

OLLI@Berkeley Winter 2025 Term

The Films of John Sayles: Truth, Beauty and Integrity

The films of acclaimed writer/director John Sayles have etched a unique and indelible place in the history of American independent cinema. Encompassing multiple genres, from science fiction to Westerns to political drama, the unifying principle underlying Sayles' eclectic body of work is his life-long commitment to equity, justice and human rights. Notwithstanding his status as a MacArthur "genius award" recipient and multiple Academy Award nominations, Sayles eschews the red carpet and prefers to premiere his films for the public, free of charge, at an old drive-in movie theater near Poughkeepsie, New York, close to his home. Sayles' uncompromising cinematic vision has influenced two generations of "indie" directors who succeeded him. This course will focus on four films written and directed by John Sayles.

Dates/Times: Thursdays 10:30am-noon, January 23, January 30, February 6, February 13, 2025

Instructor:

Karen Davis is Senior Film Programmer Emerita and Program Consultant for the Mill Valley Film Festival and Professor Emerita at CSUMB. She has taught courses in world cinema as a faculty member at California State University at Monterey Bay, UC Santa Cruz and Vassar College.

Week 1

BROTHER FOR ANOTHER PLANET 1984 104min

A comic meditation on slavery and fugitivity, migration, racism, and life under capitalism, *The Brother from Another Planet* follows an alien (played by Joe Morton) who escapes from his planet only to land in 1980s Harlem. Pursued by two intergalactic immigration agents attempting to return him to captivity, The Brother evades capture while interacting with neighborhood residents and learning about his new environment. A classic of Afrofuturism, *The Brother from Another Planet* is a must see for anyone who is interested in race, class, migration, urbanism and solidarity. A funny, smart, and affecting film. - Description courtesy of the Center for Political Education

AVAILABILITY: Apple TV, or Free (with ads): <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-brother-from-another-planet> or Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/0KN3PFPOGVFGACQWC4ZLHELK6C/ref=atv_dl_rdr?tag=justus1ktp-20

Week 2

MATEWAN 1987 133min

This wrenching historical drama recounts the true story of a West Virginia coal town where the local miners' struggle to form a union rose to the pitch of all-out war in 1920. When *Matewan's* (W. Virginia) miners go on strike, organizer Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper, in his film debut) arrives to help them, uniting workers white and black, Appalachia-born and immigrant, while urging patience in the face of the coal company's violent provocations. With a crackerjack ensemble cast—including James Earl Jones, David Strathairn, Mary McDonnell, and Will Oldham—and Oscar-nominated cinematography by Haskell Wexler, *Matewan* taps into a rich vein of Americana with painstaking attention to local texture, issuing an impassioned cry for justice that still resonates today. - Description courtesy of The Criterion Collection

AVAILABILITY (free): <https://archive.org/details/matewan-1987> or <https://archive.org/details/Matewan.JohnSayles.V.O.S.Castellano.DVDRip.XviD>

Week 3

PASSION FISH 1992 135min

"*Passion Fish*," is about the power of the unexpected -- accidents, places and, most of all, unexpected friendships. Soap opera star May-Alice (Mary McDonnell) is hit by a speeding taxi and paralyzed from the waist down. Rebelling at the discipline and indignities of physical rehabilitation, her pride drives her to retreat from life, taking her back to the Louisiana bayou country of her childhood. Hiding out in the house of her long-dead parents, she terrorizes a series of nurse-caretakers and succeeds in driving each of them from the house until Chantelle (Alfre Woodard) arrives. Chantelle is a mystery, proud and troubled, hiding from her past, but able to match May-Alice's unpredictable will with her own. Sayles' characteristic attention to the visual image pays off in the sharp camera movement indoors and the mist-laden, evocative Bayou exteriors. -Description courtesy of the Toronto International Film Festival

AVAILABILITY: Amazon, AppleTV or free(with ads) **Options here:** <https://www.justwatch.com/us/search?q=passion%20fish>

Week 4

LONE STAR 1996 134min

A keen observer of America's social fabric, writer-director John Sayles uncovers the haunted past buried beneath a small Texas border town in this sprawling neo-western mystery. When a skeleton is discovered in the desert, lawman Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper), son of a legendary local sheriff, begins an investigation that will have profound implications both for him personally and for all of Rio County, a place still reckoning with its history of racial violence. Sayles's masterful film—novelistic in its intricacy and featuring a brilliant ensemble cast, including Joe Morton, Elizabeth Peña, and Kris Kristofferson—quietly subverts national mythmaking and lays bare the fault lines of life at the border. -Description courtesy of The Portland Museum

AVAILABILITY Amazon, AppleTV or free(with ads) **Options here:** <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/lone-star>