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Karine Hildenbrand, George Larke-Walsh

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## The 90s Hollywood Gangster: Generic Reflections and Deflections

Karine Hildenbrand

“It took a combination of sound film, Capone’s Chicago, Prohibition and the mood of the depression to inaugurate the first phase of the [gangster] genre” (Shadoian 2003, 29). It has been traditionally argued that the gangster genre was born in the early 30s thanks to three movies that established its codes, themes, and narratives: *Little Caesar* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1931), *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932). Set in the city, mostly at night and detailing the illegal activities of gangs involved in the liquor business during the Prohibition era, the genre found tremendous success for several reasons. First, it reflected contemporary concerns: the expansion of gangster networks throughout the country; the corrupt, violent atmosphere of urban sprawls; the ruthless wars between ethnic gangs (climaxing on Feb. 14, 1929 with the Saint Valentine massacre). Second, it capitalized upon technological innovations. The advent of sound in movie theatres not only accelerated the pace of the movies (explanatory intertitles were no longer necessary) but also heightened the spectators’ excitement as they could hear telephones ringing, tires screeching, and machine guns stuttering. Moreover, the Italian or Irish accents of the protagonists questioned the idea of a common American identity. Finally, the gangster genre challenged American ideals. The Promethean aspect of its hero appealed to an audience who endured The Great Depression and who felt betrayed by the Government.

Voicing dissent and expressing tensions, the gangster genre was structured through paradigms (individual vs. society, modernity vs. tradition, defiance vs. obedience, freedom vs. entrapment) that highlighted its fundamental ambivalence: “the gangster is a seminal figure in modern cinema not only because he embodies modernity but also because the gangster film becomes a site for a set of tensions that have dominated the twentieth century” (Mason 2002, 5). The gangster is an iconic figure who stands at a crossroads between reification (a system of codes and conventions identified in the 1930s) and mutability (the remediation of social concerns that ceaselessly shift with time). Central to this paradoxical figure are the conflicting ideologies that shaped the country.

The enormous public success of the 1930s filmic gangster led to its demise. The Production Code Administration (PCA), a body designed to ensure that moral standards were respected and traditional values promoted on screen, was adopted by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America in 1930 and actually enforced in 1934 when films needed the approval of the PCA before being released. Primarily preoccupied by the representation of sex, the PCA became increasingly concerned with the extraordinary appeal of the gangster. In July 1935, a moratorium was imposed on gangster films. Outlaws were replaced by law-enforcers, and although the studios cast the same actors, audience attraction waned. The genre mainly survived in B-productions while Hollywood exalted patriotism and contributed to the war effort under the supervision of the Office of War Information. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the gangster figure mutated and reappeared in two subgenres: the syndicate and the caper/heist movie. In the former, the gangster is pictured as a helpless individual confronted to a foul system that outweighs him (*Force of Evil*, Abraham Polonsky, 1946; *On The Waterfront*, Elia Kazan, 1954); in the latter, he is one of the many individuals gathered to perform a robbery (*The Killers*, Robert Siodmak, 1946; *The Asphalt Jungle*, John Huston, 1950). In the Cold War context, the *Film Noir* aesthetics enhanced the idea of paranoia while the scenarios focused on the rampant corruption infiltrating all layers of society. Contrary to the omnipotent, exuberant characters of the 1930s, the postwar gangster was depicted as a mistrustful and sullen loner. In the 1960s and the gangster genre barely survived through to biopics that promoted nostalgia and debunked the mythical aura of

historical gangsters (*Bonnie and Clyde*, Arthur Penn, 1967). The gangster's actual regeneration took place in the 1970s with the enormous success of *The Godfather I* (1972) and *II* (1975). The Corleone family saga was embedded with American history. The ambiguity of the term *family* (referring to blood relatives as well as organized crime) highlighted the many dilemmas facing the characters; it also epitomized the growing divisions of American society in a context where counterculture gained momentum after appalling events such as the Watergate scandal or the seemingly never-ending Vietnam War. After a strong decline throughout the 1980s, the public success of movies released at the beginning of the 1990s caused a noticeable increase in the production of gangster films, and the rebirth of the genre was soon celebrated. But what did rebirth mean exactly in a postmodernist context?

The postmodernist aesthetics relied upon references to and the rearrangement of previous texts, developing parody as well as nostalgia, and promoting generic hybridity. They evidenced the artificial, meaningless, and fragmented nature of contemporary society where market capitalism ruled supreme. My contention is that the gangster's renaissance on screen was a way to scrutinize the paradoxes of the American Dream through time. Contemporary concerns related to previous situations in order to examine the palimpsestic and prismatic identity of the USA and redefine its genesis. The early 1990s gangster movies developed a spectacular as well as specular esthetic. The gangster genre provided the movies' thematics but also functioned as an object of study for the directors who rely upon generic conventions. They displayed those conventions to play with the audience's expectations and create new-fashioned works of art while mirroring contemporary concerns. Among them, the overwhelming promotion of a public image that is detrimental to any form of inner consistency. The *mise en abyme* of story telling highlighted the fact that narrative arrangement and fallacy dominate the 1990s. The intradiegetic thrill of the classic gangster was therefore renewed by the extradiegetic thrill of storytelling – where the spectator submits to the (re)arrangement, puzzlement and excess of the movies.

