Thirty-five years have passed since the August 1987 release of *Matewan*, a film written and directed by John Sayles that has remained in the collective memory of film buffs and labor historians alike. *Matewan* was the first commercial winner for Sayles, who followed its success with another WWI-era period piece, *Eight Men Out*, a flamboyant but sentimental portrayal of the 1919 cheating scandal surrounding the Chicago White Sox and a labor film of sorts in its own right. The seamier side of the Jazz Age often proves to be grist for a good flick, but aside from entertainment value, both films, especially *Matewan*, cried out with a social conscience propelled by prodigious acting and excellent storyboarding; the film won a Spirit award for Best Cinematography and was nominated for an Oscar for same. Since then, *Matewan* has brought film buffs, Appalachian activists, and social commentators together in mutual admiration.

The film begins with the arrival of a union organizer, played by Chris Cooper, in southern West Virginia at a time of renewed labor strife and violence among the miners themselves along racial and ethnic lines (this portrayal was based on mining baron Justus Collins's stated intention to maintain a “judicious mixture” of Black, Anglo, and Italian immigrant employees to avoid common cause among the rank and file). Cooper's character gets to work trying to organize his new neighbors but finds himself living in the same boarding-house (owned by a widow and her precocious evangelist son) as some other new arrivals, sneering agents of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. A local petit bourgeois merchant, and secret Baldwin-Felts agent, named C. E. Lively (one of a handful of actual historical figures featured in the movie) tried various methods of disinformation to drive wedges between the miners with varying success, and the agents themselves waste no time inflicting deadly violence against tent-dwelling strikers. But the agents overplay their hand when they try to evict mining families who are still living in Matewan's company houses, incurring the wrath of the town's actual mayor and police chief, both willing to prove the town's sovereignty from the coal company with hot lead (unlike many nearby company towns, Matewan, West Virginia, existed before the arrival of the large-scale coal operators, and both men were there to prove it).

[1] According to the narrator (who is revealed to be the widow's son all grown up and bound for the mines himself), it was the beginning of the “great coalfield war” that ended with the storied Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921. The young exhorter (played by future indie rock icon Will Oldham) had always preached that God's eye was on the plight of his mining neighbors, but the gunfight brings about a lurch toward dialectical ma-
materialism: “I think all God plans is we get born, and we got to take it from there.”[2]

Looking back after nearly four decades since its premiere, the film *Matewan* might seem as distant as the events it portrays in the wake of the First World War and the tail end of the Progressive Era. The year 1987 was well into the Reagan era, American labor unions were hemorrhaging membership, and organized labor, while probably more of a national player then than now, was not culturally *au courant*. The great factory labor movies of the 1970s like *F.I.S.T.*, *Blue Collar*, and *Norma Rae* had given way to dressier white-collar critiques of capitalism like *Wall Street* and *Working Girl*—incisive eviscerations themselves, but the finer lines of the class struggle were hard to delineate when the struggle was taking place strictly sixty floors above 4th Avenue.

*Matewan* was a period piece, and not only because a story of worker solidarity from 1920 West Virginia has merit, but because the distance from the present had to be expressed aesthetically with floppy ivy caps, antique Mauser rifles, and violent struggles that even Utah Phillips would acknowledge were “harder times than these,” what with the ability of capitalists to hire people to inflict deadly violence with impunity. There was no Labor Relations Board to hear desperate appeals. The shoot-out at Matewan was not just a deadly incident in the course of a strike but rather an existential struggle. And yet it also reflected the recent past, as well as a near future; the film includes coalfield folksinger Hazel Dickens and her music, paying tribute to the role she had played in the lauded documentary *Harlan County USA* (1976), and presaging her later appearance at the Benefit for Striking Pittston Miners in 1989 (Pittston was the last major Appalachian coal strike of the twentieth century).

*Matewan* is a labor movie, but it is also a movie about Appalachia, a region that has fascinated filmmakers since the silent era. *Matewan* remarkably does not victimize its setting or its denizens, although it does lightly make use of the “mountain man” archetype to interesting effect, apparently just to remind the audience that, yes, this story’s taking place in a land full of the colorful characters you’ve seen in less turgid flicks. Earlier than the famous gunfight (about an hour into the film) there is a peculiar *deus ex machina* moment that stands out from the rest of the movie like a sore thumb. Ruthless detectives are about to forcibly remove some miner families from their picket and take their belongings, and the heroic Wobbly (played by Chris Cooper) is about to sacrifice his own life for his ideals before the second reel has even started. Suddenly, three hirsute hunters identified as either as “foothill people” or “genuine hill people” emerge from the forest and inquire as to what is going on with so much recent gunfire and chaos. The miners explain their plight and seem to gain the sympathy of the mysterious mountain men, who assure them that they do not want anything to do with the strike as long as it leaves their ongoing hunting unmolested. The hill people get the better of the detectives, the latter’s modern firearms no match for men armed with archaic rifles—apparently muzzle loaders—from the “War Between the States.” Before withdrawing they assure everyone they do not recognize whatever legal authority the detectives may have because, as one says in farewell, “ain’t but one law out here, and that’s the law of nature.”

