumerist or political, about our interaction with people we will never meet, as demonstrated in *Men with Guns*. But of course, it gets even more difficult: having a complex character portrait does not mean the vision of humanness is necessarily correct. We can have complex characters that misrepresent lived experience, too. We can ask: what of the abject? How do we choose to value, for example, a teenager's catharsis in watching horror films, or misanthropic cinema by which some can feel understood, and less alone? Also, how much is it reasonable to empathise with the storytellers themselves, as surely one of the great values of art lies in the broadening of perspective attendant to comprehension of an artist's vision?

One more question is well presented at the conclusion of Jim Henson's television series *The Storyteller*, written into a retelling of "The Heartless Giant" by Anthony Minghella. The heartless giant in question discovers his long-buried empathy at the narrative's conclusion, yet those he has tormented cannot forgive him for what he has done – they crush his heart and kill him. But the protagonist who found and returned the giant's heart lives on to become a storyteller himself, and amends the original narrative to highlight the villagers' capacity for mercy, negotiation and peace. One can ask if there is a reinforcing power in telling of our facility for goodwill to other living things; however, if we value realism above all, to what extent may we be selective about the spotlight we shine on human existence to retell, and hopefully reinforce, its best qualities?

As *Lone Star*'s schoolteacher Pilar Cruz tells a roomful of parents arguing over her lessons about the Alamo, "I've only been trying to get across part of the complexity of our situation down here. Cultures coming together in both negative and positive ways." Her colleague goes on to defend her: "we're just trying to present a more complete picture." This might be considered Sayles' answer to these humanist storytelling dilemmas.

The above questions, and many more, deserve thoughtful answers beyond the scope of my research thus far. I hope to return to these ideas in future.

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