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SILVER CITY ★

DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY JOHN SAYLES

WITH DANNY HUSTON, MARIA BELLO, CHRIS COOPER, RICHARD DREYFUSS, DARYL

HANNAH, JAMES GAMMON, KRIS KRISTOFFERSON, TIM ROTH, MARY KAY PLACE, BILLY

ZANE, SAL LOPEZ, RALPH WAITE, MIGUEL FERRER, AND MICHAEL MURPHY

RATINGS

★★★★ MASTERPIECE

★★★ A MUST SEE

★★ WORTH SEEING

★ HAS REDEEMING FACET

● WORTHLESS

Same Old Lefty Claptrap

John Sayles's election-year film noir means well, but it won't swing any voters.



"Silver City"

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

Almost 60 years ago, in the essay "Politics and the English Language,"

George Orwell made observations about bad writing that have lost none of their relevance. "As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house," he wrote. "The attraction of this way of writing is that it is easy. It is easier—even quicker, once you have the habit—to say *In my opinion it is a not unjustifiable assumption that* than to say *I think.*"

Ready-made phrases in the

news—"smoking gun," "weapons of mass destruction," "war on terror"—tend to hurry listeners or readers along instead of encouraging them to think. The effect of ready-made styles and formulas in entertainment isn't much different. Nevertheless, gestures that evoke recognition are seen as obligatory, and remakes and sequels are seen as sure moneymakers.

Despite John Sayles's charm and good intentions as a writer-director, I started avoiding his movies around the time his *Men With Guns* was released in 1998. The closer his fictions came to reality, the more inadequate they seemed, with their conventional plots and familiar characters. I admire the man's politics, but his films seem mis-

guided, because every new problem has the same old tiresome solution. (A notable exception is his recent anti-Bush campaign ad, which he wrote as well as directed; it can be seen at www.moveonpac.org/10weeks.) Like so much of the American old left, he's an aesthetic reactionary who doesn't trust a plot or character he hasn't shaken hands with many times before.

The problem is worse than ever in *Silver City*, an election-year special that assaults George W. with the tried-and-true plot turns of a Raymond Chandler mystery. The movie's being proudly promoted for doing just that, which tells us we're not going to have our minds broadened or our beliefs challenged—and that Bush has little cause for alarm. "In the

tradition of the great film noirs, from *The Maltese Falcon* to *Chinatown*," states the press book, "Danny's investigation inexorably pulls him deeper and deeper into a complex web of influence and corruption, here involving high stakes lobbyists, media conglomerates, environmental plunderers, and undocumented migrant workers." The old phrases pile up like henhouse sections. It clearly hasn't occurred to anyone to try to say something new about these issues; instead we're reassured that we're in known territory.

Even if the influence cited were of an environmentalist disciple of Chandler such as Ross Macdonald, the status quo wouldn't be threatened, because familiarity isn't the only thing wrong with these prefab notions. "Is there any way to win?" asks Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer), archetypal doom-ridden noir heroine in *Out of the Past* (1947), addressing Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum), archetypal doom-ridden noir hero. He replies, "There's a way to lose more slowly." When it comes to politics in art, the mannerist noir style seems to be one of the most attractive ways of losing slowly. It makes doom more voluptuous and artful than success, makes a film's characters seem "half in love with easeful Death," as Keats put it. I often wonder if the fondness many leftists have for noir films stems from their being suckers for romantic fatalism—defeatists who wouldn't know what to do with success if it hit them over the head.

To propose such a style as politically useful in an election season seems demented, even though it's fairly routine. Maybe

Sayles figured it was the only way he could get his movie financed. The result is a gumshoe yarn that treats the romantic life of its small-time hero, Danny O'Brien (Danny Huston), as central and the destruction of the American dream as a peripheral subplot. I can't imagine that Sayles wanted the emphasis to be so ludicrous, but his addiction to formula condemned him to it.

The setting is a Colorado gubernatorial race in October 2004. Dickie Pilager (Chris Cooper)—the front-runner and, for the story's purposes, the only candidate—is meant to be a dead ringer for George Bush. Sayles clearly sees this character as a clueless, born-again frat boy, a puppet who's continually at a loss for words—the closest thing this movie has to a running gag. To underscore the resemblance to Bush, Sayles sticks in Pilager's father (Michael Murphy), a wizened pro from the Senate. If Sayles had persuaded me he knew anything about Bush, his background, or his entourage that isn't already well-known, I might have felt more like laughing. He doesn't even seem to understand that Bush uses his tortured syntax to his advantage, acknowledging it to roars of approval, as he did during his convention acceptance speech.