The visit from the “genuine hill people” is such a brief interlude in *Matewan*, it almost serves as a distraction from the primary story about the construction of class consciousness, the rejection of racial and class differences within the working class, and the warfare necessary to achieve industrial democracy.[3] Although it is averred that they had lost their land to the legal stratagems of the mining companies, they are nevertheless not participants in the film’s class struggle dialectic. In contrast to the miners and the detectives, they are (for the Marxian purposes of the movie) what Frederick Engels called *Völkerabfälle*, people lost to history due to lack of indus-
trially driven social development.[4] Or they might also represent non-Marxian phrases more directly associated with white mountaineers contemporaneous with the film’s Progressive Era setting: Berea College president William Frost’s pronouncement of “contemporary ancestors.”[5] Unlike the miners and the detectives fighting out a very modern post-WWI class war, the interloping hunters are vestiges of a nineteenth-century past somehow haunting the twentieth-century present even though they do not seem to be particularly aged, and certainly not wizened enough to be veterans of the Civil War. It is notable that the wielder of an antebellum muzzle loader from the “War between the States” in *Matewan* would be the scion of the “law of nature,” the suggestion being that these mountaineers of the past as yet shepherded a wilderness garden that had not, even by 1920, been completely conquered by the invasive machines of extraction and manufacturing. It would seem that even the disaster of the Civil War, as ruinous as it was to the well-being of Appalachia, did not threaten to replace the law of nature that still prevailed just outside the civic limits of what had become a company town. Even if the film is about change and struggle, the peculiar scene insists, perhaps exaggeratingly so, that something from the past remained. *Matewan* is a heavily political film fully dedicated to exposing the inhumane nature of industrialization in Appalachia and, by extension, in world history.[6]

And yet, for whatever reason, the screenwriters had to include some assurance that older pre-industrial practices still persisted, ambivalent to the ongoing struggles in the coal camps but nevertheless happy to occasionally come down from the hills to say hello. Despite worries from the then-mayor of Matewan, West Virginia, that his town would “be portrayed as a bunch of hillbillies,” *Matewan* strongly suggests that the men who best embody that visage actually lived outside of town, not in it.[7]

The final gunfight is one of the favorite stories of Appalachian leftists, and the subject of much speculation and mythmaking, particularly since the heroic Matewan police chief had “Hatfield” for a surname. Watching it now, it is hard to watch the gunning down of the gun thug detectives as a win for labor so much as just another film portrayal of white men with guns, a revolutionary film moment on par with the flag-raising in *Potemkin* spoiled by three decades of school shootings, revanchist militias, and other counterrevolutionary developments. A decade ago Charles A. Zappia noted that, while much of the plot involves breaking down the barriers of “judicious mixture,” the Italians and Black miners (particularly James Earl Jones as a real-life figure named Dan “Few Clothes” Chain) are absent at the site of the climactic massacre (and in real life the gunfight was indeed an all-white affair).[8] Although the boardinghouse widow gets her licks in too (dispatching one of the detectives in a cloud of shotgun smoke), we are mainly presented with an all-male affray with much or more in common with the ultraviolent Chuck Norris and Sylvester Stallone fare of the 1980s than with the previous decade’s working-class homages. If the movie were made in 2022 its makers might have been motivated to “add” diversity to the denouement, sacrificing documented history for the sake of constructing a usable past, just as *The Harder They Fall* (2021) fictionally teamed Nat Love up with Stagecoach Mary, Bass Reeves, and other African American historical figures for a profusely Black western that acknowledged the legacy of slavery in the late nineteenth century. But *Matewan* was influenced by twentieth-century social realism rather than twenty-first-century woke idealism.

Even though the final dispatching of Baldwin-Felts agents is treated as graphic, bloody catharsis, most of the film’s violence is not gratuitous. But it also does not reflect the experience of twenty-first-century Appalachia. Coal is still mined in southern West Virginia, but the opposition between miner and management that practically defined a cen-
tury’s worth of history has been replaced by a mutual understanding between the two based on shared opposition to a real or imagined environmentalist “war on coal” (there have been notable coal strike actions not too far away in eastern Kentucky and northern Alabama). Mine wages are high, especially compared to those of the “genuine hill people” working for Wal-Mart, by far West Virginia’s largest employer. Thurmond, West Virginia, the town that stood in for Matewan in the film (the two towns are about a hundred miles from one another) is now in the middle of a burgeoning tourist economy centered around the breath-taking New River Gorge National Park, while Matewan itself embraces its bloody history with a new museum dedicated to the mine wars. Appalachia still has a poverty problem caused by its pseudo-colonial history, but parts of the region are starting to look downright gentrified.

But *Matewan* is still instructive to the experience of workers, especially if we watch it from a postnational and intersectional perspective that rejects American exceptionalism and a strictly adult male worker identity. The centrality of Oldham’s character reminds us that child labor remains a major element in the global economy. The sort of violence portrayed in the movie is still experienced by workers in other countries in the twenty-first century, workers incorporated into the same capitalist system that harnessed the labor of men like Dan Chain. Strikes by coal miners in Spain and South African platinum miners occurred in 2012 and 2014 respectively. More recently, reports from Bangladesh, a country known for sweatshop conditions in its textile industry, suggest an epidemic of torture and abuse against domestic workers, many of them children. *Matewan* should stand as a cultural reminder that violence has remained a permanent element of capitalism long after what Marx called the stage of “primitive accumulation,” and not only in Appalachia.

Notes


[7]. Williamson, Hillbillyland, 7.


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