

Hillbillies Emerge from the Woods: An Unsociological Moment* in John Sayles's *Matewan* by Jimmy Dean Smith

John Sayles's 1987 film *Matewan* depicts a signal event in labor, social, and Appalachian history and thus the viewer feels the gravitational pull and satisfaction of a familiar trope—the myth embodied in a familiar liberal morality tale. The movie can and does do good, but it resists that impulse at the same time. Good is not all it does, since Sayles takes a worthwhile chance on alienating his core audience. While the aesthetic precepts of social justice often limit the range of approaches an engaged but bourgeois artist can bring to politically and socially charged material, Sayles offers a scenario that toys with liberal good taste and questions whether politics that assumes a pre-fabricated response has the guts to recognize the tantalizing power of subversive mythology.

Here are “the bare bones of the history [Sayles] started with” (Sayles 16):

In 1920 the minefields in eastern Kentucky and southwestern West Virginia are totally nonunion The United Mine Workers . . . target . . . several counties to be organized. The mine owners . . . hold Mingo and Logan counties in West Virginia in a military grip—controlling political officials and police, posting armed guards . . . sending spies into the midst of the miners and creating a “judicious mixture” of native miners, blacks and recent immigrants who they believe can never rise above their basic differences to resist collectively.

A strike begins near the town of Matewan The mayor and chief of police of the town, Cabell Testerman and Sid Hatfield, refuse a bribe offered by agents from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, which functions as the enforcing arm of the state's coal operators. Hatfield forbids the agents to evict striking miners from company housing within his jurisdiction. The Baldwins threaten to arrest him Evictions take place and the Baldwins walk to the train station to leave town. They are met in the street by Hatfield and Testerman. Shots are fired The shooting explodes into a massacre. Most of the Baldwin agents, the mayor and a few miners are killed. (Sayles 15-6)

* Because I use the oppositional term *unsociological*, I should indicate what it opposes: “The social sciences have cast a dreary blight on the public approach to fiction Today many readers and critics . . . associate the only legitimate material for long fiction with the movement of social forces, with the typical, with fidelity to the way things look and happen in normal life” (O'Connor, 814).

There are safe ways to film such a story, and Sayles often takes them. He sticks mostly to the facts and, when he swerves away from fact, it is usually in the safely “typical” directions Flannery O’Connor repudiates in “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction.” But he is also, as O’Connor writes about the storymakers she prefers, “alive to some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life” (815). And thus he offers us an opportunity to recognize that “the grotesque”—or in these fallen times, “aggressive bad taste”—secretly thrills the upright and the virtuous.

* * *

In 1986, Johnny Fullen told the *Troublesome Creek Times* that *Matewan*, then in production, “worr[ied]” him. Fullen, mayor of the real Matewan, West Virginia, was not worried about how well the film would do at the box office. Instead, he feared that “once again, we will be portrayed as a bunch of hillbillies” (qtd. in Williamson 7). In his words (“once again”) and in his syntax, the mayor’s weariness is plain. Clearly, what tires and frustrates Mayor Fullen is how mountain people “will be portrayed.” The passive construction tells a lot about how such outsiders as industrialists and missionaries—and filmmakers—have framed *real* mountain people as stereotypical hillbillies, imposing layers and layers and sub-layers of myths positive and negative (and some outright puzzling) on them.

As it turns out, Sayles, who both wrote and directed, resists or subverts the “hillbilly” stereotype in every scene except one. Instead, he depicts the Matewan strike as an inadvertent but magical opportunity to construct a bucolic workers’ paradise out of the racial chaos the owners have strategically nurtured. In two separate scenes, for instance, his ethnically diverse workers—Italians, African-Americans, native whites—join together to play their characteristic musical instruments in a birth myth both for mountain music and for an egalitarian workers’ America. In another scene, striking miners, evicted from their homes and living together in a tent camp, play a game of baseball that brings together workers of different races in a bucolic celebration of American values. Similarly, a local woman who has thus far reviled her new Italian neighbors, appalled that they turn meal into polenta (or “mush”) instead of corn bread, comes around in a scene built around facile culinary symbolism. She shares a rabbit with her Italian neighbor and together they make a semiotic stew that will feed both their families.

