

Document Citation

Title	Films in focus: Do movies really need mise-en-scene?
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1983 Apr 19
Type	article
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Sayles, John (1950), Schenectady, New York, United States
Film Subjects	Baby, it's you, Sayles, John, 1983

Do Movies Really Need Mise-en-Scene?

By Andrew Sarris

BABY, IT'S YOU. Directed by John Sayles. Screenplay by Sayles, based on a story by Amy Robinson. Produced by Griffin Dunne and Robinson. Released by Paramount Pictures.

LOSIN' IT. Directed by Curtis Hanson. Screenplay by B. W. L. Norton. Story by Norton and Bryan Gindoff. Produced by Gindoff and Hannah Hempstead. Executive producers, Joel B. Michaels and Garth H. Drabinsky. Released by Embassy Pictures.

If John Sayles had not existed, the current movie scene would have had to invent him. A talented, versatile, literate, intelligent, and, above all, inexpensive maker of entertaining talking pictures, Sayles has been lionized as much for his limitations as for his undeniable excellences.

I had planned at one time to interview him. This was during that long period between the rerelease of *Return of the Secaucus Seven* and the completion of *Lianna*. Barbara Shapiro, an old friend of mine, and a casting director for *Lianna* as well as a gorgeous cameo presence in a gay bar scene for that film, had tried to set up the interview, but the scheduling problems proved to be insurmountable, which was just as well because Sayles has now been queried by just about everyone else in the business, and it is hard to think of anything I might have asked him that he hasn't answered a dozen times in print.

If I seem to be drifting into my subject more aimlessly than usual it is because I am consciously imitating the shaggy-dog style or lack of style of Sayles himself. Also, the time machine of movie reviewing is hopelessly askew with respect to my perceptions regarding Sayles. Somehow I have always come late to his movies, and hence loaded down with preconceptions. *Return of the Secaucus Seven* was a remarkably pleasant surprise. *Lianna* was not nearly as bad a viewing and listening experience as I had feared. And now *Baby, It's You* succeeds on its own terms as an outrageously effective exercise in tear-jerking nostalgia. Sayles would seem to have arrived on the express train of film history, but has he? Since I am not sure one way or another, I would like to contribute some notes on the evolution of my uncertainty from *Secaucus* to *Baby* (without considering such fascinating Sayles-written detours as *Alligator* and *The Howling*).

