

## *Limbo*: Frustrated Narration



Rather than provide an exhaustive account of John Sayles' 1999 film *Limbo*, I would like to look closely at the first couple of scenes to convey some of their flavour and complex tone before concentrating on the final stages of the film. I am especially interested in the ending itself, the radical unconventionality of which – breaking off in midstream as it does without any closure or resolution to the narrative – is likely to provoke strong feelings of frustration in its audience, and raises a number of questions central to my concerns with viewer involvement. The film is set in the present-day state of Alaska, with the setting shifting away from everyday society in the latter part of the film and correspondingly darkening its mood. At that stage, *Limbo* will provide us with a sustained example of embedded narration – a story within a story – when Noelle (Vanessa Martinez) finds a young girl's diary on the island where she is stranded with her mother Donna (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) and Donna's new boyfriend, Joe Gastineau (David Strathairn), and reads them extracts every evening. Eventually, when the diary's narration runs out, she devises other stories which retain the original setting and characters in order to deal imaginatively with her own emotional life and family relationships. In contrast, in *Limbo*'s early scenes what we have is more like multiple narration, that is an array of different stories about Alaska existing side by side, rather than being embedded one within another. Of course, they are all ultimately embedded within Sayles' film itself (that is, he is constructing a story about these stories), though only in Noelle's case is he presenting us with a story about her appropriation and continuation of the diarist's stories for personal ends.

The film begins with a *tabula rasa* – a blank white screen on which the title starts to write itself one letter at a time as the credits simultaneously begin to appear and to shunt themselves into position from left to right – while water fades in from the original whiteness of the screen. We then move down below the surface of the water to a milling crowd of salmon, their apparently aimless movement providing an early example of lives in limbo. Indeed, the word 'LIMBO' is soon fully formed and superimposed on

the fish, just as an especially fierce and predatory-looking one approaches and moves into place behind the title, veering away again before the screen fades out to black.



From this initial representation of nature we cut to a beautiful view of hillsides rising from a sea of clouds while a male narrating voice appears to welcome us to a more benevolent place of natural beauty, without the darker undertones of the previous scene: 'Welcome to America's last frontier ...'. At this point, the majestic landscape dissolves to a shot of a luxurious tourist ship with a bank of modern buildings behind it, and then – in a series of further dissolves – to closer shots of various goods for sale (toy huskies, mounted animal heads, furs with a label indicating a sale price of \$125, and so on) while the camera moves in on them in a continuous motion which carries on across the transitions. Throughout this sequence, the narrator continues to praise the virtues of Alaska's natural wonders – 'a panoply of flora and fauna the like of which is seen nowhere else on the planet' – in contrast to the visual images we're given of a tawdry and commercialised Alaska, where elderly tourists pose for photos with someone in a polar bear suit and shop fronts promise 50% off every purchase, suggesting an economy in decline. In contrast to the narrator's evocation of 'mists redolent of the hearty souls of men who have gone to sea', we dissolve to an

unpainted doll's head and women's hands at work assembling some of the dolls and putting Eskimo costumes on others.

A number of shots of the tourists themselves accompany the ongoing narration about various peoples who have contributed to the place's history: 'Tlingit and Haida, Inuit and Aleut, Russian and Norwegian. Their languages and deeds lingering on in the names of our countless islands and passageways'. It soon becomes apparent that the narrator's words are not an objective description of the 'real' Alaska after all, in contrast to the cheap and inauthentic tourist goods on sale, but are a component of the same more complicated discourse, as we discover that he is a tour guide addressing his captive audience with a series of reassuring clichés.

Thus, he speaks of Alaska's 'siren call to the bold and adventurous ...', his words infused with an irony unintended on his part through their juxtaposition with the group of tourists following one another to some waiting seaplanes on the water, the party clustered together and contrasting with the boldness and adventure he describes. The narrator continues his reference to Alaska's siren call '... to men and women willing to risk their lives for the promise of untold fortune ...' [Here we dissolve to fish pouring into a container in a canning factory, then to a tourist with a long-lensed camera around his neck.] '... be it from fur or fin, from the heaven-parting spires of old-growth spruce or from the buried treasures of yellow gold or black energy-rich petroleum, a land visited each year by the relentless and mysterious salmon ...' [We continue to dissolve between shots of the tourists and shots of the unfolding process of the cannery, the film matching the word 'salmon' to an image of an open-topped tin of salmon meat on a conveyor belt.] '... each river and stream welcoming home the king and sockeye...', and so on.

The ironic echoes, contrasts and telling juxtapositions are many and complex, and we may note the narrator's use of 'relentless' to produce an impression not only of unfolding processes resulting from forces and imperatives beyond the will of individual salmon, but beyond the will of individual people as well. Thus, the process of salmon spawning, but also that of producing tinned salmon on an assembly line, is linked to the process of guiding tourists through their visit and moving them along a predetermined route. These various processes are linked in turn, through the mechanisms used by Sayles in constructing his film for *our* consumption (the editing, for example, or the juxtaposition of narration and imagery), to our experience as viewers of the film: not only is tourism reduced to a kind of conveyor-belt experience, and the tourists linked to helpless fish caught up in a 'relentless' process, but we are implicated in such processes as well, as we are led past the self-same sights and addressed by the same narrator, armchair tourists on a cinematic journey whose sights have been carefully selected and managed from elsewhere.