I have chosen to focus on three very different types of movies; at first glance their sole connections seem to be that they were released at the very beginning of the decade and belong to the gangster genre. Their directors, production budget, and public and critical receptions were indeed strikingly different. *Miller's Crossing* was Joel and Ethan Coen's third movie. Although not well-known by the mainstream public, the brothers received critical praise for their first movie (*Blood Simple*). They were granted a comfortable \$14 million budget for *Miller's Crossing*, but the very intricate scenario resulted a very mixed reception from both public and critics alike. *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) was Quentin Tarantino's first small budget movie (\$1.4 million). It experienced tremendous popular success and was rewarded in many countries. Finally, *Goodfellas* (1990) was the 12<sup>th</sup> opus of internationally acclaimed director Martin Scorsese. It met with immediate box-office success (almost \$47 million in the USA for a \$25 million budget), earned six Oscars, and is still considered one of Scorsese's masterpieces. The films' explicit divergences also extend to the generic references displayed in the corpus. Each movie claims affiliation to a different gangster genre or subgenre that relates to a specific social and historical context.

Although no specific date is given in *Miller's Crossing*, it clearly refers to the late 1920s, or early 1930s. Men wear three-piece suits, long coats, and fedoras. The Prohibition era is mentioned in a toast "to Volstead", characteristic slang words pervade the movie and stereotypical violence is revived through the use of tommy guns, bombings, racing cars, and executions. The emblematic locations of the genre are displayed, such as crowded speakeasies, deserted warehouses, and dark side alleys. The attention to detail in the minute reconstitution of iconic locations, attires and accessories provides visual pleasure and is

heightened by slow camera moves that allow the viewer to indulge in the visual evocation of an era. While part of the fascination for audiences of the 1930s came from the display of technical innovations and modernity on screen, in these later films it is transformed into a set of myths, moods and unique visual tones packaged for a 1990s audience. The scenario also borrows from the hardboiled literary genre. Two of Dashiell Hammett's novels provide location and motive to the movie; the small anonymous city that is torn apart by a gang warfare and is subject to the volatile collusion between gang leaders and city officials is inspired by *Red Harvest* (1929), while the complex relationship between Leo O'Bannion (Albert Finney) and Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne) borrows from *The Glass Key* (1931) and the ambiguous tandem formed by Ned Beaumont and Paul Madvig. One of Hammett's stylistic idiosyncrasies – the use of abrupt cuts between apparently disconnected chapters – is also remediated on screen through a complex narrative where transitions between sequences cut to black and open onto puzzling images with little to no expository detail. *Miller's Crossing* originates in works of art produced during the Prohibition and the Great Depression and alludes to both the literary private operative and the filmic gangster from that period. The first stereotype is characterized by disenchantment, while the second embodies transgression. Contradictory trends collide within a narrative that alternately reveres and mocks its generic references.

*Reservoir Dogs* revisits and pays tribute to the postwar cinematic gangster. While the USA emerged as a superpower in the late 40s and early 50s, the cold war political environment and attendant threat of a nuclear warfare created a myriad of social anxieties. Without a doubt, Quentin Tarantino's film was inspired by the film noir classic, *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950). Generally considered to be the first heist movie, *The Asphalt Jungle* utilizes film noir aesthetics to convey ideas of surveillance and mistrust. Doors are rarely opened but instead remain carefully locked, while characters inhabit dark corridors or dimly lit rooms in efforts to remain hidden. Most of the action takes place at night and in the bowels of the city, such as the sewer that gives access to the city vault. Both depth of focus and chiaroscuro lighting emphasizes the theme of secrecy, while also contributing to the isolation of the characters who are seldom shot together and seem trapped within a labyrinthine underworld. In *The Asphalt Jungle* opportunist associations have fully superseded the 1930s attempts at gang solidarity. *Reservoir Dogs* similarly focuses on such criminal isolation. The men gathered to perform the bank robbery do not know each other and use color aliases (Mr. Blue, Mr. Brown, etc.) to remain anonymous. Within the makeshift group, any potential intimacy will prove a weakness that is in turn a lure for potential failure, as illustrated in the film's conclusion.

Narrative fragmentation also amplifies suspicion and uncertainty. The film opens *in media res* in the midst of a panicked escape. It is soon evident the heist was a failure and thus the narrative dynamic is dominated by a reversed whodunit – who is the traitor among the gang? The narrative structure is comprised of multiple viewpoints wherein each protagonist searching his memory to identify a potential traitor and dramatic irony in that a revelation is provided to the spectator half way through the diegesis. In an update of *The Asphalt Jungle's* postwar concerns, *Reservoir Dogs* might be envisioned as a study in alienation in its full polysemy: entrapment (characters are confined in a remote location), estrangement (one among them is an informer), and madness (mostly encapsulated in Mr. Blonde). Combining a heist with an undercover cop narrative also dramatizes the quintessential ambivalence of the gangster – an individual who belongs to the gang but is also set apart when he achieves success and whose success, albeit criminal, grants him public recognition and social acceptance.

