

PSC 319/CTH 369: Faith, Politics and the Films of John Sayles  
Levan Room 100  
Monday 6-9:15 p.m.  
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Office Hours: M 3-6 p.m. and by appointment

**Course Description:** The work of John Sayles, among the best known of American independent filmmakers, has ranged across many important and controversial issues – race, economic exploitation, ethnicity, sexuality and more. While the political significance of his films is often acknowledged, his work is also suffused with religious and spiritual symbols and insights he attributes in part to his Catholic heritage (he once described himself as a “Roman Catholic Atheist”). He has received several Academy Award nominations, and received a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” in 1983.

Sayles’ work – and how he does it – also provides insights into the conditions of cultural production and artistic freedom in an era of large-scale corporate culture industries (e.g., Time-Warner, Disney, Fox). Unlike most filmmakers, Sayles works free of studio control and oversight – he provides much of the money for his films through his work as a high-priced “script doctor” for the studios (his uncredited scripts include Apollo 13, Mimic, and many others). Sayles’ better-known films, which he has written and directed, include Eight Men Out, Lone Star, Men With Guns, Matewan, and Passion Fish.

This course will explore the interplay of politics, commerce, spirituality and culture in Sayles’ work. We will watch many of Sayles’ films in their entirety, discuss and debate issues raised in them, and use Sayles’ experience as a way to investigate larger questions regarding corporate control of cultural production, the social and political significance of independent storytelling, and the ambiguous location of religion (and Catholicism in particular) in contemporary culture industries.

**Approaching This Course:** Students should take notes during each of the films; I encourage you to write additional notes/reflections soon after the viewing each movie. This practice (in-film notes and post-film recollections) are especially important given the limits of our course structure – there is at least a full week between when we see a movie and when we talk about it, you won’t have the chance to see a movie a second time unless you procure a copy on your own, and you have to write several essays drawing from the films throughout the course and at in the

take-home final exam. While taking notes during a film is an imprecise matter (some people jot down phrases or brief snippets of dialogue, keywords to remind them of particular scenes, observations about lighting/sound/staging, etc.), you should figure out what works best for you; such is usually a trial-and-error process.

Please note that many of these films include language and scenes that may be offensive or inflammatory to some people. These are generally essential to the purposes of the filmmaker and/or the narrative of the films; while I do not think students should avoid such materials in the course of the educational experience (such may be particularly important), some students want to know in advance if course material might be provocative or potentially disconcerting. Hence this paragraph.

**Class Structure:** Each class meeting will begin with class discussion and lecture focusing on the film screened during the previous class, and with that day's assigned reading.

**Method of Evaluation:** Students will be graded on two short papers (each worth 25 percent of the final course grade), an essay-based final writing exam (25 percent of final grade), and overall participation and attendance (25 percent of final grade).

*About the Papers:* Each student is required to write two double-spaced 5-page papers (each worth 25 percent of the total course grade). Each paper should explore one or two major themes, topics, motifs, or concerns in two (or three, at most) of Sayles' films. One paper might concentrate on the treatment of corruption in City of Hope and Eight Men Out, for example, while the other explores issues of racism in Brother From Another Planet and Lone Star. Your papers should do more than summarize the films at issue; you should evaluate, assess, critique and appraise the adequacy of Sayles' handling of the issues, topics or motifs you explore (e.g. adequate analysis but heavyhanded presentation, nuanced vs. stereotypical use of characters, insights you hadn't considered before). You are encouraged to explore both the explicit subject matter of the films and the significance of choices made in filmmaking (e.g. sound, lighting, editing). Given the focus of this course on matters of political economy, cultural production and religion (especially Catholicism), your essays should engage such matters in important ways. Your comparative essays should focus on different films in each paper (i.e., don't write two papers on the same film or films).

*About the Final Exam:* The final exam is a take-home, essay-based exercise. You will be asked to answer two questions (from a larger list), with each answer being five pages, double-spaced with conventional margins. You will be expected to draw upon course readings and class discussions in formulating your answers, but research beyond the syllabus is neither expected nor required.

**Reading:** All assigned reading is available via D2L. Please note that students are expected to read each week's required reading before attending class (for example, readings listed for April 6 should be read before coming to class on the evening of April 6). In addition to a variety of articles and some online video interviews, you will have access via D2L to an out-of-print book from which we will read selections (Sayles on Sayles, edited by Gavin Smith).

