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Karine Hildenbrand

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## CHAPTER FIVE

THE COEN BROTHER'S *MILLER'S CROSSING*:  
FROM REFERENCE TO BASTARDY

KARINE HILDENBRAND

The third movie by the Coen brothers, *Miller's Crossing*, marks a turning point for two reasons: because it confirms the duo's parodic and referential esthetics, but also because it foreshadows the rebirth of the gangster film in American cinema, as superbly illustrated by the success of *Reservoir Dogs* two years later.

*Miller's Crossing* claims affiliation with the early gangster genre and thus fits within a highly coded framework. However, the reference seems established the better to be questioned. Though the 30s historical context and visuals are taken up, the movie's dominant theme (betrayal and the ever increasing suspicion it generates) rather belongs to the film noir while the dialogues point to the hardboiled crime fiction novel. A single generic reference proves insufficient and the film consequently combines several "progenitors." These various sources undergo deviation and variation: first because their importance fluctuates, second because the film develops homage as well as parody. *Miller's Crossing's* reassuring symmetry (its reliance on recurring places, visual motives and paired characters) then leads to a vertiginous mirror game where signs are echoed, displaced and distorted. The characters prove deceitful or unexpectedly candid; the dynamics combines contemplation with frantic scenes while the visuals open onto oneiric or nightmarish sequences. The plot digresses and shifts, constantly evading interpretation. It is as if the main diegetic concern of "crossing" and "double-crossing" contaminated the movie to generate a singular filmic object, open to the spectator's every conjecture.

My contention is that *Miller's Crossing* is a hypnotic work of art because it stands at a crossroads between generic tribute and metacinematic discourse. Bastardy can then be understood as the specific place where interpretation works within and outside the plot. This paper will be devoted to the shift from generic reference to cinematic bastardy. I will start from generic recognition, then highlight the workings of

displacement and disproportion so as to finally focus on cinematic and metacinematic creativity.

## Displaying gangsterdom

*Miller's Crossing* refers to the 30s gangster movies. However, the accumulation of signs which pervade plot, settings, characters and aesthetics not only display this particular lineage, they also branch onto subsequent evolutions or literary influences.

### Early gangster movies

Even though no precise date is ever mentioned, *Miller's Crossing* clearly relates to the Prohibition era. Tom toasts “to Volstead” (32’30).<sup>1</sup> The imagery of the 30s is taken up: men wear the typical suit and tie while women either don the “flapper” outfit or keep the traditional long straight skirt and matching jacket. The film encapsulates many of the stereotypical scenes and places of the early gangster movie: illegal joints are raided by the police, liquor stores are bombed, machine guns stutter and men are beaten up in warehouses or executed outside town. The gangsters drink, gamble, lie, blackmail and plot... The story unfolds chronologically and in an urban setting, mostly at night. *Miller's Crossing* thus claims affiliation with a genre—and more specifically with its matrix (namely, its founding trilogy). It does so through the use of gangsterism as an imported evil: Leo is of Irish decent (like Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy*) while Caspar is of Italian origin (like Rico Bandello in *Little Caesar* and Tony Camonte in *Scarface*). Second, through the characters’ indulgence in excess and opulence. Concerning excess, I would instance Tony’s glee at discovering machine guns, which is paralleled by Leo’s ruthless and excessive use of them (39’). Regarding opulence, I would recall Rico’s astonishment when he enters Big Boy’s mansion and, later on, his boastful pleasure at showing off his brand-new apartment and butler to Joey. The two-fold scene is echoed in *Miller's Crossing* when Tom enters Caspar’s house (1h29’18), notably through the focus on the monumental chimney-fire. Third, through the thematic of doomed friendship. Experts often mentioned the Cain and Abel formula present in the early gangster films.

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<sup>1</sup> Time references are taken from the Twentieth Century Fox DVD edition of the movie.