*Goodfellas* is a film that is heavily influenced by the significant shift in generic themes and structures that took place in the 1970s. The collusion between the underworld and

upperworld; the staging of the gangster as insider and/or outsider was further developed in the mafia movie. This subgenre was masterfully brought to the screen by Francis Ford Coppola with *The Godfather* trilogy. Dilemmas constituted the main focus of the plot and were exposed through paradigms and visual contrasts: inside vs. outside; family vs. work; virtue vs. crime. Counterpoint and rupture paradoxically contributed to the unity and consistency of Coppola's aesthetics: "Basically, both the Mafia and America feel they are benevolent organizations. Both the Mafia and America have their hands stained with blood from what it is necessary to do to protect their powers and interests" (quoted in Yaquinto 1998, 125). The films appeared to criticize capitalist America for its cynical blindness in a century where counterculture had slowly but surely gained momentum. The ambitious scope of the Corleone saga not only examined the degeneration of American society but also pinpointed moments of historic transformations, most notably mass immigration through Vito Corleone's arrival in America. Inspired by a true story and based upon Nicholas Pileggi's book (*Wiseguy*, 1985), *Goodfellas* similarly relies upon jarring parallelisms. For example, card games give way to the murder of a boy, and festive gatherings open onto slow motion images of the guests' corpses; additionally, contrapuntal music accompanies scenes of violence. Martin Scorsese displays the genre's significant tropes throughout the biopic, but he also introduces major alterations. First he deprives the characters of their glamorous aura, or what Neale calls the "Mafia mystique":

(...) the difference between lower-level gangsters and ordinary citizens are much less marked. In consequence, however extraordinary the activities they engage in may be, those activities take place, as Nicole Rafter points out, in a much more down-to-earth, much less controllable 'quotidian' environment (2002, 37)

Lack of control pervades the movie from the increasingly hectic pace of the narrative to the childish yet murderous temper of Tommy (Joe Pesci). It is evident that the characters have none of the self-assured grandeur of Coppola's films. Scorsese's film is influenced by *The Godfather* and its thematic paradigms, but it rejects the grandeur and romanticism in favor of base cruelty and cynicism.

This mini corpus of films first appears as a generic replay of the most famous trends in gangster films at a time when they relevantly address America's social disturbances. References to the genre's history are however complicated by the inclusion of other plots involving under cover police officers and/or changes in rhythm, scope, or perspective. Reflection is deflected and results in prismatic (re)visions. Therefore, while the three films initially appear to be quite different to each other, fragmentation of the narrative is one of the most striking features of each film.

### **Reworking the genre's codes through fragmentation**

A taxonomy of the gangster genre will allow me to identify invariants that grant generic identity to the films. Such a process might seem simplistic as it tends to foreground common elements rather than complex forms and discard the historic context in which their production took place. It is nevertheless a good starting point to study how stereotypes are replayed and transformed in my mini corpus of films. The 1930s gangster's founding trilogy will here be considered as an "ur-text" and I will borrow from Jonathan Munby (1999), Fran Mason (2002), and Jack Shadoian (2003) to identify essential tropes and see how they are reworked in the later films.

### ***Success and failure: colliding ideologies***

Fundamental to the 1930s gangster is the rise and fall structure of the narrative. The irresistible ascension and stark collapse of the protagonist “supports the view that crime films are often disguised parables of mobility as a punishable deviation from one’s assigned place” (Shadoian, 6). Hence, it articulates the paradox of the American Dream, where self-advancement is promoted as a given right for any hard-working individual, but is also immediately associated with crime (cf. the robber barons). The gangster becomes a tragic, mythic, and even romantic figure “who transcends the social order for a brief period and refuses to bow down to the systems of laws and ideology which ultimately destroy him” (Mason, 7). *Goodfellas* utilizes the classic rise and fall trajectory. The narrative covers the 25 years (1955-1980) during which Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) gradually climbs the criminal-social ladder of the local Sicilian mafia and acquires wealth and power, then eventually falls back into anonymity by entering the witness protection program. Henry’s ambition is mentioned in voice over at the opening of the movie and grants it dynamics:

As far back as I could remember I always wanted to be a gangster. To me, being a gangster was better than being President of the United States (...) it meant being somebody in a neighborhood that was full of nobodies.

Crime is the means to success and consequently appears as a perverted form of the American Dream. More strikingly, crime is deemed mundane. Illegal activities are repeatedly labeled “normal,” as if the criminality of gangsterism was just a question of viewpoint. The very reiteration of scenes suggests they are part of the characters’ routines; the police entering Karen’s home with a search warrant, the endless threats and murders, and the ritual meetings of gangsters and their families are some examples of this. To Henry, the gang is a welfare state. He recurrently uses the words “belong, respect, protection” and insists upon the power and money he quickly acquires. The images both corroborate and contradict the fairy-tale narrative. The luxurious cars, heavy jewelry, and well-tailored suits of the gangsters are contrasted with sudden outbursts of violence or slow camera moves detailing corpses. *Goodfellas* exposes a gap between the theory, or romanticism of gangster life through Henry or Karen’s narrative voiceovers and the practice, revealed in the violent events that support their successes. The protagonists portray themselves as above the mire and indulging in opulence. This assertion runs counter to the increasingly graphic spectacles of bloodshed and the intrusion of police forces that finally dismantle the gang. Scorsese works upon divergence. He circumscribes the cracks in the narratives and focuses on the characters’ lies, which escalate as the pace of the narrative accelerates. The gangster’s romantic stance is suggested in the prologue of the movie because it focuses on Henry’s young years and his devout admiration of local hoods, but as soon as he becomes part of the gang, romance is replaced by daily chores, betrayals, and uncontrollable violence.