Nevertheless, our viewing experience is filtered through the heavily ironic perspective Sayles provides where a rosy view of nature's majesty is shown to be part of a pre-packaged spiel for the tourists and is contrasted to a darker implication of powerful and unremitting forces at work. Thus, we are let in on ways of seeing that are less comfortable and much rougher around the edges than those made available to the tourists, as we continually see patches of activity beyond the edges of their experience. For example, the words of the tour guide's commentary are abruptly hijacked by a worker in the factory who is heard first as an off-screen voice and only later identified as

Harmon King (Leo Burmester), as both men's voices overlap from the phrase 'welcoming home' through the word 'pink', Harmon then carrying on by himself as he radically reinvents the script: '... each river and stream welcoming home the king and sockeye, the coho and dog, pink or humpback ... which is smashed into cans and quick-cooked to give the colourful local folks something to do other than play cards and scratch their nuts all day'. Sayles too will shift gears as the narrative proceeds, turning his script into something very different from what it first appears.

Harmon's brash vulgarity, which we soon find out is a performance for the sake of his co-workers, is accompanied by a shot of machinery methodically lopping the heads off fish on a conveyor belt, and then a shot of hands in rubber gloves slitting open the fish on a bloodied worktop and passing them along to the next person, the workers facing each other on each side of the work surface, though no faces are visible. His commentary makes the links between tourists and fish much more explicit, though his tone is nasty, as he describes Alaska as 'A land where that nice old lady from Fort Lauderdale who had the stroke three cabins down was probably parked next to the thawed-out halibut you're eating on board tonight', going on to refer to the floating hotel en route 'to deliver its precious load of geriatrics ...' [Here we see Harmon at last, looking slightly ludicrous in his regulation hair covering.] '... to the hungry Visa-card-accepting denizens of our northernmost ...' [He lifts a fish and brandishes it, his voice aggressive.] '... and most mosquito-infested state!'. [With a flourish he turns and flings the salmon aside.]



Although Harmon's description of Alaska gives the impression of being a grittier, more 'realistic' one than the promotional discourse provides, a number of things seem intended to make us wary of taking it as a fully objective and definitive version. For one thing, his cruel sarcasm at the expense of the tourists far exceeds their visual presentation as well-intentioned and harmless older people enjoying an outing. Harmon's bitterness implies an agenda of his own, which is soon made explicit when he imagines the cannery closed and turned into a cleaned-up and sweet-smelling tourist attraction, while he goes out fishing on his boat. At this point, a young female co-worker, Audrey (Dawn McInturff), cheekily replies, 'And what boat is this?' It turns out that Harmon is a fisherman who has lost his boat through economic hardship and is unwillingly processing salmon rather than being out fishing for them himself. His point of view is very clearly determined by his financial problems, which are part of a context larger than himself but specific to a particular time and place. Another thing that undermines the authority of his perspective is that he is critical of the intrusiveness of the tourists as outsiders

to his world while he himself stands out as a white man in the cannery surrounded by a group of co-workers all of whom appear to be native Alaskans, or at least non-whites, though one or two white men walk by in the background as they talk. (In his parodic version of the cannery's future as a museum, Harmon describes the workers in display cases labelled 'Typical Filipino Cannery Worker', though Audrey and the others speak with an American accent.)

At this point we are still only minutes into the film, yet we have already been made aware of a range of perspectives each of which has been qualified in some way as only a single part of a much larger and more complicated picture. However, although we may be tempted to assume that Sayles sees the film as a whole as providing an objective view of the many discourses within it – the sum of its parts which weaves the various subjective accounts into an objective whole – he is, instead, at pains to foreground the authored nature of the film itself. Thus, at the precise moment when Harmon's voice begins to overlap with the narrating voice of the tour guide, the words 'written, directed and edited by JOHN SAYLES' appear on the screen, and, just as, a few seconds after this, the original narrator's excessively romantic account turns into Harmon's more cynical one, so the medium itself changes from video to film, producing a noticeably sharper and more saturated image as we cut to numerous pairs of hands in vivid orange or blue rubber gloves, some slitting fish open while others gut them. Almost simultaneously, we are given a series of shifts in voice, tone, look, and subject matter, as we move from live salmon to salmon in tins and from the world on display for the tourists to consume at leisure to the workaday world of the cannery, where the mechanics of producing objects for a more literal type of consumption are exposed. At the same time, the mechanics of filmmaking are revealed in the sudden change of medium, making clear that we are not seeing the world itself with anything like objectivity, as contrasting techniques for representing it are presented to us side by side. Finally, Sayles himself is named as the source of such representations, writing, directing and editing them into shape for our pleasure and edification.

I have dwelt on the relative self-consciousness of Sayles' presence at some length for a couple of reasons. First, in the scene that follows, where the three central characters – Noelle, Donna and Joe – will all be introduced, we could be forgiven for no longer remembering Sayles' self-proclaimed authorial presence behind the camera: his strategies and techniques seem much more concentrated on creating the illusion of a real world unfolding before our eyes, leaving us to wander around it in a number of meandering long takes, in contrast to the scenes just considered where we have much more sense of our response being guided by insistent editorial juxtapositions and meaningful discursive clashes. Second, the unresolved ending of the film depends for its effect on exactly such spectatorial amnesia, all the more extraordinary in light of Sayles' initial foregrounding of his presence and role. Thus, *Limbo* is both insistent on its own fictionality and yet convincing in the believability of its narrative world, as we shall now go on to examine.

