The Coen Brothers' *Fargo*

Edited by

William G. Luhr

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Fargo is the most commercially and critically successful film of Ethan and Joel Coen. Immediately recognized as an important work, it was nominated for five Academy Awards and received two, an exceptional achievement for a low-budget, independently produced film without major stars. *Fargo* is also a film that explores middle-American themes and settings from an original and unsettling perspective, challenging traditional genre structures. This volume explores *Fargo* from various methodological perspectives. Providing a detailed account of the film's production, reception, and place within the career of the Coen brothers, it explores issues and themes that are important to current film discourse, including genre, gender and sexuality, race, history, culture, and myth.

William Luhr is professor of English at St. Peter's College, Jersey City, New Jersey. Co-Chair of the Columbia University Seminar on Cinema and Interdisciplinary Interpretation, he has written, co-authored, and edited many books and articles on aspects of film, most recently *Thinking About Movies: Watching, Questioning, Enjoying*, Second Edition.

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Edited by

WILLIAM G. LUHR

Saint Peter's College, Jersey City, New Jersey

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For Walter and Richie

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Contributors

MIKITA BROTTMAN gained her PhD from Oxford University in 1994. She is the author of *Car Crash Culture* (Palgrave, 2001), *Offensive Films* (Greenwood, 1994), *Meat Is Murder* (Creation, 1998), *Hollywood Hex* (Creation, 1999), and an edited collection of essays on the films of Jack Nicholson (2000). She has published essays on the horror film and film theory in numerous journals, including *Film Quarterly* and *Literature/Film Quarterly*, and serves on the editorial board of *Unscene Film*. She is currently Assistant Professor of Literature at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

PAMELA GRACE holds a certificate in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy from Washington Square Institute, an MSW from Columbia University, and is completing her PhD in Cinema Studies at New York University. Her long involvement with feminist issues includes serving as Vice President of the Ms Foundation for Women and functioning as a delegate to the Fourth World Women's NGO (Nongovernmental Organization) Conference in Beijing. She has taught film at New York University and Brooklyn College.

WILLIAM LUHR is Professor of English at Saint Peter's College and Co-Chair (with David Sterritt) of the Columbia University Seminar on Cinema and Interdisciplinary Interpretation. Among his books as author, co-author, or editor are *Raymond Chandler and Film* (Second Edition, Florida State University Press, 1991); *World Cinema Since 1945* (Ungar, 1987); *The Maltese Falcon: John Huston, Director* (Rutgers University Press, 1995); *Thinking About Movies: Watching, Questioning, Enjoying* (Second Edition,

Blackwell, 2003), and *Blake Edwards* (Volumes I [1981] and II [1989], Ohio University Press). He has contributed to numerous journals and is currently working on a book on *film noir*.

CHRISTOPHER SHARRETT is Professor of Communication at Seton Hall University. He is editor of *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media* (1999) and *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (1993). His work has appeared in *Cineaste*, *Film Quarterly*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *CineAction*, *Persistence of Vision*, and elsewhere, including such anthologies as *The Dread of Difference: Gender and The Horror Film*, *The New American Cinema*, and *Perspectives on German Cinema*.

DAVID STERRITT has been Film Critic of *The Christian Science Monitor* for more than 30 years. He is Professor of Theater and Film at the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University, a member of the Film Studies Faculty at Columbia University, and author/editor of several books including *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Mad to Be Saved: The Beats, the '50s, and Film* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1998). He has twice served as Chair of the New York Film Critics Circle and is a former programmer of the New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center.

WILLIAM LUHR

1 Introduction

Fargo (1996) is Ethan and Joel Coens' most commercially and critically successful film (Fig. 1). It merits the kinds of examination this book offers not only on its virtues as a remarkable film, but also as one that provides insights into the Coen brothers' singular career, and into significant recent trends in both the film industry and American culture. Immediately and widely recognized as an important work, it received two Academy Awards (Best Actress for Frances McDormand and Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen, for Ethan Coen and Joel Coen) and was nominated for five more (Best Cinematography, Best Director, Best Film Editing, Best Picture, and Best Supporting Actor). It also received accolades from such prestigious venues as the Cannes Film Festival, the British Academy Awards, the Chicago Film Critics Association, and the New York Film Critics Circle. This is highly unusual for a low-budget, independently produced film without major stars. Further, this aspect of the film's success places it within the trend of the rise of independent filmmaking and distribution in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, for a cluster of reasons, numerous films made and/or distributed outside the major Hollywood studios enjoyed unprecedented cross-over success into major markets. *Fargo* is not only important as an independent film of the 1990s that signals major shifts in the film industry, but it is also a haunting and delightful one that explores middle-American themes and settings from an original and unsettling

perspective, that challenges traditional cinematic genre structures, and that comments on American racial, gender, and cultural traditions.

