

ACTING: CENTRAL TO A DIRECTOR'S CINEMA SUCH AS AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILM

Film and media studies have analyzed American independent film in relation to cultural trends, technological developments, and the conglomerates that shape Hollywood cinema¹. To extend that line of research, and to illustrate once again that acting is “a component of film” warranting the same critical attention given to framing, editing, and other filmic elements (BARON and CARNICKE, 2008: 237), this essay focuses on selected performances in American independent film during the 1980s, when work by directors such as John Sayles, Jim Jarmusch, and Spike Lee established what John Pierson (2003: 24) has described as a “golden age” of independent cinema, distinguished by low-budget films produced and distributed without Hollywood influence, that reflected filmmakers’ rather than corporate executives’ vision.

American independent film has been seen as a director’s cinema at least from John Cassavetes forward. As Yannis Tzioumakis (2006: 174) observes, Cassavetes “paved the way for other talented individuals who wanted to use the medium of cinema for personal expression”. Yet the signature style of independent directors often relies on the specific physical and vocal

choices in the actors’ performances and the impressions created by the acting company associated with the directors’ films. The unique style of a Cassavetes film hinges on portrayals by actors such as Gena Rowlands and Peter Falk. The quirkiness of a Wes Anderson film emerges in part from performances by actors such as Bill Murray and Owen Wilson. Jarmusch’s *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) became known for “its subsequently much-imitated deadpan performances, introverted characters, sparse, iconic dialogue and static camera”, while *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979) established Sayles as a filmmaker associated with “naturalistic performances and political insight” (WOOD, 2004: 7).

To explore one piece of the substantial evidence that acting is central to the director-centered domain of American independent film, it can be useful to consider the neo-naturalistic performances in *Matewan* (1987) by Sayles, who “has been called both the grandfather and the godfather of American independent cinema” (SHUMWAY, 2012: 1). Sayles himself emphasizes that actors’ contributions are crucial to his films. He explains, “My first priority is always with the acting and the be-

lievability of the characters" (AMERICAN CINEMATOGRAPHER, 1999: 53). This focus reflects his background. Sayles notes, "I was an actor before I was a writer or a director" (SCOTT, 1999: 131). His experience and training as an actor shape his approach to writing and directing. He observes: "I think some of the depth in my writing comes from having been an actor... When I finish a screenplay, I look at every part as if I had to act it, and ask, is there enough here to be a three-dimensional character" (EBERT, 1999: 162). He points out: "Because I have acted, I try to look at the characters that way. How do I play this person? Is the person consistent? Is there some action, something that this character wants" (SCHLESINGER, 1999: 25).

Sayles (1987: 84) reveals that when filming *Matewan* "believable acting was usually the highest priority. We would go a few extra takes in one scene to let the actors do their best, sometimes giving the lighting people very little time to set up for the next one". Actors developed their characterizations in advance of filming, incorporating information from the character biographies written by Sayles and their conversations with Sayles about their characters' backgrounds, beliefs, and relationships with other characters (Sayles 1987: 94, 95). As in other Sayles's films, each actor in *Matewan* was expected "to know his character" (KUSHNER, 1999: 119), "thinking and seeing the world the way the character would" so that the performance was grounded in "the life of the person being played" (SAYLES, 1987: 101).

Neo-Naturalistic Performances in *Matewan*

Matewan is set in the hills of West Virginia in the 1920s. Low wages and dangerous working conditions lead the local coal miners to strike; pacifist

union organizer Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper) arrives to coordinate it. The mine owners retaliate, hiring Baldwin-Felts agents (Kevin Tighe and Gordon Clapp) to reestablish control. Matewan's sheriff (David Strathairn) refuses

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to cooperate with them. The owners' try to end the strike by bringing in new workers; the locals thwart that attempt by welcoming the Italian and African American miners into the union. These setbacks prompt the hired gunmen to callously murder a local boy. Knowing that this will finally provoke the miners into violence, the owners hire a squad of armed men to fight them. The film's last major scene depicts the brief but deadly Matewan Massacre.