Betrayal governs the characters' moves and thoughts and drives the plot. Likewise, *Miller's Crossing* revolves around the ruthless fight of two gang leaders (Leo and Caspar) and their respective right-hand men (Tom and The Dane) for the control of the city. Tom rapidly stands as the odd-one-out. He first questions Leo's decision, then confronts him and finally sides with Caspar. The film points to the possible "crossing(s)"—and "double-crossing(s)"—of its title.

### **The Film noir**

Pervading paranoia affiliates *Miller's Crossing* with the 40s *film noir*. The theme conjures up movies such as *Force of Evil*, where the main character is involved in a "numbers racket" but soon realizes that he is caught up in a much wider system of corruption, which he cannot control and must escape. *Miller's Crossing* reiterates the collusion between political figures and gangsters (chief of police O'Doole and the mayor shift allegiances from Leo to Caspar and back) and places Tom at the center of a wide and sprawling machine he must defeat. The movie also borrows its characterization from the *film noir*. Verna (Marcia Gay Harden) is torn between her calculated affection for Leo (who can protect her brother Bernie) and uncontrollable love for Tom. Her outlooks and situation evoke the *femme fatale* character of Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner) in *The Killers* who seduces the Swede the better to betray him and serve gang-boss Colfax. The name of the Swede recalls that of the Dane (J.E. Freeman) in *Miller's Crossing*, although one seems to be the filmic negative of the other: the Swede is a disillusioned, heart-broken ghost of a man who awaits death whereas the Dane is a ruthless character who despises women (when Verna escapes he whispers: "Go ahead and run, sweetie. I'll track down all you whores." 1h07'30). Finally, the character of Tom (Gabriel Byrne) with his raincoat and felt hat, his reticence and impassivity which are sometimes contrasted with his brisk and rapidly delivered monologues, brings to mind filmic icon Humphrey Bogart and the figure of the private eye.

### **The hardboiled**

This last-mentioned kinship highlights *Miller's Crossing* main literary influence: Dashiell Hammett,<sup>2</sup> a founding father of the hardboiled fiction (or *roman noir* as it would later be called). The Prohibition era is central to his work, since he was first published in 1922 and released his last novel in 1934—that is, one year after the demise of the Volstead Act. *The Maltese Falcon* came out in 1930, in between two novels which are seminal to the making of *Miller's Crossing*: *Red Harvest* (1929) and *The Glass Key* (1931, adapted for the screen by Stuart Heisler in 1942).<sup>3</sup> The toxic atmosphere of a corrupt city subjected to warring gangs whose ramifications have permeated the local authorities is taken up from *Red Harvest*. In the novel, the task of the Continental op is to reestablish order. He does so by manipulating the gangs into killing each other and feels to be under the influence of the city: "...this getting a rear out of planning deaths is not natural to me. It's what this place has done to me."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Tom shifts from one gang to the other and mostly generates chaos. Tom's relationship with his boss Leo borrows from *The Glass Key* and the ambiguous rapport between Ned Beaumont and Paul Madvig. Like Paul, Leo is an influential gang boss who could be mistaken for a virtuous citizen given his close ties with the authorities. Like Ned, Tom is an addicted gambler and a quick thinker. Moreover, the boss and his man of trust become romantically involved with the same woman (Janet Henry in the *Glass Key* and Verna in *Miller's Crossing*). *Miller's Crossing* also remains faithful to the hardboiled characteristic language with 30s slang words such as "sap," "flunky," "dangle," "big shot," to name only a few. It furthermore replays traditional metaphors. Many passages refer to card games when what is actually at stake is a power relationship: "you didn't see the play you gave me" (Bernie to Tom); "I'm calling your bluff" (Tom refusing Bernie's blackmail). Finally, the film translates in visual terms Hammett's playful use of chapters: they literally cut the narrative and create surprise. The last line of chapter 3 in *The Glass Key* reads: "[Ned] went back and called a taxicab," while chapter 4 opens with: "Ned Beaumont took his hands away from the dead man and stood up." The reader is subjected to brusque changes to which he/she must adapt and is required to read on to solve the enigmas in retrospect. The "whodunit" structure climaxes. Similarly, *Miller's Crossing* plays with the viewer's