**Classroom Environment:** To minimize distractions and interruptions, please do not bring (or refrain from using) computers, cell phones, tablets, or similar devices. Students in noncompliance with this policy may be asked to leave the session (see 'Special Needs' section below for one exception).

**Students with special needs:** Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussions will remain confidential. To ensure that you receive the most appropriate reasonable accommodation based on your needs, contact me as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first week of class), and make sure that you have contacted the Center for Students with Disabilities (Student Center 370 or Lewis Center 1420; 773-325-1677 or 312-362-802; [csd@depaul.edu](mailto:csd@depaul.edu)).

**Academic Integrity:** Work done for this course must adhere to the University Academic Integrity Policy, which you can review in the Student Handbook or by visiting Academic Integrity at DePaul University (<http://academicintegrity.depaul.edu>).

DePaul University is a learning community that fosters the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas within a context that emphasizes a sense of responsibility for oneself, for others and for society at large. Violations of academic integrity, in any of their forms, are, therefore, detrimental to the values of DePaul, to the students' own development as responsible members of society, and to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Violations include but are not limited to the following categories: cheating; plagiarism; fabrication; falsification or sabotage of research data; destruction or misuse of the university's academic resources; alteration or falsification of academic records; and academic misconduct. Conduct that is punishable under the Academic Integrity Policy could result in additional disciplinary actions by other university officials and possible civil or criminal prosecution. Please refer to your Student Handbook or visit Academic Integrity at DePaul University (<http://academicintegrity.depaul.edu>) for further details.

## Preliminary Schedule

Monday, March 30: First Class: Introduction; Film: Brother From Another Planet (Reading: “Media Monopoly Revisited,” by Patrick Morrison; “The Great Flood,” by Donald Wilson; “A Specter is Haunting Hollywood: The 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Grosses Gloss,” by Roger Smith; and “Has Hollywood Murdered the Movies?” by David Denby, all on D2L ).

April 6: Film: Matewan (Reading: Gavin Smith, editor, Sayles on Sayles, Intro, Chapter 1, and pp. 104-118; “John Sayles: Stories Have Power,” interview at Duke University; “Writers Guild Interview with Sayles,” by Leonard Maltin, all on D2L).

13: Film: Eight Men Out (Reading: “The Theo-Political Landscape of Matewan,” by Martin Norden; Smith book, pp. 118-139; “Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Contemporary Hollywood Films and Struggles Over Racial Representation,” by Jason Smith, all on D2L).

20: Film: City of Hope (Reading: Smith, pp. 140-159; “Not a History Lesson: The Erasure of Politics in American Cinema,” by Sherry Ortner; “A Style-Sensitive Approach to Religion and Film,” by Richard Last, all on D2L).

27: Film: Passion Fish (Reading: Smith, pp. 180-193; “Between ‘Indiewood’ and ‘Nowherewood,’” by Yannis Tzioumakis; “Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative,” by Michael Newman, all on D2L).

May 4: Film: Lone Star (Reading: Smith, pp. 193-207). **First Paper due.**

11: Film: Men With Guns (Reading: Smith, pp. 217-233; “The Infernal Machine: Imperial America and John Sayles’ *A Moment in the Sun*,” by Richard Black, on D2L).

18: Film: Limbo (Reading: Smith, Chapter 10; other reading TBA).

25: No Class Meeting (**Required Viewing:** Interview with Sayles at Democracy Now, Nov. 24, 2011, available at [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/11/24/a\\_moment\\_in\\_the\\_sun\\_an](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/11/24/a_moment_in_the_sun_an);  
**Optional Viewing:** Interview with Sayles by Los Angeles Times, November 15, 2013, available

at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYUHoYcZJWM> ). **Reading:** “Not Playing by the Usual Rules,” an interview by Joan and Dennis West; “Why Doesn’t Cultural Studies Love John Sayles?” by David Shumway; “Virtue’s Hack,” by Laura Miller; “John Sayles: The Man Who Makes Necessary Movies,” by Juan Tarancon, all on D2L).

June 1: Film: Amigo or Go For Sisters. **Second Paper Due. *Final Exam Distributed.***

Final Exam due via D2L by 5 p.m. on Monday, June 8.