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Lone Star: A Review

Writer and Director: John Sayles

Principle Actors: Chris Cooper, Mathew McConaughey,

Kris Kristofferson, Elizabeth Pena, Joe Morton, Francis McDormand

Release Information: Castle Rock Entertainment (1995) 135 minutes.

Many will find John Sayles's recent film, Lone Star, threatening and bothersome. Why? Primarily, because it calls attention to the dilemmas inherent in what Dewey has aptly coined the "quest for certainty." Western thought, or at least its philosophy, has been on a 2,000-year mission to discover the immutable, to create a "mirror of nature" rather than merely pondering Platonic "shadows on a wall." Both the neopragmatism of Rorty, and the postmodernist turn that Nietzsche helped to inspire, deny the possibility of ever finding such certainty and instead posit contingency and perspectivalism in its place. These notions of contingency and perspectivalism are not new to the realm of art. In fact, Nineteenth century opera, as exemplified by the sextet concluding the second act of Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor, the final scene of Verdi's Aida, and the "leitmotifs" and multi-level staging of Wagner, largely foreshadows this philosophical and epistemological development. In Twentieth century film, perhaps the best depictions of contingency and perspectivalism can be found in Kurosawa' s masterpiece Rashomon. Although the critically acclaimed Sayles has yet to equal the virtuosity of Kurosawa, he should nonetheless be commended for bringing the concept of perspectivalism to American cinema. Admittedly, living in a fragmented world comes with its pitfalls and dangers. Such a world fails to provide the psychological comfort that dwelling in a world of certitude offers and, as communitarian thinkers have wisely noted, some degree of consensus is vital to the health and stability of all groups. However, in forcing us to break free from our own limited experiences, Sayles offers a more complex and richer depiction of human experience. For these reasons, Lone Star marks a significant advance in the medium of film as a means for increasing human expression and understanding.

The film, set in the sleepy Texas border town of Lone Star, opens with the discovery of a skeleton. Not surprisingly, a police investigation is launched. It turns out that the bones belong to the vilified former sheriff of Lone Star, Charlie Wade, who has been missing, and was presumed dead, for decades. Ironically, this discovery coincides with a controversial decision to dedicate the new town courthouse to Wade's successor as sheriff, Buddy Deeds. Although Buddy has become a legend in the town and is remembered with fondness and respect by the vast majority of Lone Star's residents, his reputation has recently been jeopardized by the growing dissident voice of some of the younger, and more politically inclined, members of the Mexican-American population in town. Increasingly, this vocal segment of Lone Star has sought to challenge the accuracy of the dominant view of what life was like under Sheriff Deeds's [End page 15] reign. Buddy's reputation is further threatened by the fact that the investigation is largely in the hands of the Lone Star' s current sheriff -- Buddy's middle-aged son. Perhaps because he grew up knowing of the character flaws that Buddy kept safely hidden from the townspeople, or perhaps due to the jealousy that arises when a son is not able to live up to the reputation of his father, Buddy's son is not afraid to confront the fact that his father's heroic reputation may be built upon a lie. It is not long before Buddy emerges as the prime suspect in the Charlie Wade case. The critical eye cast at both the events surrounding Charlie's death and Buddy's long stint as sheriff brings to surface a number of other shady dealings, including the use of prison labor for home improvements, involvement in local machine politics, and the disappearance of a large sum of county money, that implicate Buddy and other prominent members of the community. As the investigation continues, Buddy comes off looking less like a hero and more like a welcomed relief from Wade's tyrannical rule.

Despite this description, the film does not simply set out to write yet another revisionist history, but instead attempts to present a more elaborate and perspectival look at the life and times of Buddy Deeds as seen by both his contemporaries and present day observers. By doing so, Lone Star allows audiences to grapple with many of the questions that surround contemporary historiography. Is there one past or many? Who has, up to this point, constructed the past? How accurate have these historians been? What have they included and omitted? By confronting these issues in a straightforward manner, Sayles presents a fascinating peek at how recent developments in Western high culture are increasingly pervading popular culture as well.

Although the investigation into the death of Charlie Wade comprises the main story line, a number of subplots, teeming with controversial issues, are woven into the film. These issues which include, but are not limited to, immigration, interracial marriage, patriarchy, infidelity, and incest, prove that there are few topics that Sayles is not willing to address. However, this attempt to cover such a wide variety of topics, with the studied reflexivity that Sayles demands, is both the film's greatest strength and its biggest weakness. At times it appears that Sayles's film is the work of a genius, while at other moments his ideas come off as contrived and overdone. Another characteristic that can be construed as either a virtue or vice, depending upon one's perspective, is the openness of film and its unwillingness to provide answers to the many questions it proposes. This reluctance to provide final answers is very much in keeping with the postmodern vision; after all if Nietzsche consistently held any idea throughout his writings, it was the need to foster individuals and not followers. Similarly, present-day postmodern icon, Jean-Francois Lyotard, ends one of his books, Just Gaming, not with conclusive answers but rather with fading laughter. However, Lone Star never travels far enough down the road of postmodernism to reach absolute relativism. Instead of opting for the nihilism and relativism of many postmodernists, [End page 16] Sayles, ever the American, appeals to the pluralist ideals of the great American pragmatic tradition as exemplified in the writings of Dewey, Pierce, James, and, most recently, Rorty. This commitment to the American- and Enlightenment- values of democracy and pluralism becomes evident in the film's emphasis on presenting the "full story," its insistence on not privileging any single perspective, and its strong commitment to open communication as a means for resolving disputes.

Although it may not be obvious from the outset, Lone Star does offer some important insights into the criminal justice system that could have practical application. For one thing, Sayles provides an astute Foucault-like analysis of the manner in which power pervades the entire criminal justice process. Power relations are exposed everywhere in the film, and, in particular, everywhere that the criminal justice system crops into the picture frame. However, much to Sayles' s credit, aside from Kris Kristofferson' s strained portrayal of Charlie Wade, the film refrains from presenting the stereotypical, vulgar depictions of power to which Hollywood films often resort. Instead, Sayles provides a more nuanced examination of how power is exercised in human, perhaps "all too human," contexts -- among normal, well-intentioned politicians, teachers, and police officers. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny the insights that the film offers as to how power, contingency, and perspectivalism shape the criminal justice system; however, even the most optimistic of us would also have to recognize the difficulties involved in trying to convert these insights into progressive policy changes. Out of necessity, even the most enlightened of criminal justice agencies have to uphold one "perspective" of crime over another and, therefore, some use of power is essential. However, only the most cynical would deny that there are measures that can be taken to guard against injustice. One such measure involves constantly recognizing when and where power is exercised by opening up the criminal justice system to critical, democratic review. This is best accomplished through the encouragement of non-coercive communicative freedom. It is only in situations allowing for the free flow of ideas between people holding different perspectives that democratic justice can be achieved.

A criminal justice system based on the insights presented in Lone Star could only be characterized by a "daring modesty" -- a daringness to try new methods of achieving justice and to look at different perspectives of both how the system does operate and how it should operate, yet an anti-Utopian modesty in knowing that all human justice is flawed. It is with these sentiments, along with good old-fashioned wisdom and prudence, that the film concludes. In the end, dogmatism and self-righteousness take a back seat to a "daring modesty" which honors perspectivalism, contingency, and the primacy of the individual.

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