In comparison to *Goodfellas*, *Miller’s Crossing* obliterates success and is concerned with loss from the outset. It centers upon Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne), a very evasive character who initially sides with Leo (an Irish gang leader) but later pledges allegiance to Johnny (his Italian rival). The question haunting the plot is that of Tom’s faithfulness to Leo – does he really side with the enemy or does he merely pretend to, the better to serve Leo’s interests? The ending suggests the latter but also conveys the notion of meaninglessness because their friendship did not survive the intricate situation and events. The movie is fraught with betrayals, as suggested in the potential crossings and double crossings of the film’s title. Its meandering scenario examines Tom’s slow descent into rejection and isolation, whatever his choices. His hat stands as an objective correlative to the notion of drift. It is carried away by the wind in the opening credits, and Tom spends a considerable amount of time looking for it or retrieving it. His erratic trajectory paradoxically evokes chivalry and the

vain quest for the Holy Grail. Indeed, *Miller's Crossing* is in fact the name of the forest where Tom's hat flew away in the *incipit*. An unusual *topos* for the genre, it is the scene of oneiric struggle and quest that recalls the magic forest of Brocéliande associated with the myths of King Arthur. The medieval reference reveals that Tom's quest is doomed. Failure dominates the scenario.

*Reservoir Dogs* explores the tragic potential of the classic gangster. Tarantino opens the movie after the heist has gone wrong and locates most of the action in the warehouse where the gangsters had arranged to meet. The empty, decaying room in which each word uttered is echoed creates a stark atmosphere. The careful arrangement of colors range from white to pale green/light grey and are contrasted by the black suits of the gangsters; this gives the movie a black and white feel. The overall austerity refers to Greek tragedy, with the classic unity of time, place, and action. The feeling of emergency is connected to timing because of the impending death of Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) who was shot in the gunfight ensuing the heist and has kept shedding blood since. The neutral-color backdrop of the warehouse is thus increasingly contaminated by red. The highbrow reference to tragedy is nevertheless degraded because the characters lack the eloquence and noble motives of tragic heroes. Their disruption of the social order is not for the greater good.

In consequence, these 1990s gangster narratives underline degeneration. If the characters in *Goodfellas* savor their money and local fame for a while, they also become the slaves of their overwhelming greed and the victims of their hubris. *Miller's Crossing* and *Reservoir Dogs* elude success and immediately focus on treason. The early gangster's heroic stance translates into failure for these modern films.

### ***Social transgression and individual command***

A second trope is the gang as surrogate family. The father figure is almost always missing and replaced by the gang leader in the classic gangster (Shadoian, 8). Traditional family values symbolize old Europe and are obsolete on the new continent. They give way to capitalism and entrepreneurship. Run like a business, the gang obeys a strict hierarchy. The gangster's achievement of the American Dream hence requires upsetting the gang's organization and alienating the individual from his substitute family. An outsider to the American social order, the gangster joins an alternate community whose rules and conventions he will ultimately have to transgress in order to achieve individual success. The demise of the family unit only generates "an endless cycle of destruction of surrogate families and the descent into chaos of gang war which is itself a conflict between 'families'" (Mason, 8). Betrayal is a dominant theme in the three movies. *Miller's Crossing* opens as Italian gang boss Johnny Caspar (Jon Polito) challenges Leo's (Albert Finney) authority as Irish mob leader and wants control over the town. The perfect heist gone wrong in *Reservoir Dogs* indicates the presence of an intruder among the gangsters, while in *Goodfellas*, family values and trusted friendships disintegrate in favor of personal greed. Henry's individual pleasure prevails (be it with women, money, alcohol, or cocaine) and translates into a series of deceptions, which culminate in his own betrayal when he testifies for the police.

*Goodfellas* features the "breakdown of family order and the infiltration of yuppie nihilism" so characteristic of the 1990s (Yaquinto 1998, 169). Personal success requires the denial of communitarian values. The 1990s cinematic gangster successively estranges himself from the American society, his ethnic community, family, and the gang. He stands as the odd one out. This estrangement can take various forms. In *Miller's Crossing* Tom functions as a point of resistance in the narrative. He turns down Leo's and Johnny's proposal to settle his gambling debts, and he refuses to fight when he is beaten up; he rejects Verna's affection, and he initially spares Bernie's life only to kill him later on. Such reactions create mistrust in the other characters, but they also unsettle character empathy or identification for the spectator.

On the contrary, the undercover cop narrative in *Reservoir Dogs* facilitates identification with Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), but the process is contravened by the narrative structure. Identification is initially delayed in order to maintain suspense so that audiences may first relate to other characters. This multi-identification complicates the audience sympathies for law over criminality, because in an unsettling reversal of morality, audience sympathy for Mr. Orange is challenged because of his subsequent betrayal of Mr. White's (Harvey Keitel) faithfulness in the film's climax.