Sayles is on the side of the native West Virginians and their co-workers. But this allegiance does not mean that Johnny Fullen and his constituents had erred in 1986 when they expressed fears of being depicted as “a bunch of hillbillies.” They did not know that Sayles was one of the good guys. The pattern of cultural colonialism the mayor and others were reacting to is as old as the hills, and the power of media meant they had reason to worry. Hollywood, as J.W. Richardson demonstrates in *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains & What the Mountains Did to the Movies*, has had a long, profitable, and mostly unfortunate interest in portraying and eventually mythologizing the people of Southern Appalachia as unmodernized simpletons, sexed up Daisy Maes, and clownish “backward evolver[s]” (64). In an article about the making of *Matewan* in the August-September 1987 *Mother Jones*, Pat Aufderheide describes the “deep suspicion” that afflicts media-savvy mountain people like Mayor Fullen:

The suspicion springs from nightly news reports that feature “striker violence” rather than the reasons for striking in what’s come to be known as “Bloody Mingo County”; it

also stems from hoary images like those purveyed in *Li'l Abner*, *The Beverley Hillbillies*, *Deliverance*, and the TV series *Movin' On* When the locals found out that the film's subject is the Coal Wars, they feared the worst It took Robert D. Bailey III, a respected local figure and grandson of the judge who presided over the Matewan massacre trials, to assure residents that they would not be portrayed as . . . "murderous, blood-crazed hillbillies." (28)

Premiering in 1987, *Matewan* proved itself sympathetic to the mountain people. Sayles, that is, did not deliver the cheap shot locals had feared he would make. In the intervening years, the town of Matewan has come to terms with the movie, hosting a reenactment of the Massacre each May. And just last summer, bootlegs of the notoriously hard-to-find DVD of Sayles's film tempted me from the shelves of three different businesses in the eponymous town. While the Massacre may never have the touristic appeal of Matewan's other claim to fame—the little town on the Tug River was also Ground Zero for the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys, a historical myth that, now that the blood has dried, works out nicely for the Chamber of Commerce—Matewan (the town) seems at peace with *Matewan* (the movie). By the time Mayor Fullen expressed reservations about the film in 1986, the people of Pikeville, Kentucky, only 35 miles from Matewan, had already been celebrating Hillbilly Days for nearly a decade, camping it up with slouch hats, blackened teeth, and corncob pipes. What Pat Aufderheide calls the "hoary images . . . purveyed in *Li'l Abner* [and] *The Beverley Hillbillies*" had become the script for a mock minstrel show that upends the idiotic prejudices of outsiders, a laughing satire of hillbilly myth and a savage satire of parasitic mythmaking. But the people of Matewan, as the remarks of Robert D. Bailey suggest, were not so much concerned with their portrayal as comic fools as with another, equally or more pervasive myth. That is, it is hard to imagine mining humor from the stereotype of "murderous, blood-crazed hillbillies."

* * *

Before he even began writing *Matewan*, John Sayles already knew that the bald facts of his story would impose a genre, "the classic American Western" (16), on his film. How he wrote his characters—both those based on historical personages and completely imagined ones—and wrote fictional events to complement the historical ones his film would dramatize had a lot to do with that genre and his desire to reject the facile mythologizing of such classic Westerns as *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (21). "In some sorts of movies," he writes, "you want a kind of generic simplicity that can become mythic if you do it well enough But while the mythic is stirring, it can make you think 'this really doesn't have anything to do with *me*, those are allegorical figures up there on the screen.'" He sought therefore to "particularize, to humanize, to provide historical and domestic detail" (21), to film, that is, the kind of sociologically "typical" fiction Flannery O'Connor rejects.

