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Cinematic Interventions: John Sayles' Films as Critical Commentaries on Power and Social Inequality

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Abstract

The study examines how the discourse of an era relates to wider systems of power and how it is intersected through the narrative genre of film. The key concern of the paper is the examination of forces within and through which people conduct and participate in the construction of power relations. American film maker John Sayles explores the intricate web of power dynamics in his films, revealing how social, economic, and cultural factors construct individual and collective experiences. This paper attempts to read how the institutional power structures such as corporations, governments, and the military, maintain control and exploit marginalized communities in the select films. The study also looks into how the characters are portrayed, navigating hierarchies, challenging dominant narratives, and resisting oppressive systems.

Keywords: Discourse, Power, Marginalised, Hierarchy, Oppressive

Introduction

John Sayles, an independent film director famous for his politically loaded storylines, tends to examine the state as a norm of power in his films. Sayles' storytelling is a complex interweaving of social, political, and cultural factors, where the state is not only a bureaucratic institution but also a ubiquitous presence that influences the lives of individuals and communities. The state in Sayles' films is not a static institution but a living and multifaceted phenomenon that is often associated with corporate, racial, or patriarchal power structures. It is a challenge to the audience to interrogate the legitimacy of state power and its effects on individual and collective freedom, while also celebrating the strength of those who resist the state.

It is an endless struggle where oppressor and oppressed do not occupy fixed positions. However, it may change depending on economic, social, and cultural conditions. This study

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tries to examine the films from the point of view of relations of power. Power cannot be defined unless it is defined in a particular set of relations. This study tries to examine the realistic conditions of social, cultural, economic existence. Power is created through different norms. He uses a paradigmatic set of signs in the form of *mis en scene*. It was explored for deeper meanings along with the story. Foucault in his essay "The Subject and Power" says:

Most of the time, the state is conceived as a sort of political power that disregards individuals and focuses solely on the interests of the whole, or rather, of a class or a group of citizens. But I would like to emphasize the fact that the power of the state (and this is one of the reasons for its strength) is a totalizing and individualizing form of power (781).

The characteristics of power stem from this unitary power. He further says that power functions in accordance with certain legitimacy and it enables the law to exist as such. Foucault in his book *Society must be Defended* tries to identify the operators of domination. In Matewan (1987), John Sayles explores the state as power by its complicity with the interests of corporations and its role in the oppression of the masses. The film, based on a coal miners' strike in 1920s West Virginia, depicts the state not as an impartial dispenser of justice but as an instrument of capitalist exploitation. This is presented through several crucial points and characters, showing how the state exercises its power to repress labor movements.

The Baldwin-Felts agents, as corporate enforcers for the Stone Mountain Coal Company, represent the collusion between corporate power and the state. At the beginning of the movie, the Baldwin-Felts agents expel the miners and their families from company-owned housing, throwing their possessions out onto the street. The power of the Baldwin-Felts agents is supported by the legal system, indicating that the state is complicit in the exploitation of workers by corporate power.

The state perceives unionization as a challenge to the existing order and supports corporate power in its repression. Joe Kenehan, the union organizer, embodies the struggle of the miners for dignity and justice. His character is met with antagonism by the coal company and its agents, who perceive unionization as subversive and illegal. The state sees unionization as a challenge to the existing order and partners with corporate power to quash it. Joe Kenehan, the union organizer, symbolizes the miners' struggle for dignity and justice. His arrival is met with hostility from the coal company and its agents, who see unionization as subversive and illegal. The sheriff of Matewan, Sid Hatfield, is one of the few representatives of the state who chooses to stand with the miners. Yet his defiance of the Baldwin-Felts agents is depicted as unusual, suggesting that the state's apparatus—courts, police, and legislature—is primarily at the service of the corporation. The agents of the corporation carry arrest warrants for anyone who stands in their way, using the law to quash dissent.