From the scene in the cannery, we cut to a medium close-up of the adolescent Noelle facing and approaching the camera as she appears to offer us a platter of *hors d'oeuvres* (mispronouncing the term in a touching display of naïve vulnerability). As she walks away, Joe passes her in the opposite direction, carrying a folding table, Noelle turning as he says, 'Nice uniform', though neither one of



them is identified by name. In the background of some of the shots, a singer and musicians are visible but too far away for the singer to be recognised (it is Donna De Angelo, played by Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio). As Noelle offers *hors d'oeuvres* to two men in the middle of a conversation, we stay with them in a long take as they walk amongst the guests at what is soon revealed to be an outdoor wedding reception.

It becomes apparent that one of the men – the father of the bride (Michael Laskin) – is in the tourist trade, the other a lumberman, and their conversation circles around the incompatible needs of the two industries, though the discourse that was used in the earlier scenes to address the tourists directly is now simply mentioned as the object of a higher-level debate. In other words, the bride's father is here talking about such stories, rather than telling them himself.<sup>1</sup> Thus, he complains about the ugliness of the lumber industry – 'deforested hillsides and logging equipment, Phil' – which so blatantly undermines the pretty picture of Indian camps and foraging bears which he intends to present to the tourists. Throughout the long take, Donna's singing is faintly audible as an indistinct background sound, though we still haven't seen her up close. The bride's father continues to make his case to Phil: 'We're trying to develop *themes* for each area up here: "The Whales' Causeway" "Island of the Raven People" "Kingdom of the Salmon" "Lumberland"'. At this last word, the long take ends and we cut to Phil eagerly grasping the possibility that their interests may be compatible after all: 'That's *us*'. However, he is quickly disabused: 'That's a turn-of-the-century sawmill with a little water-powered generator and a gift shop'. As far as the tourist market is concerned, appearance is everything.

Up until the cut, the single take of the two men as they move has included lots of surrounding details, of musicians, guests, servers, scenery, and small groups of people, which we can notice or not, as we like. As the men's conversation ends, Noelle approaches them again with her platter, then the bride casually crosses the screen from right to left while Noelle is in the foreground of the shot, her back to the camera, as she momentarily occupies the middle of the frame. This is the first shot that indicates the central importance that Noelle will have within the film, as she briefly commands centre-stage while remaining at the periphery of the reception itself, which she observes rather than enters into as a fully-fledged participant. As Noelle surveys the proceedings, the bride herself – a marginal character in the scene, despite the fact that it takes place at her wedding reception – is, for an instant, no more than a fleeting wisp of bridal veil as she crosses the left-hand boundary of the frame. The camera follows Noelle as she walks away from us into the scene in front of her, before we cut to a medium shot of Donna singing, her centrality to the film beginning to be evident as well. We become



increasingly aware of the close relationship between the two women as Donna finishes her song and we cut to Noelle watching with a serious expression as loose strands of dark brown hair fall in her face, movingly evoking her youth and vulnerability again.

As we cut back to Donna, she announces that it's her last appearance with Randy Mason (Jimmy MacDonell) and the band. In a quick reaction shot, Randy, a pony-tailed guitarist who is evidently much younger than she, looks wary, but not overly concerned. Donna goes on to explain that she'll be continuing her solo act at a bar in town, 'while Randy will be rapidly sinking back into the relative obscurity he so richly deserves', and she dedicates the next song to him. Their relationship is thus economically sketched with a few broad and public brushstrokes, and Noelle looks simultaneously unhappy and annoyed, the platter of *hors d'oeuvres* still held in front of her as Donna readies herself to sing. After a cut back to Donna singing ('... my life with you's become a living hell ...'), we return to a closer shot of Noelle pursing her lips in annoyance. Donna spots Noelle and gives her an apologetic look, Noelle pointedly turns and walks away with a shake of her head, and a rueful Donna continues the song.

Nobody else is paying much attention, and the effect is of a party where much private business and many conversational asides take place pretty much unnoticed by

anyone other than the immediate participants themselves, the camera almost randomly picking up on some of them before moving on to other characters who happen to cross its path. As with the earlier scenes we've looked at where tourists wandered around, oblivious to pockets of activity outside their awareness, now, too, many self-enclosed conversations (their significance here less rhetorically marked) are seen to co-exist, though there is no sense in this later sequence of an 'official' discourse aimed at a specific group of people nor even of competing accounts of the same concerns. Nor does the distinction between guests and hired help appear to generate broad contrasting perspectives based on class, since people like Donna, Joe and Noelle – and the lesbian couple, Frankie (Kathryn Grody) and Lou (Rita Taggart) who are catering the event – are elsewhere shown to be as much a part of the community as any of the wedding guests (a number of whom are dressed casually, as are Frankie, Lou and Joe), this levelling of social status appropriate to what is, after all, a sort of frontier town. Both this democratic treatment of the characters and the even-handed presentation of events are strategies which contribute not only to the sense of a narrative world independent of the camera's gaze, with each character and event appearing to be of equal interest and importance, but, further, to our freedom to notice what we will and to give significance wherever we choose.