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<sup>2</sup> Frédéric Astruc, *Le Cinéma des frères Coen*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2001), 116 to 122.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan P. Doom, *The Brothers Coen—Unique Characters of Violence*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992, first published 1929), 157.

expectations. The cuts from one scene to the other are often disturbing: a close-up on a dog tilting its head, then on a skinny, motionless boy, whose frozen expression mirrors that of the corpse he is gazing at (16'25); a boxer punched in the face but filmed so close up that the viewer only grasps the noise when he/she sees the head jerking back from the blow (1h04'35). Very precise yet undecipherable sounds are heard which only make sense when they can be related to visuals. What Frédéric Astruc called “hyperrealist sound” functions both as homage to and diversion from the 30s gangster film.

*Miller's Crossing* appears as both tribute to and apex of the genre since it reenacts its settings, characters, dynamics and esthetics with a strikingly modern sophistication. The formal brilliance might explain why the movie has sometimes been dismissed as “depthless simulation.”<sup>5</sup> My intuition is that it has a much deeper, organic logic. Mirroring is not a mere formal pose that relates *Miller's Crossing* to the gangster movie, it is also a core thematic that shapes the plot and increasingly questions the generic inheritance.

## **Pairing and disparaging**

A system of diegetic echoes contradicts the gangster genre. I wish to point out three forms of betrayal which all rely on reiteration to contaminate settings, characters, and sequences.

### **Interfering motives: displacement**

While a large number of images testify to *Miller's Crossing's* affiliation to the gangster genre, an equally large number debunk its legitimacy. The feeling of entrapment inherent in gangster movies is contrasted with the use of space in *Miller's Crossing*. Rooms are vast, high-ceilinged and sparsely furnished. Leo's office is a large room with leather armchairs and a wooden desk. Tom's living room is circular and peculiarly empty, which might metaphorically indicate the impossibility of reading his mind. The frequent use of medium or low angle shots heightens the feeling of void. Exterior scenes were shot in New Orleans in winter, but the southern location allowed for the dominance of autumn

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<sup>5</sup> Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 15.

hues. The contrasted palette ranging from green to gold and dark brown is artfully developed in the forest of the opening credits (6'36). The spectator's gaze is directed towards the treetops and the infinity of a silvery sky (the sequence stands in complete contrast to the opening of *Force of Evil*, where New York's buildings and the ceaseless movement of its inhabitants are filmed from high above). The next image is a still shot at ground level. A hat falls on the autumn leaves and is gently blown away until it is out of view, thus recalling the classic western movie image of tumbleweeds rolling down the main street before a gunfight. The contemplative atmosphere is further conveyed by the soft, playful music which resembles an Irish ballad and constitutes the film's main musical theme. Carter Burwell, who composed the music for all the Coens movies, highlighted its contrapuntal use:

In *Miller's Crossing*, the music believes the character played by Gabriel Byrne is just a naïve and dreamy Irishman whereas he is in fact a cold-blooded, scheming gangster.<sup>6</sup>

The forest will turn out to be crucial. Its very name, "Miller's Crossing," somewhat elucidates the enigmatic movie title but also suggests a crossroads which is never clearly visually confirmed. It is also a recurring location that serves as recipient for psychological questions: the meaning of a dream, the consequence of acting out murder. Eventually, it is a stage for existential *coups de théâtre*: a fake execution (55'), the finding of an improbable corpse (1h15'37), Bernie's funeral (end). *Miller's Crossing's* forest recalls the Arthurian Brocéliande: a place of quest, endowed with magical qualities that sometimes give way to pure poetry.

Inner diegetic logics collide with the generic reference and create displacement, a displacement which also determines characterization.

### **From duos to adultery**

Characters are defined through their relationship with a working partner. Tom works for Leo while the Dane works for Caspar. In the opening scene, each man of trust stands behind his boss. Hierarchy is clearly established within the gangs and between them. Caspar has come to complain about Bernie (John Turturro) and ask permission to kill him.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Carter Burwell, *Transfuge* Hors-série n°4 (février 2008), 52, my translation.