The state and corporate systems use racial and ethnic divisions to keep workers from uniting. African American and Italian immigrant workers are hired to replace striking miners, causing resentment and mistrust. The film satirizes this "divide and conquer" approach, which has its roots in the state and societal structures that maintain inequality. The coal

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company uses racial prejudices to divide workers, but Joe Kenenhan urges them to unite in their shared exploitation. This leads to the defeat of the company's approach, demonstrating how resistance can challenge the power of the state-corporate alliance. However, when the miners choose to organize and fight back, their struggle is met with increasing violence, which is a characteristic of state power. The eventual confrontation between the miners and the Baldwin-Felts agents is indicative of the extent to which the state and capital will go to maintain their control. The gunfight finale, which is based on the historical Matewan Massacre, is a direct encounter between the oppressed miners and the agents of state-supported capital. The aggressive methods used by the agents of capital, such as the use of guns to break the strike, illustrate the role of the state as a tool of economic oppression.

The film also illustrates the role of the state's legal system in serving the interests of powerful rather than providing justice. While the miners' demands for better wages and working conditions are justifiable, they are made to appear as criminals for fighting back. The miners are constantly threatened with arrest for organizing or failing to disperse from company property. However, the Baldwin-Felts agents are above the law, and their actions are supported by the legal system. This is indicative of the natural bias of the state in favor of the ruling class.

In *Men with Guns* (1997), director John Sayles illustrates the state as an all-pervasive and oppressive force that uses its power to control, repress, and oppress. The film is set in an unnamed Latin American country and examines the destructive effects of state power on the lives of the poor and marginalized, especially indigenous communities, as well as the disastrous effects of systemic corruption, militarization, and neo-colonialism.

The clearest manifestation of state power in *Men with Guns* is the use of military and paramilitary forces to quell dissent and maintain state control. These "men with guns" are state agents or groups who operate with the tacit approval of the state, carrying out policies of terror and domination in rural areas. As Dr. Fuentes searches for his former medical students, he discovers that many of them have been murdered or forced to flee by soldiers. The military seeks to destroy these medical professionals because they see their work among the indigenous populations as a challenge to state control. The state believes that progress and education are a form of subversion and uses violence to eliminate this threat.

The state is represented as a system that marginalizes and displaces the indigenous people in order to preserve the socio-economic status quo. The state's actions, which are centered on the preservation of the elite's interests and the implementation of policies that result in the exploitation of natural resources, ensure that the cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement continues. In one of the scenes, Dr. Fuentes visits a village that has been abandoned by its residents as a result of state-sponsored violence. The destroyed homes and crops indicate that the state's military actions ensure that entire communities are displaced as a result of military campaigns, which treat the people as collateral damage in the pursuit of political or economic agendas.

The state in *Men with Guns* is an institution that serves the interests of the elite and foreign corporations, which ensures that neo-colonial structures of power are maintained. The

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state's control of resources and oppression of the rural population ensures that the system is maintained through the suppression of the rural population. Fuentes visits a village that has been destroyed by state forces to make way for economic exploitation. The state's support of corporate interests ensures that the indigenous land and labor are exploited for profit, while those who oppose are labeled as rebels or enemies of the state.

Sayles shows how the state uses militarization and the ever-present threat of violence to ensure that a climate of fear is maintained. The ever-present "men with guns" are a representation of the state's reach, which serves as a reminder to the people that rebellion or nonconformity will be met with violent repercussions. Throughout Fuentes' journey, he encounters villagers who live in fear of soldiers and paramilitary groups. In one of the scenes, he encounters a priest who has abandoned his church because he cannot protect his flock from the violence that is sponsored by the state.

Sayles points out the failure of the state's legal and moral systems to protect its citizens. The state does not act as a neutral judge but rather as a force that obstructs justice by allowing violence, corruption, and exploitation to flourish. The law is used as a weapon of oppression rather than a shield of protection. As Fuentes travels further into the countryside, he understands that there is no legal remedy for the communities that have been ravaged by state violence. The military acts with impunity, and there are no mechanisms in place to hold them accountable. The state's might is unchecked, and the unprotected have no access to justice whatsoever.

The film highlights the ways in which the state dehumanizes those whom it considers to be in the way of its power. By labeling indigenous people, rebels, and even well-meaning outsiders such as Fuentes' students as "enemies," the state denies them their humanity, providing a rationale for its violence and oppression. The state's propaganda of counterinsurgency portrays healthcare professionals as rebels' accomplices merely for administering medical care.