The wandering long takes and use of background sound and details (for example, Joe walking by in the distance, behind the bride's father and Phil, and mopping his brow after his earlier exertions carrying the folding table), are particularly important in achieving such effects, implying that the characters' lives continue to move on, even when they are beyond the borders of the frame, with off-screen moments seeming almost as significant as those on-screen. Also of note is the incompleteness of many of the conversations we happen upon in midstream, contributing to the sense of ongoing and unfinished business in the groupings and encounters throughout the scene, some of which will be dropped while others continue and develop



*Donna De Angelo (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) shortly after breaking up with Randy Mason (Jimmy MacDonell), right.*

later in the film (for example, the troubled relationship between Donna and Noelle, though at this stage the weighted significance of their relationship is merely implied – by things like Mastrantonio’s relative star status and the somewhat greater access we appear to be given to their emotional states – rather than explicitly signalled by sustained narrative and visual devices). Although we no longer have the multiple narrations of the earlier scenes – as I said earlier, the bride’s father *mentions* the discursive framework of tourism rather than *using* it to romanticise Alaska to Phil – we still have a multiplicity of mini-narratives, rather than a single overarching one. In other words, in place of the earlier examples of explicit storytelling (or narration) by characters within the narrative world, we continue to have numerous events (or narratives) unfolding around us – such as Donna’s break-up with Randy, and Noelle’s reaction.

Despite the differences, however, there are also some specific links with earlier sequences. For example, not only is Harmon a significant figure in the cannery scene, but he turns up at the reception as well, in the middle of Donna’s second song (the one dedicated to Randy whose lyrics are so openly at his expense). The film cuts to Harmon as he follows one of the caterers, Louise, who puts a basket down on an outdoor table next to her partner Francine while turning to confront him, with Harmon demanding that they return his boat, which the two women acquired as collateral when his financial troubles made it impossible for him to pay his debts. The camera is much closer and the editing more confrontational than in earlier parts of the reception scene as the three of them argue, both Lou and Frankie insisting on the importance of their being taken seriously. Along these lines, the script introduces a running joke whereby Lou corrects Frankie’s terminology to Frankie’s obvious annoyance, which grows in intensity with each subsequent variation (‘The jaws of a vise are moved by a screw or lever. You don’t call it a handle’. ‘Thank you, Louise’. And, later, after a further correction and a further tight-lipped response: ‘Francine, if we’re gonna do this, we have to get our terminology right’).

Donna’s earlier sarcastic humour at Randy’s expense – and, indeed, the ironic question Harmon’s co-worker asked about ‘his’ boat in the cannery scene – are further examples of how all these women purposefully use words to mock or take control. If we add to this list of examples Harmon’s appropriation and undermining of the tourist spiel, at the cannery, then what we see is a broad range of characters who are marginalised in various ways – through gender, race, sexuality, age and economics – and who employ a number of different tactics to reconstrue, subvert or use to their own benefit the discourses at work around them in order to counter the disadvantages they feel and, in Lou and Frankie’s terms, be taken seriously. I don’t think it’s too fanciful to link such efforts on the part of the film’s characters to those of Sayles himself – an independent filmmaker marginal to the American commercial mainstream – and to look at his subversion of the codes of mainstream cinematic language, particularly in the final moments of the film, in this light.

With two exceptions (Bobby Gastineau and Jack Johansson), all of the main characters have now been introduced, and, once Joe gives Donna a lift into town and helps her move her things from Randy’s place to her flat above the Golden Nugget, the relationships amongst them have been briefly sketched as well, even if what we know is implied and partial, rather than explicit and complete. Thus, when Donna tells Joe about her daughter, we are likely to

guess from the earlier looks between Donna and Noelle that Noelle is the daughter in question, and when Donna and Joe are seen to be taking a tentative interest in each another, we may remember Noelle’s friendly banter with Joe at the wedding reception and anticipate mother-daughter conflicts ahead. The sense of a tightly interwoven community already evident is further developed in the first of four scenes at the Golden Nugget, where Donna talks with Joe between her sets, and where the town’s inhabitants tell each other familiar stories about troubles and disasters from the past. At the same time, tourists are paraded through the bar to see some ‘local colour’, the attendant commentary now provided by a woman guide, rather than the male narrating voice which led into the cannery scene. The various stories are presented as no more than snippets which we hear in rapid succession, intercut to produce a stylised pattern of overlapping strands, rather than coherent individual accounts complete in themselves. Our own position throughout the scene is neither to stand in the shoes of the tourists (who come and go while we remain in place), nor to feel fully at home amongst the local workers along the bar. Our exclusion from both groups – we have already been disillusioned with the romanticism of the tour guide’s account and are unable to share the easy familiarity of the locals with the details of one another’s lives – results in a kind of detached curiosity as the characters’ backgrounds are gradually filled in through the stories that they tell.

In a later scene at the Golden Nugget which takes place in Joe’s absence, we overhear a story about him without realising at first that Donna is listening too, since her presence isn’t revealed straightaway, and, when it is, her fond smiles at the mention of Joe show how unprepared she is for the story that follows (though we ourselves have had hints of it before in a conversation between Noelle and the co-worker who drove her home from the reception). Although Joe is, by then, on the point of going out in Lou and Frankie’s boat, it seems that he hasn’t been out fishing in years, ever since his boat sank suddenly, resulting in the drowning of the two other men on board. This traumatic event shapes the other key events in the film, a sort of linchpin holding many of the characters and their stories together. Thus, when Joe agrees to go out fishing for Lou and Frankie on the boat Harmon is trying to reclaim, his decision represents an important step in overcoming his past (which the tentative relationship with Donna may have helped to inspire). Further, as a result of going back on the water again, Joe accepts the invitation of his feckless half-brother Bobby (Casey Siemaszko) to crew for him in order to help him impress a couple of clients he’s collecting by boat – a trip that goes very badly wrong – with Joe innocently bringing Donna and Noelle along on what he assumes to be no more than a harmless scenic cruise.