The neat symmetry of the scene only brings out each character's idiosyncrasies: Caspar's ridiculousness, the cruelty of the Dane (who wants to kill Bernie "for starters"), Leo's confident power and Tom's silence. Also, as soon as Caspar and the Dane walk out, Tom contests Leo's decision, who let his romantic interest interfere with business (Leo is in love with Bernie's sister Verna). Tandems can provide tension or comic relief. As illustration of the latter, one could mention Caspar's Italian cousins, who cannot speak a word of English and for whom he would like to find a job at the city hall. The mayor's bewilderment at the request climaxes and provokes laughter when the camera eventually reveals the pair (1h22). The cousins look like twin brothers: they wear the same bushy mustache, have presumably donned their Sunday best and are both sitting very straight, with their bowler hats in their laps. Their formal dignity faced with an absurd situation is reminiscent of Dupont and Dupond in the Belgian cartoon *Tintin*. Laughter is also triggered by mismatches. The physical disparity between Caspar and the Dane, or between Tic-Tac and Frankie evokes tandems such as Laurel and Hardy. Tension, on the other hand, is mostly conveyed through arguments and fights which are very often directed at Tom. He and the Dane keep provoking one another. Their tongue-in-cheek exchanges are brilliant and exhilarating (1h14'12), yet they twice culminate in Tom being almost killed by his enemy. Tom's unheroic stance is further developed when he remains defenseless under Leo's blows. Tom has just confessed he was having an affair with Verna. Leo literally boxes Tom out of his club and down the stairs, hence sealing the end of their partnership (45'20). Interestingly, Tom's breach of trust towards Leo concerns private matters, but Leo's retaliation concerns business. Romantic betrayal infiltrates the gangs. The tragic love triangle involving Leo, Verna and Tom is underpinned in a crueller version by that of Bernie, Mink and the Dane. Although the Dane faithfully protects Mink ("his boy"), Bernie (Mink's lover) does not hesitate to kill Mink to save his own skin. The heterosexual or homosexual love triangles bring forward the figure of the intruder—or double crosser. They also evidence a fundamental instability of signs: friendships, hierarchies or love affairs are mirrored and distorted. It seems everything is soluble in the Coen brothers' universe, an intuition confirmed by the emphasis on bodily fluids shed by the characters (who throw up, urinate and, above all, bleed).

## Parody



In *Miller's Crossing*, parody unfolds as “symmetrical betrayal,” calling on disproportion (excessive resemblance and/or dissemblance) and intrusion (unexpected tone, visuals, characters...) to generate spectatorial pleasure. The *media res* opening is a case in point.

If the gangster form seemed to have been exhausted by the mid-fifties, it reappeared in the seventies and reached an apex with Coppola's masterpiece, *The Godfather* (1972). *Miller's Crossing* echoes the saga's opening scene while inserting elements that disrupt its strained solemnity. *The Godfather* opens on a black screen while a voice-over with a strong Italian accent claims: “I believe in America.” The camera cuts to a close up on Bonaserra and slowly zooms out. His tense face emerges from a dark background. He has come to beg Don Corleone for justice the American system did not grant him: the death of the two young men who beat his daughter up. The scene cuts to Don Corleone (Marlon Brando) who rejects the request. Then follows a long conversation in which the godfather finally has Bonaserra acknowledge allegiance to him. The dialectics point to shifts in meaning: the friend is a debtor, justice means retaliation, respect implies obedience. In *Miller's Crossing's* incipit, Caspar insists that Bernie does not abide by the gangster ethos. He states in voice-over: “I'm talking about ethics, I'm talking about character, I'm talking about... Hell Leo, I ain't embarrassed to use the word, I'm talking about ethics.” Meanwhile, the camera focuses on a glass into which ice cubes are dropped and whisky is poured. The next shot is a slow zoom-in on Caspar as he mentions “ethics.” The dominant color is brown. Caspar resembles a clownish version of Bonaserra. Like him, he is bald and wears a mustache, but he is fatter and louder. His mimics, emphatic gestures and disjointed speech punctuated with swearwords strongly contrast with Bonaserra's dignity and precision. Surprised at Leo's impassivity, he suddenly stops and asks: “Is it clear what I'm saying?” to which Leo answers disrespectfully: “As... mud.” The values of “ethics” are denied on three interpretative levels: because a ridiculous character advocates them, because *The Godfather* evidenced a shift in meaning and, finally, because “ethics” could easily be understood as “ethnics” (Caspar obsessively refers to Bernie's Jewish origin with derogatory words: “the Yid,” “the Sheenie,” “the Schmatte”). Caspar's recurrent credo is then disparaged as pointless or biased. Yet Caspar will prove obtusely faithful to his professed code. He will end up killing his long time partner the Dane simply out of suspicion (or because Tom cleverly planted the seed of doubt) while remaining blindly impervious to Tom's characteristic ambivalence—an ambivalence which is expressed visually throughout the film: “No other