Sayles is interested in working with actors who craft performances that seem to emerge spontaneously from interactions between the characters². Describing the audition that led him to cast Chris Cooper, Sayles (1987: 48) recalls: "The thing that stood out about his reading [of Joe's first long speech to the miners] was that I forgot which line came next and just listened to a guy making up a pretty good argument from his own feelings and whatever other organizing speeches he'd heard in his life". Drawing on the same aesthetic values, Sayles cast Mary McDonnell as Elma Radnor, the widow who runs the boarding house where Joe and later the Baldwin-Felts agents stay, because he saw McDonnell as a "really good actress

[able to] convey Elma's hard past and knowledge of a hard future without 'playing' it" (SAYLES, 1987: 50).

Sayles (1987: 19) explains that to "personalize the backbone of the film, Joe's struggle for justice without violence", he created the character of Danny, Elma's son, "an adolescent boy, a coal miner, preacher, and union man who has both the Old Testament values of righteousness and retribution and the New Testament dreams for peace and justice within him". Sayles (1987: 50) recalls that he cast Will Oldham as Danny because "he had a bit of Kentucky in his voice, which broke now and then like Jimmy Stewart's" and was able

to read Danny's first sermon "just like a guy telling us a story". Describing James Earl Jones's ability to portray his character in an understated but engaging way, Sayles (1987: 51) notes: "James Earl turned out to be one of the best prepared, most helpful actors I've ever gotten to work with. He understood the mixture of strength and savvy Few Clothes needed to help his men survive in a deadly confrontation far from home, and brought even the moments where he just sits and listens to life".

The neo-naturalistic feel of *Matewan* arises from the performances of these actors. It also relies on the work of other actors who have shown their ability to portray individualized but culturally specific characters in various Sayles's films. In addition to McDonnell, who also stars in *Passion Fish* (1992), and Chris Cooper, who has leading roles in *City of Hope* (1991), *Lone Star* (1996), *Silver City* (2004), and *Amigo* (2010), David Strathairn, who plays the sheriff, is in eight Sayles's films, from *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979) to *Limbo* (1999)³.

The performance style in *Matewan* shares some common ground with what came to be known as the Method

style after Marlon Brando appeared in films such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) and *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954). Outlining key aspects of that style, James Naremore (1988: 278) highlights: "(1) Deliberate lapses in rhetorical clarity, signaled especially by overlapping speech and apparently contingent, spontaneous behavior. (2) Careful attention to the accents and manners of an indigenous, urban society. (3) Moments of expressive incoherence designed to indicate repression, or deep-seated psychological drives". Acting choices in *Matewan* can also be compared to work in more contemporary films. For example, one could see parallels between the performances in *Matewan* and those in films by British director Mike Leigh. As Paul McDonald (1999: 150) observes: performances in Leigh's films suggest "a heightened sense of realist observation. Accents are more distinct than in everyday life and all characters have their twitches that are forever foregrounded... Characters appear as both clearly representative of ordinary lives but also extraordinarily idiosyncratic".

Historically Grounded Neo-Naturalism

There are, however, important contrasts between performances in Sayles's films and portrayals in the male-melodramas that launched the Method style. There are also significant differences between the acting in *Matewan* and in Leigh's films. *On the Waterfront* and *Secrets and Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996) have performances marked by "over-heated naturalism, a sense of hysteria held in check" (NAREMORE, 1998: 210). Both emphasize characters' eccentricities. By comparison, portrayals in *Matewan* convey characters' individuality and social circumstance in equal measure. In Kazan's and Leigh's films, characters are psychological entities; while they

belong to identifiable social categories (class, region, time period, etc.) they respond to situations based on their ahistorical psychological makeup. By contrast, in *Matewan* the characters' personalities have been shaped by multifaceted social circumstances; their responses to events, situations, and other characters reflect their way of embodying their material circumstances and surrounding belief systems. As documents in The John Sayles Archive reveal, Sayles designed his characters as social types; his notes read: "Sid – the courage & ignorance of the culture, Joe – courage & idealism of the movement... Elma – wants to live in peace, Danny – the promise of the future» (UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, 2014).