Finally, Joe’s wary relationship with Smilin’ Jack Johansson (Kris Kristofferson), a bush pilot whom we see in several scenes at the Golden Nugget, where he is clearly a regular, is coloured by the fact that one of the men who drowned while out on Joe’s boat was Jack’s younger brother Oley. Thus, the dangerous edge to Kristofferson’s persona – the sense his characters often give off of recklessness and potential violence – is reinforced by our knowledge of Jack’s personal grievance towards Joe, making Jack a particularly difficult character to read, despite his outward friendliness (or, rather, because of the way it disguises what we assume lies underneath). Jack may be seen as an instructive exemplification of what the Russian filmmaking pioneer, Lev Kuleshov, famously discovered when experimenting with the ways that our attributions of



*Can Jack be trusted? Kris Kristofferson and David Strathairn.*

emotions to characters on-screen are functions of editing and context as much as of the expressive qualities of their faces, with viewers picking up hints of emotional significance elsewhere and projecting such emotions onto faces whose meaning is otherwise indeterminate and obscure.

Thus, in *Limbo*, we may find ourselves imputing to Jack's unreadable face near the end of the film – a face masked by bland affability and reasonableness – hints of a deeper resentment which we imagine he must feel on the basis of what we know about Joe's implication in Oley's death. Alternatively, we may project onto Jack's face a genuine benevolence which we take to have been restored with the passage of so many years, as evidenced by his earlier congeniality in the bar.

It is surely no accident (or, if it is, then it is a particularly gratifying one) that the name of the place where Joe, Donna and Noelle get stranded is Kuleshov Island, and that, when Donna asks whether people come there to fish, Joe replies: 'No. Nobody does anything on Kuleshov'. The final scene may thus be taken to proclaim itself as Sayles' own version of Kuleshov's experimental cinema, with us as subjects. In addition, it is noteworthy that, in 1926, Kuleshov himself made a film entitled *By the Law* which was based on a Jack London short story ('The Unexpected'), set in Alaska near Skagway, in which four men and a woman share a cabin in the wilderness while on an expedition prospecting for gold, until one of them suddenly – and unexpectedly – shoots and kills two of the others. The married couple who remain alive manage to overpower the killer and tie him up before he can murder the two of them as well, but they are forced to keep watch over him until they can return to civilization lest he break free and kill them. Eventually they try him and condemn him to death themselves, before hanging him while some Siwash Indians act as reluctant witnesses (though in Kuleshov's film version, he returns to haunt them). Although the plot is not the same as that of *Limbo*, there are enough broad points of contact – three people in

an isolated Alaskan cabin, a totally unexpected shooting which disrupts a previously relaxed and friendly atmosphere, a couple under threat of being killed themselves after having witnessed the original shooting – to suggest that Sayles may have been familiar with the original story, or at least with Kuleshov's version of it, described by Ronald Levaco as 'Kuleshov's finest and most celebrated film' (1974: 12).

The main difference in Sayles' scenario is that instead of a solitary killer cooped up with the couple inside the cabin, we have two faceless killers outside, who may or may not be coming back, with Noelle occupying the place of the third figure inside. In *Limbo*, the 'unexpected' occurs just after Bobby confides to Joe that his 'clients' are drug dealers for whom he had worked until he threw a stash of drugs overboard when he mistakenly thought he was about to be stopped by a Canadian patrol boat, with Bobby unable to find the money to compensate them for the loss. While Joe, Donna and Noelle are below deck, the boat is suddenly boarded and Bobby is shot and killed, the three managing to escape and swim to shore, where they hide until their pursuers give up and leave, taking Bobby's boat away with them as well as their own. At this point, the fight for survival begins, as Joe, Donna and Noelle find an abandoned and derelict cabin belonging to a family who unsuccessfully tried to raise foxes for their pelts many years previously. As they settle into a survival routine – gathering and preparing sea cucumber, setting traps for fish, and so on – their evenings are punctuated by Noelle reading extracts from a diary she has found, presumably written by the adolescent daughter of the ill-fated family who lived there before.

In the first of these scenes, the firelight is rich and warm on Noelle's face, with blackness all around her, and the camera cuts from shots of her isolated in the frame to shots of Donna and Joe together, Joe studying Donna's face from time to time as Donna watches her daughter while she reads the first instalment. Noelle rations what she reads, despite

her mother's request for more as she gets drawn into the story (just as we will want more when the film comes to a sudden end), Noelle insisting, 'I found it. I'll read it when I want to'. We then cut to Donna on her own, and then to Joe, before cutting back to Noelle, and then to several alternating shots of Donna and Joe, each now alone in the frame. The scene ends with Donna insisting to the others and to herself that they'll be fine, a forced half-smile on her lips as the flickering firelight darkens and lightens her face in turn.

After what seems to be a cut to blackness, Joe's memory of the fatal accident with his boat is re-enacted as his nightmare, with Joe emerging from the blackness of the screen gasping for breath, looking around in the water, and calling out for the other men. The lesson he takes from the dream, which he explains to Donna when he wakes and she asks him what's wrong, is that 'You can't always save people'. So, both Donna's attempt to put a brave face on things – even as she finds herself unable to maintain her smile – and Joe's more pragmatic and open acceptance that they may not all survive are linked by the utter blackness of the screen between Donna's response and Joe's nightmare. Our memories of both of these conflicting attitudes – the alternative positions of hoping for the best or expecting the worst – will feed into our response to the ending of the film.