In *Goodfellas*, the movement from affiliation to estrangement is exemplified by the times Henry spends in jail. The first time is offscreen, but his incarceration is congratulated by his criminal family as a sign of loyalty. The second time highlights the gang's cohesion and power. Henry and his fellow gangsters share an incredibly comfortable cell where they cook Italian meals, watch TV, and peacefully wait for freedom. Corruption rules among prison employees, and the time served looks like a holiday camp. It nevertheless corresponds to Henry's first breach of trust as he starts dealing drugs to provide money for his wife and children on the outside. When he finally comes out of jail and is then arrested by narcotic agents, isolation and mistrust prevail.

The classic trope of rise and fall is replayed but also transformed into fragmentation that is initially identified through the nonlinear timelines evident in this group of films. *Miller's Crossing* is the only movie to unfold chronologically, but the narrative is increasingly complex and proceeds mostly through riddles. Sequences open on a shocker close up or "hyperrealist" sound clues that delay interpretation such as a muffled noise on a black screen revealing a man punched in the face or a kid facing a corpse in a dark alley and stealing his misplaced wig. The movie generates a specific detachment where the viewer alternately relates to the plot and identifies with Tom or steps back from the diegesis (Sineux 1991, 25). *Reservoir Dogs* and *Goodfellas* rely on time disruptions. The former focuses on one day in the lives of the gangsters and proceeds through flashbacks that gradually reveal the genesis of the heist. The latter has a much more epic scope that paradoxically epitomizes all the generic staples in a frenzied manner. Henry's quick voiceover gives the diegesis a rapid pace because it avoids exposition scenes, while the inscriptions onscreen permit to jump from one time and place to the other. The classic gangster dilemmas are expressed through puzzles and gaps in these films. They require reconstitution from the spectator and depend primarily on his/her knowledge of the history of the genre.

### ***Circumscribing inner divisions through alterity***

One of the symbolic functions of the classical gangster was to voice otherness and represent ethnicity. The actors who acquired fame by playing them were quite different from traditional film stars. James Cagney, Paul Muni, and Edward G. Robinson had European origins, came from the Lower East Side, and spoke a street vernacular with an accent (Munby, 39). Whereas the classic western promoted a common history and celebrated the bravery of the new settlers who reached the Promised Land, the classic gangster challenged the idyllic picture through the spectre of immigration. The newcomers were perceived as a threat to the stability of WASP America. Their screen presence in the 1930s confirmed the danger but also granted them heroic stature. In the 1990s, the idea of an enemy within was taken up and exterior opponents seemed to have disappeared, notably with the fall of the Berlin wall, which meant the defeat of the communist regime but also the end of a rather comfortable binary system of oppositions dividing the globe between East and West. The enemy could now be anywhere, a scattered and lurking danger. The three movies work upon intrusion in different ways. *Miller's Crossing* mirrors the classic opposition between Italian and Irish gangs and uses their opinions of the Jewish character Bernie (John Turturro) as a bone of contention between the two groups. Confrontations in the movie always involve a third party. Duels



depend upon triangular relations. Leo's business rupture with Tom is rooted in a private matter (Tom had an affair Leo's girl, Verna). The love triangle is replicated in a homosexual version with the Dane, Mink (his "boy"), and Bernie (Mink's lover); it ends with the killing of Mink by Bernie to save his own life. Romantic betrayal infiltrates businesses and creates instability. *Goodfellas* also centers upon a trio but highlights the strong friendship between Henry, Jimmy (Robert De Niro), and Tommy. The *media res* opening establishes their solidarity in crime as they help Tommy kill and get rid of Billy Batts' (Frank Vincent) corpse. This brutal scene also denotes their violation of the gang's hierarchy. Billy was a higher-ranking member, and his murder symbolizes the trio's first step towards growing unfaithfulness to Paulie (Paul Sorvino). Tension between the gang's tight organization and the gangsters' excessive nature is established from this violent outset. Among the gang's rules, heritage seems particularly interesting. Only members of pure Italian blood can be 'made men' (that is formally enter the mafia hierarchy). Therefore, Henry and Jimmy can never truly belong, while the emotionally unreliable Tommy can. In this sense, lineage prevails over skills. Faithful to the principles of the heist movie, *Reservoir Dogs* presents a group of criminals temporarily associated for a specific robbery. The apparent uniformity of the group (all wearing the same outfit and walking together during the opening credits) soon proves illusory for a few reasons. For example, they are scattered away after the arrival of the police, and their suits only display their physical dissemblance. Furthermore, their behavior and reactions to each other differ greatly, and finally, the revelation of a police informant within the group heightens paranoia. The group's striking diversity is an accurate metaphor of American society. The romantic idea of a "melting pot" that had dominated America since the 18<sup>th</sup> century stood as the paragon of assimilation, but this idealism started being challenged in the 1960s with the development of an alternative "salad bowl" theory, which claimed that many cultures coexisted but did not blend. Inner divisions were revealed that mapped out a fractured country.

The 1990s mini corpus borrows from the classic gangster tropes to transform and rearrange them. The narrative structures neglect the protagonists' irresistible ascension in favor of carefully examining their downfall and its consequences. Failure dominates, and the apparent unity of the gangs is soon revealed as illusory. Betrayal is a key theme that illustrates the problematic relationships between the group and the individual – or between social order and free will. Fragmentation pervades the scenarios, highlighting the core ambivalence of the gangster genre as it has developed in these later films.