Performances in *Matewan* feature "apparently contingent, spontaneous behavior", but they do not render characters that are "extraordinarily idiosyncratic". They include moments of "expressive incoherence" when the audience can see what characters are thinking or feeling while the surrounding characters cannot, but those moments do not reflect characters' "deep-seated psychological drives" but instead their awareness of their place in the social order. For example, in early scenes

they reflect a "heightened sense of realist observation". However, the performances in Sayles's film contrast with those shaped by the conventions of psychological realism or Hollywood realism, because they offer more than "a faithful reproduction" of the physical world (MAYER, 1999: 26). With the characters' individuality emerging from their material circumstances and belief systems, the portrayals in *Matewan* highlight the cultural, "philosophical, and socio-political system in which human behaviour and environment are inextricably linked" (MAYER, 1999: 26). The film's illustration of factors surrounding the characters reveals a connection between *Matewan* and "what Raymond Williams defines as 'authentic naturalism'" (NAREMORE, 1988: 200). The film's portrayals can make the characters' thoughts and feelings legible and lead us to see their responses, plans, and actions reflecting historical circumstances. That orientation means that the performances in *Matewan* are informed by naturalism; as noted by cultural theorist Raymond Williams, whose early work includes *Drama: From Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), in contrast to romanticism and realism, naturalism is "a critical movement, in which

the relation between men and their environments [is] not merely *represented* but *actively explored*" (NAREMORE, 1998: 200-201)

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Building on naturalism, performances in *Matewan* are best understood as neo-naturalistic. They are "grounded in a conception of character that shows the influence of the naturalist and the modernist

traditions: the characters are shaped by their specific social environments, yet those environments are the source of fragmented, indeterminate psychological and social identities" (VIERA, 2006: 159-160). Joe's actions are influenced by the tradition of pacifism as well as the confrontational, often violent tradi-

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James Earl Jones holds his head still but quickly glances about to show us that Few Clothes knows that as a black man in a white town he must stay on guard to survive.

One might see performances in *Matewan* as comparable to portrayals in Kazan's and Leigh's films because

tion of early-twentieth-century union organizing; the actions of Danny and his mother are grounded in Old Testament as well as New Testament values. Sayles departs from nineteenth-century naturalism because he “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” (SHUMWAY, 2012: 7). Portrayals in his films reflect the priorities of 1960s social movements; David Shumway (2012: 7, 12) finds that Sayles “understands that the human personality exists only within a definite social order”, yet does not see class relations as “the root of all injustice”, but instead that people’s interactions are troubled by various sources of power.

Gesture-Signs and Gesture-Expressions in *Matewan*

Analyzing performances in *Matewan* requires thorough attention to the film’s conception of character, for “in contrast to modernist and postmodern traditions that differentiate themselves in unique ways from the ‘realist’ norm”, when considering performances details, especially in isolated frame captures, “it can be more difficult to demonstrate significant differences between neonaturalist performances and acting that conforms to Hollywood ‘realism’” (BARON, ET AL., 2004: 4). Parallels exist between realism, naturalism, and neo-naturalism because stage and screen performances shaped by aesthetic norms and values in the performing arts in the west have led actors to use “basic, culturally transmitted gestures to ‘write’ characters; the standard postures change slightly over time, but they are easily noticed, especially in comedy, where stereotypical expression is fore grounded” (NAREMORE, 1988: 63).

Actors’ use of recognizable social gestures need not be seen as conventional. Through studies of theater and film, the Prague Linguistic Circle found that attention to *gesture-signs* (social



Strathairn follows a joke with coldness, as the sheriff negates the friendliness that might have been suggested by his passing levity

gestures like handshakes) and *gesture-expressions* (individual uses of social gestures) allow one to analyze “the way a particular detail of performance sustains, amplifies, or contradicts the thought or feeling usually conveyed by such social expressions as greeting, farewell, apology, concern, condolence, and so on” (BARON and CARNICKE, 2008: 89-90). As their landmark research demonstrates, “Interplay between gesture-signs and gesture-expressions can reveal character, show the performer’s skill, and contribute to commentary on social class, time period, and cultural circumstance” (BARON and CARNICKE, 2008: 111)⁵.