The next day, when Donna continues to try to counter Joe and Noelle's pessimism by construing their situation more positively ('We're on a camping trip. We're on a survival school camping trip ... I mean, people pay money to come on trips like this'), her breaking voice and short-tempered delivery of the lines make clear, as her forced smile did in the earlier scene, that she is well aware of how precarious their situation remains. Having proclaimed Joe and Noelle to be 'A perfect match. Doom and Gloom', she now turns her back on them and walks away, leaving them to set up fish traps as they talk and discover more common ground (for example, the fact that Noelle never lived with her father, nor Joe with his half-brother Bobby: thus, Joe and Noelle begin to unite as a family through their similar experiences of broken families and disappointing fathers in the past). The scene reinforces the editing strategies of the earlier diary-reading scene in altering the pattern of their relationships from a situation where Donna's and Joe's romance excludes Noelle to a more familial grouping with shifting moments of isolation and closeness involving various combinations of all three of them. For the moment, Joe and Noelle share the frame as they walk along the edge of the water and he teaches her how to set the traps, the scene ending with cuts between them as Noelle talks about her father's absence from her life, culminating in her asking quietly, 'You don't think we're gonna get rescued, do you?' and Joe looking back at her in silence.

From this we cut to a shot of Donna, in the cabin at night, looking isolated and grim, with Joe busy in the background, his back turned, as Noelle reads from the diary off screen: 'The house is small but cosy now that we have cleaned it up and made it our own'. The camera moves left with Joe as he works at weather-proofing the dilapidated cabin, then, as he moves out of frame to the right, it moves downward to reveal Noelle, thus including all three of them in the same shot, though they are not all in frame simultaneously. We then cut between shots of Joe and Donna listening and those of Noelle continuing to read about the vixens on the point of giving birth. Once again, Donna asks her to continue when she comes to a stop, and this time Noelle complies: 'The terrible birthing has begun. We think one of the vixens ate her litter'. This will be seen, in retrospect, to be a crucial turning point in the reading of



the diary, the point where its original author's story ends and is appropriated by Noelle who, confronted by an empty page, decides to carry on. As she pointedly begins to develop the story with her image of a mother violently devouring her young, we see Donna in medium close-up and alone in the frame. Her face is expressionless, its guardedness more typical of Joe and Noelle: for instance, even when Noelle discovers Bobby's body in the following scene, she gives little away. For the moment, after describing the baby foxes with their squarish fluffy heads, Noelle stops her narration and closes the book.

In the third diary scene, hints of the growing mental instability of the mother in the diary and her violent aggression towards the father creep into the narration, but Noelle breaks off abruptly. The cut to a silent Joe and Donna, sitting close together with Joe's hand on Donna's arm, is followed by a fade to black. From this we cut to Noelle retrieving a fish from the trap and pausing on her way back to Donna and Joe when she finds them kissing and embracing against a tree, unaware of her presence (one of many shots when characters watch each other without their gazes being returned). After a cut to all three of them on the shore, with Joe cooking the fish over a fire, Noelle's feelings of exclusion from the relationship between Joe and her mother soon take shape as angry rebuttal of her mother's optimism ('Good day for planes'), Joe once again reinforcing Noelle's pessimistic realism by suggesting that Bobby probably misled people at the dock about their plans. Noelle's aggression becomes more directly aimed at Donna, while Donna in turn angrily punctures Noelle's idealised view of her father, revealing that all the childhood gifts her father sent her were actually bought and sent by Donna herself. This revelation is thematically crucial in a film so consistently interested in storytelling, since so much of what Noelle has previously counted on as a fundamental aspect of her life and her precarious sense of self-worth (that she has a father who cares about her) is suddenly uncovered as just another story.

Unlike Noelle's own storytelling in taking over the diary's narration, which helps her confront her conflicting emotions about her mother, Donna's stories throughout her daughter's childhood were used to cover up such conflicts and avoid having to confront them, just like her present more openly fabricated stories about their being on a camping trip rather than fighting for survival for real. Such issues were already prominent in the film's earlier conflicting discourses about Alaska and, more particularly, in the intention of the bride's father, expressed in a restaurant where Noelle works as waitress, to offer future tourists not merely an illusion of danger but the real thing, a plumping for authenticity which is particularly ironic in the present context: not only is genuine danger nothing to be taken lightly, but much that Noelle thought was most real about her own autobiographical story turns out to have been

an illusion of her mother's making, just as Donna continues to choose an openly illusory version of their present situation over less comfortable truths. That Joe sides with Noelle in her preference for facing up to the truth is part of their growing closeness in other ways as well (suggested, for example, by the way they share the foreground of the frame at the start of the scene, as Joe cooks the fish and Noelle sits beside him, while Donna stands apart, a smaller figure further down the shore). Nevertheless, Noelle insists to her mother that Joe is not her father, though this happens just before Donna takes away her illusions about her actual father, who is far less concerned about her than Joe turns out to be, again reinforcing the sense of a new family in the process of being formed.