### **Aesthetic fluctuations as social comment?**

Endeavoring to work and rework the gangster genre through time and history turns out to be an efficient way of exposing the country's tensions. That is what Jonathan Munby asserts when mentioning the 1930s gangster's "dialogical principle":

The talking gangster is at war with a form of cultural apartheid. While he ultimately fails in his own attempt to win acceptance, his story bespeaks a need to counter established forms of intolerance (1999, 62).

The dialogical principle is taken further each time the genre is altered. Directors relate their works to generic history in order to better address contemporary concerns but also to revise the beliefs that form the genesis of modern American national identity. Urban growth is reshaped with each mutation of the genre, which entails retrospection as well as prospection. Such dynamics are of particular relevance in the 1990s with its attendant trend in postmodernist aesthetics. It is my belief that generic history is reflected and deflected to unveil the ideological paradoxes that founded America. Aesthetic hybridity can also stand for

social comment. Although I agree with Mason that postmodernism can take various shapes ranging from tribute to parody and that intertextuality and rearrangement prevail, I wish to qualify her assertion that:

(...) all of these features insist on the textualised nature of the postmodernist text, articulating an inability to represent reality not because it cannot be adequately expressed but because it does not exist (2002, 146).

I would rather argue that generic ambivalence mirrors the lost bearings and growing anxiety of the American people in the 1990s. I would also agree with Amiel and Couté that the genre's history can be used to examine how American society has been represented through time (2003, 25-26). It hence becomes a tool for genetic demystification.

### *Metaphorical impotence*

The status of the United States as a superpower ruling over the world was increasingly challenged and criticized in the 1990s by outsiders and indeed by itself. Onscreen, the gangster's masculinity was similarly questioned in ways that could be said to mock the excesses of American national identity. If the movies replayed the protagonist's childishness, they also reworked manliness through ridicule or excess. For instance, the choice of aliases in *Reservoir Dogs* is an example of masculinity as performance. Joe Cabot insists the men use code names so that their connections to each other remain strictly professional. But the men argue about the colors they have been granted, which only evoke poor and crude stereotypes: "Mr. Brown is a little too close to Mr. Shit"; "Mr. Pink sounds like Mr. Pussy". In Freudian terms, the male group seems to be trapped at the anal stage of mental development. As for the boss, he uses outdated clichés ("My way or the highway"), barks out orders and has difficulties disciplining the men. As such, the father figure is devoid of authority. He is even the object of parody in *Miller's Crossing*. Johnny Caspar's physical appearance is exaggerated to suggest self-indulgence and a bloated sense of self-importance. Johnny Jr., his obviously thick son (both stupid and chubby), stands as a miniature duplicate of his father, which might explain why he is the subject of his lavish affection as well as his explosive rage. Vignettes expose Johnny's contradictory feelings towards his son and create slapstick humor as he alternately smacks and cuddles him. Two father figures are represented in *Goodfellas*. Henry's father is quickly sketched at the beginning of the movie and defined by domestic violence. In contrast the gang's boss, Paulie Cicero, is characterized by stillness and silence. He does not have a phone, seldom speaks or moves, and insists upon secrecy. His omnipresence is revealed through tracking shots or slow zooms in and his reticence stands in sharp contrast with the agitation and loudness of the men surrounding him. A haunting figure who sets the gang's law, Paulie is nevertheless disobeyed, denounced, and imprisoned for life. Henry, Jimmy, and Tommy's unpredictability are the source of the boss's demise.

Onomastics are of particular importance in this mini corpus because they convey instability by pointing to generic references but also leading astray from them. Paulie's surname, Cicero, evokes the character's Sicilian roots. It is also the name of a city outside Chicago and Al Capone's stronghold in the 1920s. In *Miller's Crossing*, the Dane is a direct reference to *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), a film noir masterpiece starring Burt Lancaster as the Swede. More interestingly, Tom Reagan's surname brings to mind former American President Ronald Reagan (1981-89), the first actor to take office in the White House and also a fervent partisan of liberalism and free initiative. In his 1981 inaugural address he claimed, "government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem". Tom's elusiveness might then be envisioned as a filmic remediation of Reaganomics. More fundamentally, Ronald Reagan's

political success underlines the supremacy of the public image in the 1990s. Intimate relationships on screen are doomed to fail as the line between public and private matters becomes increasingly blurred. The use of Cabot in *Reservoir Dogs* evidences the importance of the persona because, in French “un cabot” can either mean a very self-conscious person who constantly overdoes things to be noticed or an old actor who knows all the tricks. It also points out to the animality of the characters, the other definition of “cabot” being “dog”. In the warehouse, they become the (under)“dogs” of the title: nervous individuals who turn in circles in the same room, suspect their colleagues, and very promptly at draw their guns. The Hobbesian formula (*homo homini lupus est*) is reactivated through scenes of bloodcurdling violence that rely upon sadistic as well as masochistic pleasure.

These 1990s gangster presents us with ineffective fathers or surrogate fathers that are either disobeyed, betrayed, or ridiculed. They stand as metaphors for a neo-liberalist government favorable to *laissez-faire* and well aware that political power is subjected to the market economy... so that the urge of (metaphorically or literally) killing the father might prove meaningless.