character (...) crosses even half as often as Tom: he crosses the frames, the fields of view, the full expanse of large rooms.”<sup>7</sup>

The audience is drifted away from face-value interpretation. They perceive the generic reference but also enjoy its iconoclastic deployment. Parody plays with their expectations, establishing reference and then evading it so as to generate the unexpected. Parody relies on two forms of pleasure: recognition, which relates to memory and the childish pleasure of discovery; and surprise, which wagers on the spectator’s ability to absorb the changes and recompose the movie as it unfolds. Interpretation navigates between the plot and its periphery. The unique beauty of *Miller’s Crossing* is that its central diegetic issues replay its esthetic concerns. Cinematic bastardy is an act of diversion and re-creation.

### **Drifting away**

The spectator’s investigation of the plot leads him/her towards unknown territory. His/her diegetic involvement triggers extradiegetic evasion. Generic contamination is increased and enlarged in *Miller’s Crossing* so as to celebrate cinema’s specific quality: regeneration.

### **Cinematic reflection**

Tom functions as the diegetic reflection of the spectator, but this revelation is retrospective. Once ended, the film calls for a rereading and recomposition in the light of the additional knowledge which is finally disclosed to us: “There is a *mise en abyme* effect in *Miller’s Crossing*, because the spectator finds himself confronted with a fiction—the movie—in which the hero fabricates another fiction which remains long undetectable—his plan.”<sup>8</sup> This re-vision underlines the ever-increasing difficulties Tom faces to back up Leo and restore order while pretending to side with Caspar. If Tom is hard to decipher, it is because he must abide by his initial decision of faithfulness (to Leo) while adapting to the uncontrollable developments his apparent betrayal created. The pattern is spiraloid: Tom’s neatly devised plans are thwarted (by enemies, friends or

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<sup>7</sup> William Nolan, “*Miller’s Crossing*’s Tom Reagan: ‘Straight as a Corkscrew, Mr. Inside-Outsky,’” *Post Script* vol. 27, n°2, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Astruc, 118, my translation.

even chance); he then adapts and changes schemes, but unsuspected events come gripping his scenario again so that he must adopt a new approach, etc. Similarly, the spectator's frenetic search for clues in the (vain) hope of solving the movie before its resolution generates both participation in and distance from the diegesis. Each sign is analyzed and dissected: what is its value? Does it relate to another film or genre? Is it meaningful to *Miller's Crossing*? Tom combines two mythical figures: the wandering knight (or drifter) and the Machiavellian brain. On the one hand, the wandering knight evokes the pleasure of the quest *per se*. The trajectory is erratic and the sense of failure impending, but the search prevails and sometimes leads to epiphanies. Tom's hat is a synecdoche for the drifter figure: it is blown across the autumn leaves, lands in the dust during a fight, sits inert in an armchair, dances in the wind... It stands as a substitute for the spectator's emotions. It also counterbalances Tom's impassive face, reveals his longing for evasion (or even romance) and functions as a poetic and oneiric symbol (the singular beauty of the opening credits which are, in fact, Tom's recurrent dream). On the other hand, the Machiavellian figure conjures up a more cerebral, sadistic pleasure to be derived from organizing chaos. Interestingly, Fran Mason sees evidence of this figure in Tom's hairstyle (so that it is revealed when he wears no hat):