The depiction of resistance by Sayles corresponds to Foucault's concept of the interrelation of power and resistance, which coexist in the same structures. Both *Matewan* and *Men with Guns* represent how resistance emerges not as an external phenomenon but as an internal process within the structures of oppression. In *Matewan*, the miners use the same structures of organization and unity to oppose the state-supported corporate power. In *Men with Guns*, resistance is more complex and dispersed, demonstrating how survival can be a potent form of resistance against state-supported annihilation.

In this way, both films show that, while the state has a lot of power, this power is never absolute. Resistance, which takes many forms, is always a part of the dynamic of power and represents Foucault's notion that no system of power can ever fully eliminate the possibility of resistance. The miners' strike in *Matewan* is one example of Marx's notion of the proletariat's resistance to the bourgeoisie. The coal company is the representative of the ruling class of capitalists, who exploit the miners for profit while maintaining their power through the state's apparatus (the Baldwin-Felts agents). The miners' union is the embodiment of class consciousness, as miners of all racial and ethnic backgrounds come

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together to resist for better wages and working conditions. The state's support of the economic elite and foreign interests reflects Marx's critique of the way in which capitalism seeks to exploit marginalized groups. The indigenous people in *Men with Guns* resist not only physical violence but also the systemic economic oppression that denies them land, resources, and freedom.

The idea of cultural hegemony, developed by Antonio Gramsci, describes how the ruling class maintains its power not only through violence but also through the creation of ideology and culture. Resistance, therefore, is not only a matter of physical struggle but also of challenging dominant ideologies and creating counter-hegemonic ideas that can mobilize people for action. The miners in *Matewan* resist not only the physical oppression of the coal company but also the ideological domination that legitimates their oppression. Joe Kenehan's speeches urge the miners to think critically about the world around them and to reject the company's ideology that their poverty and suffering are inevitable.

In *Men with Guns*, the fragmented testimonies of the villagers and survivors become a counter-hegemonic move. In sharing their experiences with Dr. Fuentes, they go against the state's narrative that labels them as rebels or subversives. This move to reclaim their narrative is a form of resistance against ideological domination. James C. Scott's work centers on "everyday resistance," or the small, subtle ways in which oppressed groups resist systems of power without necessarily going to war with them. This can be done through evasion, non-compliance, and symbolic resistance, usually done by those who do not have the resources to mount an open rebellion. In *Matewan*, for instance, the miners and their families resist eviction by continuing to live on the company's land or by salvaging what they can. These are ways of showing that they will not fully submit to the coal company's power. In *Men with Guns*, resistance is often the simple act of surviving in the face of overwhelming state violence. The indigenous villagers resist by hiding, fleeing, or living their lives in secret. These acts are passive but show defiance against a state that seeks to destroy them.

Power is shown to be ubiquitous and complex, operating at the levels of direct coercion, economic exploitation, and ideological hegemony. In both movies, these processes show how power operates not only through violence but also through fear, economic subjection, and the destruction of cultural and communal selves. Where there is power, there is resistance—a theme that is rich in Sayles' narratives. Resistance in *Matewan* is communal, emphasizing the possibility of solidarity and grassroots resistance to systemic oppression. In contrast, *Men with Guns* portrays a more fractured and existential form of resistance. In this movie, the very act of survival becomes a form of resistance against a repressive state. The indigenous peoples and individuals resist through narrative, cultural maintenance, and even isolation, subverting the state's efforts to efface their presence. While Karl Marx's emphasis on class struggle and Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony are central to *Matewan*, these movies also demonstrate how collective resistance can effectively counter systems of economic and ideological oppression. *Men with Guns*, in particular, as a film that

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reflects the ideas of James C. Scott on everyday resistance, emphasizes the subtle and invisible nature of resistance by marginalized groups.

Both films reflect Michel Foucault's ideas about the relational and productive nature of power, demonstrating how resistance emerges both inside and in opposition to the very structures of power that oppress. In both *Matewan* and *Men with Guns*, Sayles presents a compelling vision of the cyclical relationship between power and resistance, in which a world of systemic oppression is countered by courage and resistance. While these movies do not idealize resistance, they instead suggest its complexity, vulnerability, and cost. However, they also suggest the necessity and possibility of resistance, reminding viewers that even in the most oppressive circumstances, resistance—whether collective or individual, visible or invisible—can reclaim dignity, challenge injustice, and inspire hope for a more just world.

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