Noelle's storytelling now moves the film's overall story forward for the fourth and penultimate time, these scenes effectively providing the structural basis for the second half of the film, similarly to the way the various scenes at the Golden Nugget function in the first half. The present scene begins with a rich blue seascape under an Alaskan night sky, and Noelle's narration bridges the cut to a shot of her 'reading' the diary by firelight inside. As her fictional narrator recounts the story's latest instalment about the killing of the foxes and her mother's lack of response ('... she's only a black spot these days'), we cut to Donna and Joe sharing the frame but untouching, with serious expressions on both their faces, then back to Noelle, backlit by the fire. The way she hesitates from time to time or speaks with eyes unfocused on the open book in her hands alerts us to the fact that she's making up the story as she goes along, though Donna and Joe don't seem to notice. Recalling herself with a quick sideways glance, Noelle looks down at the book, looking up at Donna on the word, 'Mother ...' in her narration, followed by a reaction shot of Donna alone in the frame in medium close-up looking sad and surrounded by blackness, as Noelle's voice continues off-screen: '... sleeps with me now, and it is cramped and tense'. When we cut back to Noelle, she describes the way the mother drains the heat away from her daughter's body as they share a bed, Noelle's voice more tearful as her narrator ponders whether she's meant to be in such a cold, wet place, in an echo of Noelle's words in her own right in the previous scene ('I shouldn't be here! I shouldn't be in this state!'). There is another cut to Donna sometime later, after which the night's instalment ends with a fade to black on Noelle's tear-stained face.

At this point, we arrive at the key scene for a Kuleshovian reading of the ending of the film, beginning with a shot of Noelle as she feeds the signal fire on the shore, her voice calling, 'They're coming!' over the subsequent shot of Donna lugging branches from the woods. All three of them rush down to the shore, though Joe stops short, advising caution, as Donna rushes past him. The

music is cheerful, preparing us for an upbeat resolution as a tiny seaplane lands on the water, with Joe running down to join the women as the plane turns and then approaches. However, an unexpected cut to a shot of their tiny figures on the shore from the perspective of the plane undoubtedly causes us some anxiety as we are forcibly reminded of their vulnerability and the unknown identity and intentions of the pilot, once again dividing our response between wishful optimism and foreboding. When Jack Johansson emerges from the plane, our mixed feelings about him from earlier scenes do nothing to clarify our present response. Still, it does seem reasonable to assume he knew nothing of Bobby's death, so that his reaction to this news appears sincere, for if the drug dealers aim to kill Joe, Donna and Noelle because of what they know, it is unlikely they would have willingly told Jack about the murder as well.

Jack tells them he's been hired to look for three people and report back on their whereabouts, but now that he's implicated in the knowledge of Bobby's death, he is obviously in danger himself, and even more so if the three people on the island end up dead. If the film gave us time to think this through, we might conclude that he has more to gain by rescuing them than by colluding in their deaths and leaving himself as the only witness, but I don't think this is the reaction the film encourages here. My own experience of the film suggests that we share Joe's caution towards Jack when he attempts to counter Donna's ill-advised frankness by slipping into the conversation the information that they're not sure who the killers are, rather than our asking ourselves what the most rational thing for Jack to do might be. Our immediate interest is focused, instead, on a far simpler question: can Jack be trusted?

Unlike what happens with a traditional Kuleshov effect, however, if we look to adjoining shots and physical business within the sequence for help in deciding how to read Jack's face, we find contradictory elements, rather than more straightforwardly coherent indications of what emotional colouring to apply to the encounter. Thus, the shot from the plane is surely ominous (producing an immediate 'Uh oh!' response for viewers familiar with the conventions of horror films and thrillers), while Jack's gesture of offering them his jacket and first-aid kit before he returns to base for a larger plane with a full tank of fuel appears genuinely well meant. (Sayles' commentary on the DVD, which might be thought to be of some help, is equally inconclusive, though he repeats the advice he gave Kristofferson when the actor asked him whether his character was telling the truth: everything Jack says in the scene is true, except for his claim that the radio is broken, which he makes up in order to give himself time to think about what he's going to do without being rushed into an immediate decision. So the actor is no better informed than we are about his character's motives, and it is the last time we see him in the film.)

In the following sequence of scenes, as Joe, Donna and Noelle wait for the rain to let up and for Jack to return, the remaining tensions and uncertainties amongst them are resolved. Noelle's final stretch of narration, after her mother has discovered that the diary's pages are blank, exorcises the 'bad' mother in her story by having her reveal herself as the foxes' killer in a suicide note and then hang herself. Noelle barely maintains any pretence of reading the diarist's words, as her tear-streaked face and gaze away from the book for much of the scene proclaim her authorship much more openly than before. Donna's response – 'Her mother didn't love her enough to stick around ... I would never do that. No matter what' – symbolically restores her as the good mother, and we dissolve from Noelle's face to a shot

of her asleep across her mother's lap. As Donna talks to Joe about some gigs she has up north, he too moves into place within the newly constituted family, offering to look after Noelle while Donna is away. Just as the bad mother of Noelle's narration is replaced by a good one, so too is the absent and uncaring father of her childhood replaced by Joe.

Effectively, their interrelated stories have now, tentatively, been set to rights, and all that remains is to get them off Kuleshov Island and safely home, even if their future as a family remains uncertain. Such tidying up of the narrative, however nominal, is a common procedure in mainstream American films, once the main emotional business has been resolved. *Limbo* plays on such expectations as we move, in a series of dissolves, from Donna to several shots of misty slopes and then the signal fire, before cutting to the three of them together on the shore as Donna spots the plane, which is still little more than a speck in the sky. A sudden shift to the plane's point of view (if not precisely the pilot's), in an echo of the comparable shot from the scene of Jack's original arrival in the smaller plane, prolongs the suspense and evokes our earlier inability to pick up any unambiguous clues to guide our reading of Jack and his intentions. After another shot of the three of them together, which fades to white (the airplane motor dominating the soundtrack), we cut to blackness and silence, and then the end credits start to roll, with Bruce Springsteen singing over them in falsetto.