His hair is folded down at the sides on his forehead to give the impression that he has horns and which give him a devilish quality that implies a Machiavellian interiority.<sup>9</sup>

The oxymoronic characterization is best illustrated in two echoing scenes, placed in the middle (56'05) and at the end of the movie (1h40'40). To prove he has really sided with Caspar, Tom has been driven to the forest, where he must kill Bernie. Gun in hand, Tom follows Bernie down into the woods. Bernie is terrified. He cries, repeating he does not want to be killed "like an animal" and finally pleads in a litany: "I'm praying to you, look in your heart." The camera zooms on Tom's stern face as he pulls the trigger. A reverse shot on Bernie discloses Tom has spared him. Towards the end of the movie, Tom faces Bernie again, and declares he must kill him to walk out free. Bernie falls down on his knees and starts pleading again: "Look in your heart," to which Tom answers: "What heart?" and shoots him in the head. In terms of plot, Bernie's murder is the result of Tom's cold calculation; in terms of esthetics, Bernie is condemned for lack of inventiveness.

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<sup>9</sup> Mason, 152.

*Miller's Crossing* is a demanding film. The Coen brothers unfold a complex plot, which requires the utmost attention. They also blow away generic references and require cinematic creativity. The system of crossing and double-crossing which pervades the film is relayed through the spectator and expanded to the metatextual level.

## Cinematic diptychs

Through recognition of *Miller's Crossing's* kinship with other movies, the spectator indulges in cinematic re-creation, establishing parallels in accordance with his specific memories, culture and tastes.

Parallels can first be drawn within the Coen brothers' filmography. *Miller's Crossing* took the Coen brothers a record six months to write, whereas *Barton Fink*, which they devised when they were stuck on *Miller's Crossing*, took them two months.<sup>10</sup> The interruption proved mostly inspirational. Although set in different contexts (an indefinite town in the early thirties vs. Hollywood in 1941) and developing apparently unrelated themes (the Prohibition and its disastrous consequences vs. the anguishing unproductivity of a successful playwright), both films fuel one another and brilliantly develop the idea of the brain within and behind the fiction. John Turturro embodied Tom's evil shadow in *Miller's Crossing*. He is granted the leading role in *Barton Fink* and suffers the ill doings of Charlie Meadows (John Goodman). Both protagonists are defined as thinkers, but while Tom maintains control over an evasive situation by gradually shifting perspectives, Barton becomes literally entrapped in his neighbor's sick mind. The idea of an objective correlative for the brain, merely outlined in *Miller's Crossing* with Tom's cortex-shaped living room, reaches an acme in *Barton Fink*:

The hotel is in fact the neighbor's *alter ego*. The place is 'haunted,' alive and it expresses the physical and mental disturbances of the mad man (the walls oozing like his ear, the corridor on fire reflecting the inferno of dementia, etc.)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Pierre Coursodon, "Un Chapeau poussé par le vent: entretien avec Joel et Ethan Coen," Interview with Joel and Ethan Coen, *Positif* n° 360 (février 1991), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Bourguignon, "L'Illusionniste et le visionnaire—le cinéma des frères Coen," *Positif* n°367 (septembre 1991), 55, my translation.

Space becomes the stage for thinking and stable markers are diluted under the force of the manipulative mind. *Barton Fink* reveals a nightmare endured by a powerless character while *Miller's Crossing* stands as a bad dream the protagonist finally overcomes. The movies form a diptych and offer an exemplary illustration of cinematic bastardy. The spectator's gaze navigates between the two films building up a third mental projection which will be his/her very own.