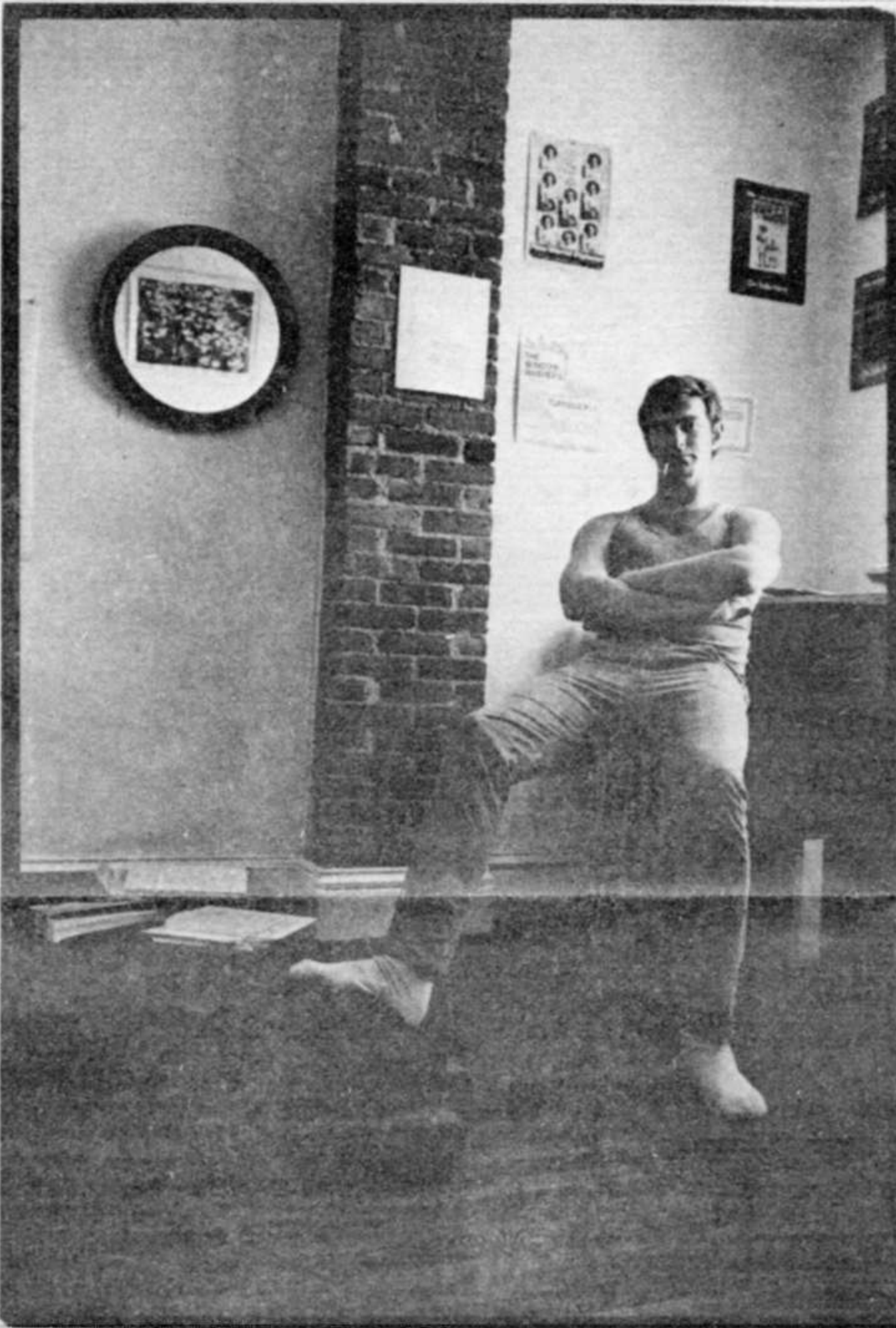
Return of the Secaucus Seven: some of my auteurist friends have denounced me for endorsing a film totally devoid of mise-en-scène. Even reviewers who have praised the film have argued that Sayles could not afford mise-en-scène on a \$60,000 budget. Others suggested that the actors were, on the whole, not fully equal to the multilayered ironies of the script. It was all a matter of perspective.

Not since Preston Sturges was in his heyday has there been a writer-director with the ability, desire, or even opportunity to write witty, pithy dialogue for as many as 12 delineated characters. On the other hand, it is much easier to write dialogue for characters who happen to be becalmed in historical, sociological, and dramatic limbo than it is for characters moving inexorably toward some life-altering decision. I felt, therefore, that *Return of the Secaucus Seven* succeeded as much because of its limited means as in spite of them. The presence in the cast of smoother, more charismatic performers would have made the recurringly wistful regrets unbearably arch. As for mise-en-scène it is not a technological toy a film-

maker buys for display; it is a filmmaker's stylistic commitment to human destiny, a cinematic manifestation of man's fate. That is why the mise-en-scène of a Max Ophüls, a Kenji Mizoguchi, an Alfred Hitchcock, or a Fritz Lang can never be successfully imitated. No money can buy the sustained melodies and rhythms of a personal vision of existence. For Sayles, his characters had been cast adrift on a mildly absurdist sea, and he had no idea when they would sight land and journey's end. He could never judge them too harshly because their indecision was his indecision. In a Bazinian sense, they were his friends and contemporaries even more

perniciousness of New York taste, particularly when the same reviewer professed to be bored by the banal subject of lesbianism.

My own experience in watching the film was nothing if not distanced. The writer-director's complicity with the characters in *Secaucus* was replaced by an overtly voyeuristic attitude. I very quickly wearied of the heroine's relentlessly wide-eyed gee-whiz-I'm-gay-and-isn't-it-exciting naiveté. I was startled even more by the crawly worthlessness of the heroine's husband, a nasty film teacher who actually paraphrases one of my own published insights in *The American Cinema*



John Sayles: more than creatures of his imagination

than they were the creatures of his imagination.