### ***Fearsome fun***

Exposing antithetic ideologies that were rooted in America’s foundation, it is not surprising that gangster movies capitalized upon violence as a catalyst for contradictory emotions. 1990s movies display an exacerbated spectacle of violence that can take on various meanings. The decade’s hyper consumerism is mirrored in the movies’ appeal to extreme sensations. They reach out to a younger audience who was born with TV, is familiar with screen violence, is well aware of generic codes and looks for novelty. Screen violence then takes on burlesque aspects because it relies “(...) on the spectator’s knowledge of the targeted text and on the ability not only to ‘spot the reference’, but also to notice any alteration of that reference.” (Harries 2002, 282). Postmodernism is expressed through a blending of tribute and parody that Nicole Rafter called “the absurdist trend”. *Miller’s Crossing* constantly oscillates between the alternatives; it mirrors the codes, themes, and plots of the gangster genre, thus creating comfort and pleasure, but it also works through shifts that alter the genre. One of the movie’s *tour de force* moments is the attempted attack on Leo’s house. The Irish boss looks like a peaceful grandfather lying on his bed in a robe, smoking a cigar, and listening to “Danny Boy” while reading the paper with his glasses on. He nevertheless turns into a superhero when threatened by two attackers. He slips under the bed, shoots the first man, then jumps out the window onto the roof, and grips the gutter to land down in the street, where, without his glasses on, he executes the other man with a machine gun. The man’s body moves like a puppet as it is riddled with bullets in what seems an extensively long still shot. The scene conveys both unease and pleasure. The absurd gesticulations of the dead man point to existential meaninglessness. Because it is excessive and unbelievable, violence generates fun. The over perfect circularity of the scene creates detachment. Leo takes his cigar out of his pocket and resumes smoking while the last notes of the Irish song are struck. The intradiegetic music, played on a gramophone in Leo’s room, becomes extradiegetic as the scene unfolds. Its sound never wanes or vanishes but provides stylish and ironical counterpoint.

*Reservoir Dogs* also uses musical counterpoint to create anxiety. Mr. Blonde’s torture of police officer Nash is a case in point; tension is built up through a series of contrasts: Mr. Blonde’s glee versus Officer Nash’s terror – identification with the policeman and his plight reaches a climax because the audience feels similarly trapped in their voyeurism, and the seen versus the unseen (the camera pans away when Mr. Blonde cuts the cop’s ear off). Uneasiness is further conveyed by the ironic use of the song played on the radio, “Stuck in the Middle with You,” and by the sexual clichés the torturer uses: “Alone at last” when the scene starts and “Was it as good for me as it was for you?” whispered to the maimed ear. *Reservoir Dogs*

might then be envisioned as filmic recreation of violence, not only its modern resurrection, but also its comic alteration. For if the first vision of the scene generates pure fright, its subsequent revisions reveal more of its comic and/or ironic impact.

In *Goodfellas*, Tommy combines hubris with unpredictable violence. This gives way two extremely tense scenes whose uncertain outcome keeps the viewer on edge, namely when he insists Henry explain what he means when he calls him “funny”; and when he shoots Spider in the foot for not obeying his orders and later kills him for being disrespectful. Those fits create interruptions in the narrative that thrive on linking humor and violence in complex and unsettling ways. Screen violence, such as these examples, freezes the narrative – it delays meaning and interpretation to address primitive emotions in the spectator. The intradiegetic spectacle of violence then relates to the extradiegetic relationship between director and spectator. Firstly because voyeurism is the urge to see the obscene (literally, what is off the stage), and secondly because the greatest form of violence in contemporary cinema relies on the disruption of meaning (Amiel and Couté, 77). Spectacular violence becomes specular violence.

### ***Filmic hybridization and puzzlement***

Filmic intertexts are an important trend in postmodernism. Quotations and generic references can either result in an economy of means or accumulation of signs. *Goodfellas* condenses the genre and its major alterations. Gangster conventions are internalized, reflected and renewed through abruptness. The fragmented biopic relies on the spectator’s knowledge to identify situations that are barely sketched, notably when teenage Henry performs a series of petty crimes for the gang without context or motive, dwelling upon the pleasure of transgression *per se*. The constant shifts in time and place engage the spectator in reconstitution. The background of the blunt opening scene is disclosed much later in the diegesis. Meaning is first withheld, then new elements are related to earlier scenes and require a rearrangement of the narrative line. This specific movement into the diegesis and back to its starting point(s) generates review and revision. *Goodfellas* celebrates the genre’s history and scrutinizes the American Dream. The once regulated privileges and power of gangster life climax into unrestrained consumerism. Excessive individual desire results in death (the series of corpses discovered after the Lufthansa heist) or psychosis (Jimmy’s mistrust, Henry’s paranoia). Betrayal is both a filmic motive and social comment in the mini-corpus. Yet if *Goodfellas* restricts its scope to the gangster genre, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Miller’s Crossing* proceed through accumulation of filmic references, which direct interpretation towards false leads or generic contradictions. *Reservoir Dogs* works upon bifurcation as much of the plot relies on what is off screen. The protagonists in the warehouse reminisce with one another about their histories, recruitment, and relationships. Small vignettes referring to western movies also disturb the gangster genre. Among them, the slow motion opening credits that replay the arrival of the mercenaries in *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) and the Mexican standoff between Joe Cabot, Mr. White, and Eddie that recalls the ending of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966). If the classic western advocated the existence of a national identity, it was considerably transformed by counterculture and the advent of the New Hollywood in the 1960s. The western intertext functions as a wink to the spectator but also underlines the deceitful construction of an American identity. The notion of artificiality is further developed in *Miller’s Crossing* where filmic intertext generates pleasure and suspension. The opening consists of a parodic replay of *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972), but recognition only leads the spectator away from the plot as many of these cinematic references are used as red herrings. A master in the art of suspense and black humor, Alfred Hitchcock is quoted twice. A fleeting reference is made to Lars Thorvald (the archetypal villain in *Rear Window*, 1954) when his name is used on a poster advertising a boxing event.