With *Matewan*’s characters firmly grounded in their cultural setting, the actors’ use of recognizable gesture-signs is central to their characterizations and to the film as a whole. Their crafted use of seemingly incidental gesture-signs conveys rich meaning about their characters’ social position, cultural background, and evolving hopes, fears, plans, and responses. To appreciate the crucial information carried by the gesture-signs selected and the qualities in each individual gesture-

expression, one could trace each performance from beginning to end. In an abbreviated study, one might simply consider salient confrontations between central characters. For example, the initial confrontation between the sinister Baldwin-Felts agent (Tighe) and the stoic Matewan sheriff (Strathairn) not only illustrates Sayles’s vision of good acting; as he (1987: 102) explains: “When good actors really lock into each other you get involved in the push and pull, you feel that unless the first one said what he did exactly the way he said it, the other one would never have answered the way *he* did, and each moment is up for grabs”. The scene also illustrates the actors’ apt and creative deployment of social gestures. During a moment in the encounter, Strathairn’s physical expression contradicts social conventions when he follows his delivery of an amusing line by tightening his face rather than breaking into a grin; in response Tighe contradicts social conventions by smiling as he prepares to deliver his next verbal threat.

Those choices illuminate the social and emotional dimensions of the situation. In this confrontation between the



Cooper's circumspect demeanor – accentuated by the downward glance of the girl in the background – establishes Joe as an ideal guide into the complex relationships in *Matewan*

town sheriff and the gunman empowered by the mine owners to establish law and order as they see it, both men see themselves in a social position unfettered by outside rules; both aim to put pressure on the other by making their claim for control explicit. The acting choices also reveal the characters' awareness of their vastly different resources: Tighe's free flowing smile and cocky pose convey his confidence in the unlimited resources at his disposal; through his tightly bound physical expression, Straithairn conveys the sheriff's recognition that he will need to work quietly and strategically to retain control of his town.

The standoff between the two lawmen creates an opportunity for Cooper to show that Joe will approach the crisis in *Matewan* in a careful way, always gathering information and gauging the actions of people around him. His physical expression (wide open eyes and forward leaning body) not only reflects the priority Sayles places on actor interaction; as Sayles (1987: 102) explains: when an actor "is really listening he doesn't necessarily do anything different with his face, but you can

feel the information going in, being thought about, and a reaction forming". Cooper's individual gesture-expression (quiet but filled with energy) also amplifies the caution generally associated with the recognizable gesture-sign of listening carefully.

The qualities in actors' individual gesture-expressions also generate the meaning and emotion of the massacre's aftermath. Oldham's limp body and drooping arms convey Danny's shame for breaking with Joe's gospel of non-violence; McDonnell's crumpled posture, clasped hands, and anguished expression convey Elma's grief that the miners' efforts to improve their lot has caused only more pain and suffering. Drawing on familiar gesture-signs of shame and grief, their performances also allow audiences to reflect on the consequences of violence in general.

Acting in American Independent Cinema

Contrasting the expressive characterizations in Sayles's films with modernist cinema's minimalist portrayals, Diane Carson (2004: 184) notes that Sayles's actors also avoid "broad, emphatic

gestures and amplified, inflated language". Carson (2004: 175) points out that the engaging performances in Sayles's films also "eschew the postmodern affectations of ironic distanciation, self-conscious cynicism, or allusions to contemporary cultural artifacts and media images". As these observations perhaps suggest, a more comprehensive account of American independent cinema would consider a wide range of performances, illustrating ways in which they can be seen as existing on a continuum, with neo-naturalistic performances on one end and distinctly modernist performances on the other.

One could see acting choices in Sayles's films as reflecting twentieth-century naturalistic traditions, with characters defined by social circumstance and performance styles grounded in observed human behavior. Moving along the continuum, one could see performances in films by Spike Lee, for example, also belonging to naturalist traditions, with historical circumstances crucial to conception of character and identity, but with portrayals and filmic presentation of performance often including more visibly symbolic and expressive details to convey characters' background and experience; *Do the Right Thing* (1989) exemplifies this complex collage of naturalistic and modernist strategies of performance and presentation of performance.

A more complete account of performance styles in 1980s American independent cinema would also consider performances that are more thoroughly influenced by modernist traditions, where performers create minimalist portrayals designed to avoid theatricality and mannerisms. One could consider a film such as *House of Games* (1987) by David Mamet, which features a modernist conception of character and vocal choices informed by a modernist interest in distancing audiences from characters in the narrative performance, but physical choices shaped by realist or naturalistic traditions. One could explore performances in Jarmusch's films, which occupy yet

another step along the continuum, for in productions such as *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), performances arise from a modernist conception of character that reflects abstractions like hipster, alienated outsider, or global tourist; minimalist performances combined with self-reflexive filmic choices can suggest commentary about popularized types in contemporary life.