Sayles himself plays a rueful bumpkin in their midst, an overgrown weed of a paterfamilias choking to death over the burdensome wonder of incessant fatherhood. The audience for this sort of thing is shrewdly reassured that the apparent pointlessness of one's life is no adequate measure of its moment-to-moment value. Sayles even tricks up the bogus clannishness of '60's commitment by making the film's exposition-extracting outsider a dismal clod seeking initiation into the self-mocking rituals of the *Secaucus Seven*, when this same character could just as easily have served as a discerning but tactful reflector of the essential futility of the *Secaucus* mystique.

Lianna: the first rumor I heard about *Lianna* after its earliest screenings was that it had not been realized, and that its heroine was completely unsympathetic. Obviously, it has done much better with reviewers and the public than many people had anticipated. One of the television reviewers on a PBS series emanating from Chicago blamed the limited vogue for both Sayles and *Lianna* on a cabal of unnamed "New York critics." I was somewhat amused by this resurgence of middle-American paranoia about the alleged

(1968), an insight which appeared originally in a 1963 issue of *Film Culture*.

I must digress at this point with a Rodney Dangerfield aside of my own. Writing of Flaherty's attitude toward Nanook, I noted back in 1963: "By involving himself in his material, he established a cinematic principle that parallels Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in physics, namely, that the mere observation of nuclear (and cinematic) particles alters the properties of these particles. One of the most beautiful moments in the history of the cinema was recorded when Nanook smilingly acknowledged the presence of Flaherty's camera in his igloo."

A few months after this passage appeared in print, I bumped into a noted documentarian at the Montreal Film Festival. When he started quoting back the Flaherty-Heisenberg passage to me, I assumed that he was being ironic and I deadpanned the occasion. Later I learned that he had never been ironic in all his oppressively sincere life. Years later, one of my most persistent detractors at the *Voice* invoked the Heisenberg-on-film principle without attributing it to me, and I reclaimed it shortly thereafter. Just recently, a sociological film history was sent to me in manuscript form, and there in

the text was old Heisenberg-on-film being attributed to the late Lionel Trilling, one of my most eminent mentors at Columbia.

Of course, I don't expect to get rich on residuals from any or even all of my insights. Still, I had a funny feeling as I watched this wretched character in *Lianna* spouting one of my ideas, and then sneering at a student who insisted that Audie Murphy was an American tragic hero in Hollywood. Sayles was striking too close to home for comfort, and I noted that he was becoming more abusive and less compassionate as he did so. The indulgence he accorded the *Secaucus Seven* had turned sour as he contemplated the grotesque academics of film. It may be that he was typing out the academic scene with his derisive left hand even as he was indulging lesbian bravado with his respectful right hand. Here too he ran the gauntlet of playing a particularly opportunist film academic himself, and I could sense in his performance that he still didn't want anything to happen really and irrevocably, and nothing did happen really and irrevocably. Indeed, the one authentically Saylesian character in *Lianna* is the heroine's remarkably undefined upstairs neighbor, played by Maggie Renzi, who also played the hostess for the reunion of the *Secaucus Seven*. This is a character who has been taking courses forever, is open to new experiences, and yet eventually drifts into a state of amiable indistinctness.

Baby, It's You: I felt a little sad at the end of *Secaucus*. I felt a little tearful at the end of *Lianna*, with the lonely, abandoned lesbian sobbing in the chaste arms of her "straight" woman friend. There was some camera movement, I suppose, but I would hardly call it mise-en-scène. Sayles was still temporizing with his narrative, even as he was shamelessly exploiting our feelings in the manner of a cut-rate encounter guru. It works, but it is hardly sublime.

At the end of *Baby, It's You* I could not hold back my tears for all the proms I never attended, and for all the prom dates I never beseeched or saluted. The overhead camera angle contributes to the effect, but again it does not constitute mise-en-scène.

Sayles has abstracted his characters into a universally recognizable emotion, but he has evaded the bitterness built into the situation. Rosanna Arquette and Vincent Spano project all the smoothness and charisma that was lacking in *Secaucus* and *Lianna*. The wit and talent of Sayles can be appreciated even more in the service of a coherent, though not entirely plausible, narrative.

You have to see *Baby, It's You* for yourself. You won't be sorry. The look of the film undeniably benefits from the technical resourcefulness of German cinematographer Michael Ballhaus. Yet, for all the emotional effectiveness of *Baby, It's You*, Sayles still seems to be hanging back on the near side of the bridge of human destiny.