The sequence devoted to Tom discovering a corpse in the forest brings to mind *The Trouble with Harry* (1955). Many critics condemned the Coens' paroxysmic self-reflexivity as empty, pointless spectacle (Mason, 151) or a beautiful mechanism (Amiel and Couté, 77). My contention is that this perfect surface opens onto unexpected depths. I agree with Palmer when he says that their postmodern exploration of cinematic heritage creates "different meaning" (2004, 45) because it highlights duplicity, revisits gender or ethnic roles, and, I might add, addresses a central problematic in the 1990s: the staging of identity.

### *Trapped in Storytelling?*

Since Robert Warshow 1948 seminal essay, numerous essays have outlined and developed the tragic potential of the filmic gangster. A recurring feature in those analyses is the reference to Shakespearian tragedies. Jonathan Munby reminds us that W.R. Burnett considered his *Little Caesar* as a "gutter Macbeth" (1999, 45); Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard identifies what she calls an "Elizabethan archeology" in the Hollywood gangster films (2005, 41), and Robert Warshow himself underlines that filmic gangsters and Shakespeare's tragic heroes have this common "trick of looking at themselves dramatically" (1998, 185). I believe that the three postmodernist gangster films under study share with the playwright a delight in the reversibility of signs that suggest staging can breed illusion as well as reality. Jaques' famous monologue in *As You Like It* ("All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players. / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts" Act II, scene 7) exposes the workings of illusion without impairing its efficiency. The regeneration of the filmic gangster relies on the *mise en abyme* of storytelling. The protagonists' membership to the gang depends upon their narrative skills. Mr. Orange's credibility in telling the "commode story" grants him acceptance into the gang. A six-minute sequence is devoted to the painful learning and relentless rehearsal of the anecdote. He is given a script and stage directions. When he finally performs the act before Joe, Eddie, and Mr. White, the fable becomes cinema; its translation into images indicates the gangsters are immersed in the story. The beauty of Tarantino's direction lies in its playful use of digression, which alternately takes us away from the diegesis and then back to its core.

*Miller's Crossing* rather focuses on improvisation. Uncertainty governs the plot, which is riddled with different generic references (from slapstick comedy to gorish thriller), expands through enigmas and red herrings, and centers on an opaque protagonist: "For the viewer, it's often hard to connect with Tom because he keeps his doubting, scheming, and loving largely to himself" (Yaquinto, 202). Finally, *Goodfellas* relies upon abstracts. Gangster conventions (the 1930s violence and indulgence in luxury, the 1950s paranoia, the 1970s rituals and conflicts) function as a premise to the narrative. The telling of jokes is dramatized, but they are cut or piecemeal so that, in a striking reversal, the spectator seems to be the object of dramatic irony. The three movies are the stage of a playful relationship between spectator and director that combines illusion and manipulation.

The three films under study borrow from a classic gangster blueprint to reflect key generic themes. Escalating suspicion dominates the plot to breed betrayal. Friendship turns into hatred while the family cell disintegrates. Those shifts in values are expressed through the tensions underlying the movies whose main outcome is violence.

Modernity first stems from their detailed treatment of violence. Minute sequences are devoted to deformed, tortured, and bleeding bodies. Those scenes create gaps in the narrative, as the audience undergoes both sadistic pleasure and masochistic voyeurism. Interpretation is suspended while the narrative keeps its relentless course. Deflection then relies on the opposition between the meaning of the plot and its staging. Fragmentation is key to the

movies and is generated through enigmas, dramatic irony, or transgression. The generic codes are exposed to be better recomposed and favor new narrative strategies. The resurrection of the genre then allowed for a questioning of American cinema and the way it (re)presented American identity.

The 1990s gangster regenerates through reflection and deflection of generic and genetic history. It encapsulates and unveils the layers of conflicting ideologies upon which American identity was built. Gérard Genette's study of the Narcissus myth proves very relevant in such a context. A prisoner of his reflection in the water, Narcissus is paralyzed by the idea his image could disappear. But the apparently still surface of the water reveals unstable: it is not only running water (Narcissus was drinking from a fountain), it also opens onto unsuspected depth (Genette 1966, 22-24). The postmodernist gangster displays formal brilliance that reveals its many traps. The audience is under the influence of biased narratives where the original presence of evil has either become mythical or fallen into oblivion. This is the object of *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), where Verbal Kint (Kevin Spacey), a cowardly limping hood, turns out to be Kayser Söze, the devil incarnate. The unreliable narrator rules supreme (Ledoux, 2012).

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