
THE MOB AND THE MOVIES: A CINEMATIC HISTORY OF THE ALL-AMERICAN CRIMINAL

Andrew Graves

Week 9: Crime and the Coen Brothers

THE COEN BROTHERS

- After graduating from NYU, Joel worked on a number of industrial projects as well as music videos
- Around this time, he met Sam Raimi and through this he ended up co-editing *The Evil Dead* (1981)

MILLER'S CROSSING (1990)

THE COEN BROTHERS

- Directed by Joel Coen
- Written by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen
- Produced by Ethan Coen
- Cinematography by Barry Sonnenfeld
- Edited by Michael R Miller
- Music by Carter Burwell
- Miller's Crossing saw the Coen Brothers using their considerable talents to create a neo-noir gangster pic
- This prohibition era piece tells the story of a mob war
- The plot is complex
- The brothers took a long time to complete the screenplay
- The writer's block they faced inspired the to write *Barton Fink*

"...the Coens have a wonderful time playing in this particular toy box...As an exercise in style, Miller's Crossing puts a fine polish on the hardwood interiors of the offices and social clubs where gangsters do business, and luxuriates in period wardrobe and hair, which are like an outward reflection of inward calculation."

Scott Tobias, The Guardian

- In retrospect, *Miller's Crossing* contains many elements which work well, and includes the conventions we would come to expect from a Coen Brothers movie.
- However, though it moves beyond being a generic gangster movie, it feels more like a Coen Brothers film in embryo, something is missing – it doesn't quite gel together fully
- The plot, like many 1940s features, is overly complex, however where a movie like *The Maltese Falcon* bristles with style and witty dialogue, *Miller's Crossing* doesn't necessarily deliver in those terms.

FARGO (1996)**THE COHEN BROTHERS**

- Directed by Joel Cohen
 - Written by Joel Cohen and Ethan Cohen
 - Produced by Ethan Cohen
 - Cinematography by Roger Deakins
 - Edited by Roderick Jaynes
 - Music by Carter Burwell
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- Unlike *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo* feels much more like a fully-fledged Coen Brothers film.
 - The plot, the fascinatingly twisty, is not overly complicated, so the action and story moves much faster than *Miller's Crossing*.
 - Characters with complicated backstories and motivations come together in an engaging narrative full of wit, tension and intelligence

"Fargo is speckled with those ironising tics that keep us off balance: after one strained conversation in a diner, a parodically perky young woman at the till asks: "How was everything today?" and the question jars and crashes; she is like a figure from a bad dream. The Coen style is so difficult to pin down here. The witnesses that Marge interviews describe Stormare's character as "funny looking" without being able to say why, and trying to describe this film's tone raises the same difficulty."

Peter Bradshaw
The Guardian

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE (2001)**THE COHEN BROTHERS**

- Directed by Joel Cohen
 - Written by Joel Cohen and Ethan Cohen
 - Produced by Ethan Cohen
 - Cinematography by Roger Deakins
 - Edited by Roderick Jaynes and Tricia Cooke
 - Music by Carter Burwell
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- The film obviously recalls many 1940s movies, such as *Double Indemnity*, *Shadow of a Doubt* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.
 - The black and white photography by Roger Deakins brings in a closed in, added intensity
 - While many people have argued over the inclusion of the UFO at the end of the film, it might be seen as Ed's connection to a higher power
 - His reaction shows that he has resigned himself to his fate and what 'god' has in store