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A 35MM PRESENTATION  
PRINCE CHARLES CINEMA  
MON 25 SEPTEMBER, 2023



## Lone Star

1996 / USA / 135 mins

Written, directed and edited by John Sayles

Photographed by Stuart Dryburgh / Music by Mason Daring


Starring Chris Cooper, Kris Kristofferson, Matthew McConaughey, Elizabeth Peña, Joe Morton, Frances McDormand, Clifton James, Ron Canada

*“Part of my idea in making Lone Star was to treat the culture of the border as one large, dysfunctional family.” - John Sayles*

John Sayles has often worked in genre - *Eight Men Out* (1988) is the director's sports film, *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) his sci-fi - but he had little interest keeping within established genre boundaries. *Lone Star*, a partly contemporary western incorporating elements of noir and police procedural, is no different in that respect. Perhaps Sayles' most identifiable directorial trait is the way he uses genre as a lens through which to view contemporary American life. He'd used traces of the western to reflect on the legacy of labor rights in *Matewan* (1987) and to touch on his country's attitude to race in *City of Hope* (1991), but *Lone Star* was his first (and, so far, only) film in the genre (although elements would inevitably recur in his subsequent work).

*Lone Star* falls in one of the western's richer sub-genres - the border western, in which stories are set on the US-Mexico border and explore the complicated relationship between the nations. In many, the anxiety of an open border is prevalent, sometimes to the point of hysteria, but for Sayles, it's a place which encapsulates both the promise and betrayal of America. In this sense, the film makes for an illuminating companion to Sayles' 1991 novel *Los Gusanos*, in which Miami is pitched as a border town of sorts between Cuba and the rest of America.

Speaking with Pauline Adamek of Arts Beat LA upon the film's release in 1996, Sayles said *Lone Star* is about “the way in which American culture has always, always been many cultures”, something that's reflected in the film's exceptional soundtrack, which draws from country, blues and Tejano music from all eras. But he's also interested in the border as a flashpoint of fear, violence and racism, which he elaborated on in his contemporary interview with Megan Ratner for Filmmaker magazine: “Even when we were shooting, every time we wanted to get to the river we had to go on some fairly rich Anglo's estate because that's the good land. Even on the other side, a lot of land is owned by the Anglos. That wasn't the way it was when the war ended. So it had to be taken somehow, and it was taken by bandits - sometimes by bandits who in their spare time were Texas rangers - usually with the help of local police and judges. And that's what the politics of the post-Mexican-war period were on the border. That's who Charlie Wade is; he's a kind of a concentration of all that nasty history.”



Since it became an identifiable genre, the western has always been the perfect form for American artists to reckon with their nation's history and, crucially, what it's led to. This idea of the past as a dominant force in the present is ingrained in the blueprint of the western and, indeed, it informs everything in *Lone Star* but, this being John Sayles, it does so in a way which feels intuitive and natural - didacticism is not a part of Sayles' cinematic language. The director explained to Ratner how he made the past and present interact seamlessly in the film, in a way which betrays his sensibility and lightness of touch: "I used theatrical transitions so that there would be this feeling there wasn't a big seam between the past and the present. Orson Welles did things like that every once in a while. Basically, you get a background for your tight shot from 1996, you pan away, and when you pan back to where the guy telling the story was, it's somebody completely different, and it's 1957. There's not a cut or a dissolve. I wanted to reinforce the feeling that what's going on now is totally connected to the past. It's almost not like a memory - you don't hear the harp playing. It's there."

Grand ideas flow through the film, but they are introduced through small character moments or neat visual motifs (making art from bullets being one of the finest examples). The setting is a town called Frontera - the Frontier - so it's arguable that the setting itself is an idea, one which roots the film and informs its dense, multi-generational story, where each character is defined by their relationship and history with the frontier. For Charlie Wade (Kris Kristofferson), it's his hard-won ancestral right, to be protected at all costs but, as Matt Zoller Seitz remarked in his 25th anniversary essay on the film for [rogerebert.com](http://rogerebert.com), "'frontier' means something different to Native Americans, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Black Americans who were either displaced from their land or prevented from owning land in the first place. To them, the word was not a promise, but a threat."

There's something quasi-dynastic about the lawmen in Frontera, bonded by blood in more ways than one. Three sheriffs in different eras, each contending with the legacy of his predecessor, whether that's Buddy Deeds (Matthew McConaughey) atoning for the evil Charlie or Buddy's son Sam (Chris Cooper) whose feelings about his role in the town, as sheriff, citizen and a Deeds, border on existential to the point where, according to Sayles, he "can't really enjoy being in the driver's seat - [he doesn't] want to be there". This is a very novelistic idea, an observation which has admittedly become a bit of a cliché when discussing Sayles' work, not least given his moonlighting career as a novelist, but one which is inescapable, especially given his deeply felt character sketches and the structural elegance of his films.

That structural elegance may also be partly credited to the fact that Sayles often edits his own projects. He claims to shoot very little extraneous material and cites pervasive budgetary constraints as the reason he has to be meticulous in his shooting plans, particularly with a film as sprawling as *Lone Star*, where intraday location moves were frequent, and so his sense of rhythm and movement as an editor becomes an essential, even elevating, component in his work.

*Lone Star* was, alongside the likes of *Fargo* and *Big Night*, one of the best-reviewed American movies of 1996, became a solid crossover indie success and earned Sayles an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay. In the years since, it's mysteriously drifted into obscurity, and to this date has still not been issued on Blu-ray. Therefore we were delighted to discover the existence of a 35mm print to screen for this Mystery Movie selection at the Prince Charles Cinema - hopefully a pleasant surprise for you, and hopefully rhyming poignantly with the film's own subject of unburying the not-so-distant past.

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