Two filmic objects that would stimulate cinematic creation... The idea is seductive, but valid only when filmmakers reach out to the spectator and blend in generic forms or signs so as to create novelty. Recognition opens up onto the unfamiliar. Several directors emerged in the 90s who relied on these processes with equal or even greater success. Among them, Quentin Tarantino and his masterly literal use of digression—as conversation leading astray from the plot—right from the opening scene of his first feature film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). I wish to turn to an older, different director who stages repetition and mystery: David Lynch. Thomas Bourguignon very aptly underlined the striking similarities between *Miller's Crossing* and *Wild at Heart* (1990), both of which he termed “grotesque fugues.”<sup>12</sup> The musical pattern of the fugue collides with the grotesque tradition to generate cinematic singularity. From the outset, both movies introduce a mysterious and beautiful scene (a shot on a match and an arson; a hat blown away through the woods) which will be echoed, acquiring added meaning each time it reappears. The initial motives both enrich and evade the plot. *Wild at Heart's* road movie<sup>13</sup> is paired with fairy tales aspiration, while gangster-focused *Miller's Crossing* is imbued with a melancholic longing for escape. The grotesque consists in amplifying contrasts so as to create jarring visuals combining the hideous and the enchanting. “Beauty and the Beast” esthetics are developed in *Wild at Heart* through the character of beautiful Lula who is a catalyst for male desires and perversion. In *Miller's Crossing*, the fascination Verna exerts matches her brother's ability to be loathed. To me, the grotesque fugue in *Miller's Crossing* is best illustrated when Frankie sings a Neapolitan air *a cappella* in the forest while he, Tic-Tac, the Dane and Tom are looking for Bernie's corpse (1h15'40). Frankie's powerful voice and the beauty of the song are contrasted with Tom's pale face and unsteady pace as he knows they will not find the body. The combination of awe and poetry hints at the sublime. It then switches on to astonishment when Tic-Tac actually finds Bernie's corpse, because Tom and the spectator know it is impossible.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Bourguignon, “Fugues grotesques: *Sailor et Lula* et *Miller's Crossing* à la croisée des chemins.” *Positif* n° 360 (February 1991): 30-35.

<sup>13</sup> The very title relates to Sam Peckinpah's *Wild Bunch* (1969).

A corpse in a forest triggers questions and creates incongruous situations... Hitchcock's very dark comedy, *The Trouble with Harry* immediately comes to mind. I would however qualify the idea of a diptych and rather speak of kinship. Hitchcock and the Coen brothers share the same taste for dark humor, which emerges from the intrusion of an unexpected element in a clichéd situation. They also play with dramatic irony and red herrings for the characters or the spectators. In *Miller's Crossing*, the gangsters wonder indignantly who took out Rug Daniels' wig and what message they were trying to send. We know it was a kid's impulse and there is nothing to read in it, so we can laugh at the characters' expense. But we might be trapped in a similar desire to make sense when a poster in Clarence Johnson's room advertises a fight between him and "Lars Thorvald," which is the name of the character played by Raymond Burr in *Rear Window*. The reference does not serve our interpretation of *Miller's Crossing*. It rather celebrates the pleasure of cinema for its own sake.

Cinematic recognition reaches an apex when fleeting vignettes absorb the spectator away from the movie towards the joy of recollection.

### **Cinema per se: in-drafts**

Burlesque images interrupt the tense plot and convoke the gleeful pleasure of early memories. Many critics observed the recurring use of fat characters in the Coens' filmography. Caspar's ridiculous silhouette and distorted features are reflected in his obese wife and child and point to familial degeneracy. The son's stupidity is highlighted when he interrupts Caspar's conversation with Tom to rejoice noisily about the prize he won at school (undoubtedly thanks to his father's bribery). Caspar abruptly slaps him in the face. Cries of joy are replaced by loud sobs, leading Caspar to ask: "What's the matter? Someone hit you?" (1h04). The plot branches off into slapstick comedy. Caspar's wife resembles the obese lady who screams and hits Tom with her tiny bag because he landed in her bosom under Leo's blows (45'20). In outlook and attire, she echoes Chaplin's obese bourgeois in *Modern Times*. When Bernie first appears, his bowler hat, tailcoat and large round-ended shoes make him look like a disgraceful Charlie Chaplin. Disproportion and excess are also reminiscent of Tex Avery. I am thinking in particular of the George and Junior tandem cartoon series and the play with contrasted rhythms. Junior is a small, edgy character who wants George to act out his every thought, but George is hopelessly slow and dumb. Caspar can then be cast as a freaked-out