Speculating about what happens next is a normal part of the process of listening to stories or, in the case of narrative films, of watching their stories develop. Nevertheless, even if it were possible, we don't usually require detailed information about the future of every character in order to feel a satisfactory sense of closure and resolution. Thus, at the end of *Limbo*, it is unlikely that many viewers will be troubled over whether Harmon will get his boat back, or even wonder what really happened to Anne Marie, the diarist, from the point where Noelle took over her story. A film's strategies in making us pay more attention to some characters than others, and in generating curiosity and

suspense over their fates, not only have the effect of channelling and focusing our expectations, but require the illusion of a narrative world which, in comparison, is much vaster, with many characters and much implied activity on the sidelines of the main events, and outside the borders of the cinematic frame, as well as before and after the time frame of the film overall. *Limbo* operates as a traditional narrative in encouraging us to wonder whether Joe, Donna and Noelle will be saved or killed, while at the same time denying us an answer both by making Jack opaque and by uncovering the mechanisms of filmmaking and authorial decision-making behind the camera: a camera can be abruptly turned off, an image cut to black, unlike the world outside the film.

Throughout *Limbo*, Sayles has expressed interest in how films typically create their narrative worlds and locate their characters within them. For example, the even-handedness with which characters and events are treated at the wedding reception, and the marginality of the bride within the scene, keep us on the lookout for clues about which characters are to be central to the film and what their relationships to one another may be, thereby foregrounding a process which is normally accomplished much earlier and without calling itself to our attention to the same extent. Ironically, the realism of the scene in refusing to present its world from the point of view of a small number of privileged central characters is what alerts us to its unconventionality as a narrative film and its links with American independent filmmaking more generally, thus foregrounding its nature as an authored film which refrains from inserting us more seamlessly and imperceptibly within it. In this way, Sayles pushes us to confront two incompatible ways of construing realism at once: the Godardian sense that what we are watching is a film, and the mainstream 'Hollywood' sense that it is a seamless world.

Further, the various narrations which punctuate the film – the tall tales which the tourists consume, the locals' talk of unemployment and disasters at sea, Noelle's appropriation of Anne Marie's story in order to tell a version of her own –



are so ubiquitous as to facilitate a certain merging between objective events and more subjective storytelling about them. What one character may think is real (Noelle's childhood memories of her father's gifts), or what another character may choose to take as such (Donna's decision to construe their situation on the island as a survival camping trip) is often no more than a story. In some cases, language takes on not just a storytelling function, but a performative function in the film, where saying something constitutes doing it (for instance, Donna breaks up with Randy by more or less announcing it in public: the break-up is constituted by the act of saying so), thus accomplishing what philosophers of language like John Searle, or J. L. Austin before him, call an illocutionary act. The quintessential example of an illocutionary act is the act of promising: to say you promise something is, under the appropriate conditions, to make the promise. For example, when a bride and groom speak their wedding vows, their getting married is constituted by these linguistic acts. It is gratifying, in this context, that a wedding party should figure prominently in the early stages of the film, as if to remind us of the very real practical consequences which speaking may entail, while, at the same time, humorously offering us Donna's public break-up with Randy instead of the marital couple's vows.

There is no equivalent, in the realm of visual language, to such verbal illocutionary acts: images can't literally make statements or promises. However, it is tempting to see as broadly analogous, if not precisely identical, the way cinema – by 'speaking' the narrative world through visual means – is able to create it, to call it into being. Again, Sayles gives much more prominence to this process of 'writing' the film into existence than would be the case in many more mainstream films. Thus, *Limbo* begins with a blank white screen on which the title starts to write itself and the credits move into place, and the film ends with a cut to silence and an empty black screen, the film thus writing the narrative world into being and then erasing it abruptly at the end. Where the normal illusion, when we speculate about what happens to characters after the end of a film, is that a film may end but its narrative world somehow carries on, this is an impossible illusion to maintain if we acknowledge that a film's language is performative – or something like this – in this way, and thereby constitutes its world.

Yet despite all this, our emotional investment in the narrative persists: surely we continue to want to know what 'really' happens next at the end of the film, despite the paradoxical nature of this demand and Sayles' insistence that there is no 'next', since the narrative world comes into being and goes out of existence at more or less the same times as the projection of the film begins and ends.<sup>2</sup> The only way out of our frustration when confronted with the final blankness of the screen is to do what Noelle does when confronted with the blank pages in the diary: to invent an ending for ourselves. In *Limbo*, Sayles destabilises the distinction between writing and reading by inviting readers to become writers. However, this opportunity to provide ourselves with some sort of resolution to the suspense requires us to admit that the narrative world has no independent existence of its own, thus forcing us to acknowledge it as a product of the imagination at the same time as we attempt to prolong it as if it were real. Any remaining frustration we may experience is proof of the enormous power of what we are being asked to disavow.

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<sup>1</sup> Attentive listeners may recognise that Laskin recorded the voice-over of the previous sequence.

<sup>2</sup> Excluding non-diegetic framing moments – e.g. credits – at either end, at least when no narrative world is visible in the background.