But one scene plays with myth and mythmaking. The day following the Baldwins' bullet-riddled night attack on the strikers' tent camp, most of the men are back in town, meeting to plan acts of retaliatory sabotage. The gun thugs return to the camp where they find mostly women and children and the real prize, Joe, whom they promptly identify as "the Red, . . . the agitator" (66) and threaten to murder. They gunbutt him to the ground. Just as they are about to finish him, there is a shot from the woods and four mountain men emerge from the trees. Although the Baldwins outnumber and

outgun the hill men, the company thugs roar off in their car and Joe is saved. “Haint but one law here, an that’s the law a nature” (102), says the chief mountain man.

Sayles is too smart and too humane to wallow in the silliest though still toxic stereotypes of hillbilly cinema, but he allows himself a single, strikingly iconic scene in which “hill people” emerge from the woods, pointedly reject the values of bourgeois industrial modernity, and return once again to the wilderness. Sayles is aware that this scene sticks out from the rest of *Matewan*:

The one time I use a cavalry-to-the-rescue kind of appearance, the arrival of the hill people to bail Joe out at the tent camp, I lean on their mythic, generic stereotype as violent, sharpshooting individualists. Once the audience has their initial “Let’s see the Baldwins fuck with *these* guys” reaction, I try to push beyond the stereotype, to show some of the formal manners and sense of basic justice they also possess. The patriarch of the group invites the tent people to share the game in the area, and politely asks them not to shoot any of his hogs. (29)

Sayles raises the myth of the savage backwoodsman only to reject it, or so he says. But then this is the scene in which Sayles veers away from the typical to hint at “mystery and the unexpected” (O’Connor 815). That is, of course he “tr[ies] to push beyond the stereotype,” but first he raises the stereotype and gives his audience the thrill of wallowing (or so they think) in one of those hillbilly exploitation myths that Mayor Johnny Fullen feared *Matewan* would be full of.

Having defeated the Baldwins, the hill people merge back into the wilderness; they *become* the wilderness once again. But they are not, despite Sayles’s tidy hints on how to read this scene, only there to provide lessons in manners to town folk who apparently have forgotten the rules of mountain life. There are other reasons to examine this sequence—the hill men are more complicated than they initially appear—but the main thing to recognize is that this scene is haunted—not by *an* iconic scene out of Appalachian cinema but by *the* iconic scene, the one all good people are supposed to abhor.

In the novel, the scene begins like this: “Two men stepped out of the woods, one of them trailing a shotgun by the barrel” (Dickey 107). But hardly anyone recalls James Dickey’s novel when they think of the rape scene in *Deliverance*. Instead, it is John Boorman’s film that haunts us, and in it the rape scene begins like this: Two outsiders, members of a party of four suburban Atlanta businessmen canoeing in the mountains of northeastern Georgia, take a break from paddling the soon-to-be-dammed Cahulawassee River. While they rest, they—and we—notice movement in the woods. A human form flashes across a rippling rock-strewn creek. Another form—harder to make out at first but, we realize, wielding a shotgun—winds its way in and out of the low foliage, among the rhododendron and vines. It is hard to tell where woods begin and mountain men end since the strangers are dressed in brownish green and greenish brown. These two men, at one with the wilderness, do not so much “step . . . out of the woods” as slowly *emerge* from the trees and shadows. When our view of the strangers is finally distinct, we realize that, though we have never seen them before, we know them—or rather, we know their type. They are savage mountain men. We realize with a thrill that the two suburban outsiders, heretofore talking tough but barely skirting the real wilderness, are about to engage “the irresistible ferociousness of hillbillyland” (Williamson 151).

