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Independence Way

John Sayles on *Crossing Borders*
BY AMY TAUBIN

W 6/25/96 p. 70

If John Sayles's *Lone Star* is a revisionist western, its priorities are not those of *Unforgiven*. "All my movies are revisionist," says Sayles, "in the sense that they look at stuff not looked at before. But they're not about revising genre. In *Unforgiven*, Eastwood was not only revising the western, he was also revising his own myth."

Though *Lone Star* doesn't take on the western as a form, it is concerned with the way people internalize myths and legends—specifically the legend of the Alamo and the myth of a certain kind of American masculinity—and whether it's possible to escape them. The film is set in a small Texas border town, the kind of town, says Sayles, "where there's a constant cultural war going on, where every time there's a celebration of the Alamo, there's also a counterdemonstration."

"The script also came out of thinking about Yugoslavia and how, when someone got up there in the morning, he was expected to go out and shoot someone because of something that had happened three generations ago."

The protagonist of *Lone Star* is a sheriff who finds himself drawn into the investigation of a killing that occurred 40 years earlier. The victim was the town's murderously racist sheriff; among the possible suspects is the current sheriff's own father, who succeeded the racist sheriff and became a local hero. *Lone Star* is in part a film about filial anger and resentment. The current sheriff's hatred of his dead father colors his uneasy investigation. But *Lone Star* is less about solving the mystery of who shot the sheriff than about the relationship between belief and knowledge.

"When you challenge what people feel is their belief system, when you come up with facts that don't fit their beliefs, it's so threatening to them. Like telling Pat Buchananites that America has always been a multicultural society. Or that maybe we've already reached our manifest destiny. That's something that politicians don't like to talk about. America has always been about the sense that anything is possible. So many songs and legends are about moving out and moving on. But the economics of the moment suggest that there may be limits, and that's very disturbing to people."

Sayles likes the way Kris Kristoferson (who plays the racist sheriff) describes the film's three main white male characters as representing three generations. The racist sheriff is the Teddy Roosevelt character who's going to kill all the Indians so his family can live in peace. The next sheriff is more patronizing. He's the Lyndon Johnson character who oversees the Vietnam War but also puts these sweeping so-

cial programs into effect. And his son is the kind of '60s character who doesn't want to be the cop of the world. He wants to paint his father, the Lyndon Johnson character, as having been as bad as the Teddy Roosevelt character. "He doesn't see," says Sayles, "that he was something in between, that he was a hypocrite, but not quite the hypocrite he thought he was."

From the first, Sayles's films have been distinguished by their multiple points of view. In *Lone Star*, there are at least 10 characters who figure prominently in the narrative, among them a Mexican American mother and daughter, an African American military officer, his estranged father, and his rebellious adolescent son. Often, Sayles explains, we begin a scene through the eyes of one character and come out of it through the eyes of another. To complicate things further, the narrative is constantly filtered through the subjectivity of the leading character, through his beliefs and desires. Editing is therefore central, and Sayles does his own. "Editing is like the third draft of the story. The first draft is writing the script, the second is directing, the third is editing."

As much as *Lone Star* is a film about parents and children, it's also about romantic love which, for Sayles, is always, unlike marriage, antisocial. The love story, says Sayles, is a metaphor for moving outside the social order, crossing bor-

ders, and breaking taboos. "For years, interracial marriage was against the law in many parts of the United



"Maybe we've already reached our manifest destiny."

States." But here, the love story is even more profoundly transgressive. It's what kicks *Lone Star* over the edge of social history and its critique and makes it the most liberating of Sayles's films.

Financed in its entirety by Castle Rock at a budget of roughly \$5 million, *Lone Star* is Sayles's 10th independent film. His first was the influential *The Return of the Secaucus 7*, made in 1980 on a minuscule budget. Making films that are resolutely unglamorous and unfashionable, Sayles has managed to be astonishingly prolific. Like John Cassavetes, Sayles has financed his independence by doing work for hire within the industry. Beginning as a genre writer (his scripts for Lewis Teague's *Alligator* and Joe Dante's *The Howling* are classics), he then moved on to more mainstream scriptwriting and script doctoring. As a filmmaker who's worked both sides of the fence, how does Sayles define independent film?

"In the early days of the IFP [Independent Feature Project], they wanted to put in the definition that an independent film is always political. I was against that. And then there's the *Variety* definition—that any film financed outside the major studios is independent, which would mean that Carolco was making independent films. My definition has always been simply that this is the story you want to tell and you find a way to make it. It doesn't matter where the money comes from as long as you're making the film you want to make." ♦

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