Although it would require more time to illustrate the various ways independent films differ from Hollywood offerings, analyzing performances in *Matewan* should reveal one way they break with the “faux realism” of commercial cinema (CARSON, 2004: 175). Whereas portrayals of psychologically complex characters in Hollywood cinema can cause audiences to be more engaged in the world of the film, performances in *Matewan* can lead viewers to be engaged with the characters and learn something about the world outside the film. Sayles (1987: 101) explains that he gets “uncomfortable when the performance [he is] watching seems to be based on another performance the actor has seen or imagined and not on the life of the person being played”. His discomfort leads him to write characters rarely seen in Hollywood movies and to rely on actors skilled and insightful enough

to craft performances that illuminate not only the characters’ inner experiences, but also the social realities that influence their interactions with others and shape their ideas, actions, and reactions.



The observable qualities in the actors’ gesture-expressions illuminate the characters’ feelings and the central themes of a film.

Analyzing acting choices in films such as *Matewan* is absolutely essential, because so much meaning is created by the actors’ selection and combination of recognizable gesture signs (e.g., handshakes, nods of the head). The gesture-signs they use in their performances convey a wealth of information about the characters’ cultural backgrounds and social circumstances;

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the gesture-signs that the actors do and do not use in specific interactions also reveal what they want, how they plan to get it, and so on. There is also dense meaning transmitted by the observable qualities in actors’ individual

gesture-expressions (e.g., a hearty handshake, a rigid nod of the head); the degree to which actors’ gesture-expressions sustain, amplify or contradict the meaning of social gesture-signs communicates characters’ immediate thoughts and feelings, as well as their upbringing, beliefs, and place in the social order. Sayles sees the acting as his “first priority” when making films; analyzing the acting could be our first priority in discussing them.

Notes

* The pictures from *Matewan* that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is her responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. *L’Atalante* thanks Universal Pictures International the licensing of the images from *Do The Right Thing* illustrating this article. (Edition note.)

1 Recent studies include: the 2013 anthology edited by Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis; *Hollywood’s Indies* (2011) by Yannis Tzioumakis; *Indie Inc.* (2010) by Alissa Perren; *Indiewood* (2010) by Michael Z. Newman; and *Indiewood USA* (2009) by Geoff King.

2 The performances’ spontaneous feel might lead one to imagine they involve improvisation. However, as Sayles explains: “I really have never had much time for rehearsing... And I really haven’t had the money to improvise... You try to write it so that it seems people are making it

up. It’s in the writing” (AMERICAN FILM, 1999: 82). While one might think the performances depend on the camera capturing natural behavior, Sayles selects highly skilled actors for leading roles. He notes: “In most of the movies I’ve directed I’ve know some of the

people beforehand, either from having seen their work or, as I was an actor for a while, having worked with them. We always have so little time to shoot that I usually work with people who have worked in theater because they can retain two pages of dialogue with no problem" (AMERICAN FILM, 1999: 81). He explains: "Anytime you've worked with an actor before, you can eliminate a question mark [and cut down on the] emotional energy and time [spent] working something out with that actor" (RATNER, 1999: 208). See Sayles's *Thinking in Pictures* (pp. 45-53; 93-103).

- 3 *Matewan* also features: Kevin Tighe (three films) and Gordon Clapp (four films) as the Baldwin-Felts agents; Josh Mostel (three films) as the meek but steadfast mayor; Nancy Mette (four films) as the woman tricked into helping the company spy; Jace Alexander (three films) as the youth whose murder leads to the final shootout; Tom Wright (five films) as a miner; and Michael Mantell (five films) as a terrified gunman who Danny spares in the massacre.
- 4 Discussions about how to describe the realism or naturalism in Sayles's films can also be found in *Lone Star: The Cinema of John Sayles* (2009) and the essays by Cynthia Baron and Alex Woloch in *Sayles Talk* (2004).
- 5 For information about Prague semiotics, see *Reframing Screen Performance* (pp. 89-112).

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