Scott Von Doviak writes that, “[s]ince its debut in 1972, [the film *Deliverance*] has often been proclaimed a masterpiece, but it has pissed off a lot of people as well”

(168). Among the angriest of the now nearly forty-year-old campaign against it are “mountain educators and intellectuals”: “The movie was angrily denounced in mountain institutions and at regional professional conferences as an impious return to hillbilly stereotypes” (Williamson 158). Despite the denunciations, as J.W. Williamson has shown (291), the film, especially the rape scene and the theme “Dueling Banjos,” show no signs of losing their scary power. Neither the general population nor “educators and intellectuals” seem ready to let the film go or to put it safely away in the canon of Classic Cinema. An allegorical reading of *Deliverance* tries to make the nightmare go away: the suburban outsiders are intent on imposing their will on nature and nature, in the form of the two men who emerge from the woods, responds with extreme prejudice. But, as the educators and intellectuals who “speak for the mountains” implicitly recognize, silently agreeing with a mass audience that watches Boorman’s film for thrills and ethnocentric giggles, the rape scene cannot be intellectualized into genteel submission. Those savage hillbillies keep emerging from the woods.

This is the tradition that Sayles invokes with his hill people scene. We can read the anomalous hill people scene as an allegory that simply, along with the rest of the film, flatters the kind of genteelly intellectual audience Flannery O’Connor reviled. Take the car in *Matewan*, for example. How Sayles’s hill people respond to the Baldwin’s symbolic machine indicates their position vis-à-vis the modernizing forces invading their mountains. The automobile can be easily enough absorbed into an intellectual tradition and thus put into intellectual deep freeze: it is the machine in the garden, an image of modernizing brutality.

But why, really, do the hill people focus on the car when they emerge from the woods to confront modernity? (Have they read Leo Marx?) What appears most to upset them about the outsiders in their midst is not that the Baldwins threaten violence against the weak but rather that their vehicle does violence to aesthetics. The noise the car makes is “an offense to the ear” (66), says the hill people’s patriarch, Isaac. The car does not belong in the woods and neither do its owners—Isaac tells the Baldwins to “get in that machine and get back to town where you belong” (67). This seems to be a satisfying conclusion to the showdown: the Baldwins, who wield revolvers and repeating rifles, yield to the hill people, who have single shot rifles. No matter that the modern world has force and machines that offend the ear on its side, the message that we are left with is, despite Sayles’s assertion to the contrary: Yes, the Baldwins *did* pick the wrong guys to fuck with.

But the outsiders in this mountain setting are not limited to the gun thugs. The strikers themselves—Italians, African-Americans, native town folk—are out of place in the hills as well. They wear manufactured clothes, eat packaged food, and, when they are wronged, seek redress through agents of civilization like Chief of Police Sid Hatfield (who, like the hill people, carries guns and, unlike the hill people, wears a badge). The strikers are modernized (or at least modernizing) outsiders, and the criticism Isaac focuses on the alien Baldwins targets them as well. The machinery of capital is just as much an offense to the law of nature as the Baldwins’ car.

And then there is the machinery of filmmaking, which brings us and Sayles reflexively back to the fears that Mayor Fullen and other Matewanians expressed. Mostly, *Matewan* is a nice film, rejecting a vulgarization of its historical sources, refusing to sensationalize and exploit. That is, it does not depict southern West Virginians as “a bunch of hillbillies.” But then Sayles, resisting the pressure to make *Matewan* a classic American western, quotes *the* iconic scene from classic (if that is the word) Appalachian cinema. Hillbillies emerge from the woods and into his sociologically rich examination

of labor and capital. Myth comes from out of nowhere. For a moment, Sayles overcomes the debilitating effects of good taste and a developed social conscience.

Works Cited

- Aufderheide, Pat. "Coal Wars: On Location with John Sayles." *Mother Jones*. August-September 1987. 24-29, 44-5. Print.
- Dickey, James. *Deliverance*. New York: Delta, 1970. Print.
- Harkin, Anthony. *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Inscoc, John C. "Deliverance." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2010. Online.
- Lang, John. Introduction. *Appalachia and Beyond: Conversations with Writers from the Mountain South*. Knoxville: U Tennessee P, 2006. xi-xviii. Print.
- O'Connor, Flannery. "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." *Collected Works*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Library of America, 1988. 813-21. Print.
- Sayles, John. *Thinking in Pictures: The Making of the Movie Matewan*. Cambridge: De Capo, 1987. Print.
- Von Doviak, Scott. *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004. Print.
- Williamson, J.W. *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies*. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1995. Print.