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The High Hat: Iconography in Miller's Crossing

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Professor Sinowitz

Film 197A

The High Hat: Iconography in *Miller's Crossing*

In his essay "Iconography of the Gangster Film," Colin McArthur describes the importance of iconography in gangster films and how it presents information to an audience by allowing them to draw on their past experiences. Iconography is the continuance of patterns across a genre, which can be seen through the imagery used or the relationships that are present between characters. McArthur divides the gangster film's iconography into three separate categories, "those surrounding the physical presence, attributes, and dress of the actors...those emanating from the milieux within which the characters operate; and those connected with the technology at the characters' disposal" (McArthur, 36). In Joel Coen's *Miller's Crossing* (1990), the opening sequence of Tom's (Gabriel Byrne) hat floating in the middle of the forest and it being a common piece of clothing among characters immediately reveals to the audience what one of the icons of the film is. The recurrence of the woodland setting through Tom's dream and in real life allows it to become a second icon. Both of these icons help to reveal more about Tom and the violence of the gangsters around him.

The dress in *Miller's Crossing* mainly consists of long coats, suits, and hats. The film is set during the Prohibition era, and the style of clothing worn by its characters reflects this. When a modern day actor like Gabriel Byrne is dressed like an Old Hollywood gangster, it helps connect him to the classic gangster films made during that time period. As a staple of the genre, the outfit of the gangster works to reveal more about him as a character, especially since the audience is able to associate it with what they have seen in the past. This point is highlighted by

McArthur who argues that, “The peculiar squareness of their hatted and coated figures is an extension of their physical presence, a visual shorthand for their violent potential” (“Iconography of the Gangster Film,” McArthur). The outfit of the gangster is an extension of his true character, or an extension of his violence. Tom’s hat reveals more about his violent potential and also acts as a symbol of his identity. Tom can wear his hat in a way that allows him to hide his face or to be more secretive, contributing to how he presents himself as a gangster. While he is wearing his hat he seems more powerful, and the audience is able to add to this by relating his outfit to what they have seen previously.

For characters that wear hats, the absence of it leads to the exposure of their weaknesses and feelings of humiliation. This is represented through the scene where Tom goes to tell Leo (Albert Finney) the truth behind his affair with Verna (Marcia Gay Harden). As Tom walks to Leo’s office, he passes numerous gangsters all dressed similarly to him, in suits and hats. When Tom tells Leo the truth he is chased out of the office and soft music plays as he is beaten up by Leo in front of everyone in the dance hall. Tom is humiliated by this in more ways than one, as after almost every hit he takes, his hat gets knocked away from him. His humiliation can only be emphasized by how he has to chase after his hat, the symbol of his power and violence, after telling Verna earlier how there is, “Nothing more foolish than a man chasing his hat” (Coen, *Miller's Crossing*). When Tom is without his hat, it is usually because he is at the mercy of another character. His inability to defend himself shows the authority Leo has over him. He is chasing after his own dignity as much as he is chasing after his hat, with this public loss of power damaging his reputation as a gangster.



Gangsters are able to label themselves through their choice in appearance. Their dress acts as a way of altering themselves in order to expose or conceal different aspects of their character. This is frequently seen through Eddie Dane (J. E. Freeman), who is almost unrecognizable as he lowers his hat and tilts his head down so that his face is hidden. Characters like Johnny Caspar (Jon Polito) and Leo on the other hand act as the figureheads of their gangs and do not hide their faces. The downside of this is that both men are unaware of the true intentions of the people around them, specifically Tom. Caspar, who does not wear a hat, feels that he is constantly being looked down on by other gangsters or “given the high hat,” revealing that this exposure comes at a price. Men without hats are less secretive about their ambitions, but this usually results in them being cheated in the end. This difference in dress creates a distinction between characters, separating gangsters like Tom from those like Caspar in more ways than one.