version of Junior, who relies on his henchmen to do his dirty work, but eventually commits murder in a stunning scene where the crescendo rhythm, rapid tracking shots and zooms forward culminate in Caspar knocking the Dane down with a shovel (1h32'35). The scene resorts to the thrill of fright one expects in gore movies.<sup>14</sup> Horror conjures up the character of Eddy Dane, whose cruel expression and emaciated face evoke Boris Karloff. And Boris Karloff can lead us to screwball comedy through his own caricatured entrance in Frank Capra's *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a film which delights in absurd digressions while it started as classic romantic comedy. The trend is sketched in the bathroom scene in *Miller's Crossing*, where the argument between Tom and Verna can be mistaken for love (21'34). It is also contradicted through displaced boulevard with the two love triangles—one entirely killed, the other forever broken. The movie's final scene suggests that Tom's most significant loss is probably his friendship with Leo. It is endowed with a Hustonian sense of failure as Tom asks: "You always know why you do things, Leo?" and utters the movie's last words: "Goodbye, Leo." The two men stare at each other silently, both hurt and sad while the Irish theme music of the credits is taken up. The camera focuses on Tom, who tilts his hat down, and zooms forward as Tom slightly raises his head to disclose... an inscrutable expression (1h44'30). Some saw a slight smile in this last still shot, others read sorrow. Astruc believes the last shot is useless in terms of narration and comments: "One might say of the Coen brothers that this shot is theirs, because it is gratuitous and this very gratuitousness is filled with their faith in cinema."<sup>15</sup> I would add that it equally belongs to the spectator, who can interpret it according to his/her own cinematic knowledge and memories.

I have watched *Miller's Crossing* many times, and each time with renewed emotion. I was alternately annoyed at its hero's imperviousness, troubled by its of violence, amused by its play on the genre, hypnotized by its visuals, confused by its display of references... The film sometimes seemed frustrating, sometimes beautifully melancholic and sometimes cruelly hilarious. As a cinematic buff, I was first absorbed by the generic gangster references, then distracted by their variations and finally succumbed to my own cinematic memories. It took me a while to follow the plot candidly, to accept not to look for signs and clues.

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<sup>14</sup> In the early eighties, Joel Coen was assistant editor on *Evil Dead*, where he met Sam Raimi. The brothers then co-wrote *Crimewave* with him (1986).

<sup>15</sup> Astruc, 38, my translation.

According to Vincent Amiel, cinema's history both works as model and mirror in the Coen brothers' works.<sup>16</sup> It is a fact that the shiny fragments, bold *tours de force* and singular motives that compose the movie are reflections or deflections of filmic clichés, scenes, genres or movies. But what really defines the Coen brothers' *Ars Poetica* is that they also require innocence from the spectators. Through fragmentation (the accumulation of veiled or gratuitous references) they consistently appeal to our memory and more particularly our childhood memories: the first entry into a movie theater, the discovery genre, the fascination for stars, the gleeful and sadistic pleasure derived from Chaplin or Hitchcock movies... In *Miller's Crossing*, bastardy relates to the sophistication of contemporary viewers as well as to the striking beauty of the original scene. Bastardy takes us from recognition to surprise, from echoes to distortion, from (over)interpretation to pure contemplative indulgence. In a word, bastardy celebrates the cinema's specific and numerous pleasures.

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<sup>16</sup> Amiel, 54.