In the opening scene Pilager is casting out fishing line for a TV ad meant to promote his phony environmentalism, and his hook snags a corpse. His ruthless campaign manager, Chuck Raven (Richard Dreyfuss)—described in the press notes as, yawn, a "pit-bull"—suspects that some enemy of Pilager may be responsible,

and he hires O'Brien, a local detective, to deliver "a good, stiff warning—nothing actionable" to the three suspects: a right-wing talk-radio host (Miguel Ferrer), a former boss at a mine who's been reduced to being a tour guide (Ralph Waite), and, a Chandler specialty, the candidate's dissolute and "crazy" sister (Daryl Hannah), with whom O'Brien, predictably, winds up having sex.

O'Brien is another walking cliché, a former newspaper reporter with progressive principles who was drummed out of the profession for daring to try to expose local corruption; his willingness to work as a thug for Pilager's campaign manager is offered as proof of how demoralized he is. He's such a loser that he broke up with his girlfriend, another journalist, and the woman he lives with is so fed up with his negativity that she leaves him when this story begins. But then he starts uncovering some corruption and toxic waste. His investigative talents return, and his anger and sense of trampled justice rekindle.

The final images of this movie reveal hundreds of dead fish in the scenic lake seen in the opening, while a voice bellows "America the Beautiful," and Pilager seems set to clinch the election. But at least O'Brien gets the first girlfriend back, so we're encouraged to leave the theater with a sense of closure and contentment. The smirky use of "America the Beautiful" all but replicates the use of the "Blue Danube" waltz to accompany a diabetic's stomach surgery in Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me*, and it evokes Michael Moore at his least thoughtful and most demagogic.

The opening sequence of *Silver City* shows us the nature and depth of Pilager's corruption, so what's the point of unraveling an

intricate mystery about it? Sayles trusts the viewer so little that he spells out every obvious plot turn twice. O'Brien hires a Mexican assistant, Tony Guerra (Sal Lopez), to discover where the corpse in the lake came from, and Guerra goes to question a hostile and sinister subcontractor who hires illegal aliens. When Guerra returns to his car he discovers he has a flat tire, and he says, virtually to the camera, "Somebody's fucking with me."

Sayles's sole acknowledgment that Chandler's Philip Marlowe may be a wee bit out-of-date is his casting of the nebbishy Huston, who also excelled as the lead in *Ivans xtc.*, as O'Brien; it's probably his most creative act, along with his offbeat casting of Kris Kristofferson as a corporate cowboy billionaire spouting homespun horseshit. But such choices still demonstrate a remake mentality. Sayles is mimicking another irreverent Chandler adaptation, Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, which cast nebbishy Elliott Gould as Marlowe. Huston's voice in its gruffer registers recalls that of his father John, which suggests another link with *Chinatown*, a mid-70s Chandler and Ross Macdonald spin-off.

We never hear a word about the war in Iraq in Sayles's version of today's Colorado, and the reason must be at least partly generic. After all, Marlowe and Lew Archer never had to worry about such a topic, so why should Sayles's characters? He prefers the comfort of a "timeless" (read "nostalgic") genre to the discomfort of contemporary America and has a vested interest in offering old solutions to new problems. That his version of Bush is in no way believable makes the movie more superficial and entertaining rather than less; a believable Bush might get us worried,

and where's the fun in that?

I don't doubt that Sayles sincerely believes our current political situation is desperate or that he believes a Chandler-esque analysis of corruption might send people off to the polls with a sense of renewed purpose. The press notes quote him saying, "I started thinking about the story for *Silver City* shortly after the Bush and Gore election. We were down in Florida shooting *Sunshine State*, and so many people in Florida told us the story wasn't about chads—it was about how many African-American people didn't get to vote."

The press notes also report that he was disturbed at "how quickly people lost their outrage about the voting irregularities in Florida and accepted it as just the way the system works; the pervasive feeling that there was nothing to do about it." In *Chinatown* this sense of defeatism was glamorized in the film's famous final line: "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown." But isn't Sayles sharing that defeatism rather than decrying it by turning to this film as a model? (For a pertinent critique of what's politically as well as historically bogus about both *Chinatown* and *L.A. Confidential*, check out Thom Andersen's brilliant essay film *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, showing at the Gene Siskel Film Center the first week in October.) He can't contribute anything new to the discussion because that's the last thing he wants.

There are plenty of politically cogent films around at the moment. By November *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Corporation*, *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*, and several other documentaries could sway plenty of swing voters, so this is hardly the time to recycle dated fictional no-brainers that won't change anyone's mind about anything. **■**