The importance of Tom's hat as an icon is immediately indicated by one of the opening scenes of the film, or by Tom's dream. A tracking shot moves the audience through the woodlands at low angle, looking up at the trees as the opening credits play. Suddenly, the camera moves to eye level, revealing Tom's hat on the ground with the title of the film displayed above it. The title then fades away and we watch as the hat gets picked up by the wind and carried off into the distance. This opening scene is referenced again later on in the film, when Tom describes it to Verna as a dream he had. In the dream, Tom is walking in the woods when the wind picks his hat up and carries it away from him. Verna, believing there has to be more to the dream than that, presses Tom for more information. She asks, "And you chased it, right? You ran and ran, [until you] finally caught up to it and you picked it up. But it wasn't a hat anymore and it changed into something else, something wonderful" (Coen, *Miller's Crossing*). Going against what Verna assumes, Tom quickly denies this, clarifying that the hat was just a hat and he did not chase after it. The dream is a metaphor for Tom's acceptance of the position he's in and his own unhappiness. He only watches as his hat is swept away from him, not caring enough to chase after it. He also only sees his hat for what it is and not what it could be, like in Verna's version of the dream. This demonstrates how Tom is only standing in the background while his hat, or his identity, gets carried further away from him.

The location of the forest, or of Miller's Crossing, also works to reveal more about Tom as a character. McArthur argues that the milieu of the film serves as both a background for the gangster's activities and as an extension of the violence of the world. The quiet setting of Miller's Crossing is contrasted with the loud and busy city. However, both places are inhabited by the gangster and both places act as an extension of his violence. The violence of the city is seen through the brutality of the characters within it, like the police officers that gun down and

destroy Leo's bar after pledging their loyalty to Caspar. The city is also where Tom's and Verna's apartments are located, or where their affair and betrayal of Leo takes place. The ambience of the forest seems to offer a transition away from this, as Tom and Caspar's men leave the city and the people within it behind. Instead, it is quickly revealed that the forest is only a more secretive place for violence. There they find Mink's (Steve Buscemi) body rotted and unrecognizable, his identity taken away from him. It is also where Tom almost kills Verna's brother, Bernie (John Turturro), and where Bernie humiliates himself by begging for his life and crying. He kneels on the ground, exposed with no coat or hat while Tom stands above him wearing both. This highlights how the forest and Tom's hat are closely linked together as icons of the movie, and both act as an extension of Tom's secrecy and violence.



The concluding scene of the film takes place at Miller's Crossing after Bernie's funeral. The end setting of the woodlands alludes back to the opening credits of the film, exposing how much Tom has changed as a character. Once Tom arrives, Verna quickly takes the car and leaves, forcing Tom and Leo to walk back together. As they move away from Bernie's grave,

Leo asks Tom to work for him again and says he believes Tom is sorry for the affair. Tom opposes this, stating that he does not feel sorry and he rejects Leo's offer. Similarly to Verna, Leo tries to look past Tom's reclusiveness and assumes he knows what Tom is thinking. Leo gets upset by the truth and storms off. Tom stands by a tree, watching as Leo walks down the path and places his hat on his head. This scene is able to connect back to Tom's dream, as the icons of the hat and forest are brought together once again. Instead of his hat, it's Leo that's moving away from him. Just as Tom did not chase after his hat in the dream, he will not chase after Leo. In the dream Tom's hat did not turn into anything wonderful, as Verna assumed, it just stayed a hat. Along the same lines, chasing after Leo will not lead to anything new or wonderful for Tom. Leo revealing that he's engaged to Verna even after learning about the affair only confirms his unwillingness to change. Leo's refusal to listen to Tom's advice to give Bernie up, choosing to protect Bernie and create an enemy out of Caspar instead, shows how Tom was limited or ignored while working for him. If Tom accepted Leo's offer, or chased after him, his life would go back to the way that it was. Instead, the film ends with Tom putting his own hat back on and tipping it downwards, signifying how he has matured and gained power through his independence. Even though Tom is losing both Leo and Verna in the end, he is able to regain his dignity and become more powerful as a gangster. Those who had control over him are either dead or out of his life, and he doesn't have to answer to anyone.

The iconography seen within the film creates an emphasis on the gangster's identity; As a result, identity is central to the gangster's character and helps to define who he associates with or who he is working against. This identity allows the audience to associate the gangster with other aspects of the genre, meaning that they can more deeply understand him. The milieu and dress of the film serve as an extension of the gangster. In *Miller's Crossing*, the violence and secrecy of

the woodland setting is added along with Tom's hatted figure, ultimately working to reveal the brutality of him in several different ways. The combination of these icons is most significant in the conclusion of the film, where Tom's confidence in himself and his identity as a gangster is strengthened.