It does this as a film by the Coen brothers, a writing/directing/producing team that has displayed unusual assurance, as well as a distinctive vision from their first film, *Blood Simple* (1984), nearly 20 years ago. The distinctiveness of their vision is evident in the difficulties that many, even among its champions, have had in classifying *Fargo*. Some have placed it in the tradition of *film noir*, others call it a comedy, and some call it both.

Fargo is a particularly useful film for the Cambridge Film Handbooks series because the very diversity of its characterizations leads viewers in varied, at times contradictory, and often provocative directions. On some levels, such potentially confusing responses result from little more than jokes. For example, the credited editor, Roderick Jaynes (who was nominated for an Academy Award) does not exist; the name is a pseudonym for the Coen brothers, one they have used in other films. Other aspects of the film that produce diverse interpretation are more complex. An opening title asserts that "This is a true story. The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred." A closing title, however, directly contradicts this and states that "No similarity to actual persons living or dead is intended or should be inferred." Although these certainly are contradictory statements, the first one is also part of a complex strategy to guide the viewer's response to the film. Regardless of whether the first statement is true, it is certainly no joke. It sets a somber mood that is reinforced by the tone of the opening scenes. Unlike some Coen films that begin by evoking old film genres or broad comedy, this one establishes the mood of a grim buildup to a "true crime" from the recent past. With ominous music on the soundtrack, an isolated car crawls across a frozen landscape. The driver soon meets with two criminals to set a doomed series of crimes in motion. Fact-based or

1. Marge points her revolver at Gaear as she identifies herself by her sheriff's shield.

not, the film strives for the *feel* of actual events and invites the viewer to accept its story as such.

The sad, ugly, and somehow inevitable events that follow, combined with the self-destructive nature of many of the characters and the overall atmosphere of doom, have led many critics to place the film in the tradition of *film noir*. Yet, in June 2000, the American Film Institute placed *Fargo* on its list of the 100 greatest American film comedies. How can a *film noir* be a comedy? Such an opposition is not as contradictory as it might initially seem, and while it points to the Coens' sense of playfulness, it also underscores genuinely distinctive aspects of their work. Their *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), which deals with chain gang escapees in the rural U.S. South in the 1930s, asserts in its credits that it is "Based on *The Odyssey* by Homer." Such a claim at first seems like a preposterous joke, and yet elements of Homer's epic do inflect the film in ways much more significant than the fact that its central character has "Ulysses" for his middle name.

The Coens frequently take character and genre types familiar to audiences and develop them in unexpected ways. *Fargo*'s plot concerns a kidnapping that goes horribly wrong, resulting in the murders of innocent people and disaster for the perpetrators. It fits into a long-standing concern of the Coens with kidnapping and/or criminal life that began with the spectacular success of their first feature, *Blood Simple*, continued with their second, *Raising Arizona* (1987), and pervades their career. The Coens have repeatedly said that many of these interests have roots in their affection for American hard-boiled fiction, especially that of James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and Dashiell Hammett.

Although references to Hollywood genre traditions pervade their work, the Coens have taken pains to stress that film is not their only creative influence. They have a long-standing interest in literature and literary issues that extends beyond their affection for American hard-boiled fiction. Ethan Coen has published a well-reviewed collection of fiction, *The Gates of Eden* (Delta, 1999), and even essays such as his introduction to the printed screenplay for *Fargo* (Faber and Faber, 1996) display a reflective, literary sensibility. One of their films, *Barton Fink* (1991), takes as its central topic the difficulties of a Depression-era playwright who comes to work in Hollywood. Although the Coens are steeped in film history, other components of their intellectual makeup should not be ignored.

David Sterritt, in his essay on the Coens in this volume, gives a broad and perceptive assessment of major trends in their career, as well as a production history of the making of *Fargo*. Rather than repeat much of that information here, I outline three rubrics helpful to an understanding of broad contexts for their work. The first is the influence of Hollywood genres, the second is their status as American independent filmmakers, and the third is the importance to their work of carefully detailed settings in specific regions and eras.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Hollywood genres on the Coens' career. It started early; as boys they made home-movie remakes of old Hollywood films. Their films as adults both draw upon and distance themselves from Hollywood traditions. Although they

have never done a feature-length remake of an individual film, their work is steeped in genre traditions and references.

They do this in their own, distinctive way. Unlike directors such as Steven Spielberg or George Lucas in films such as the Indiana Jones trilogy, the *Star Wars* films, or *Always* (1989), they do not nostalgically engage old films or genres in an attempt to revive their effects for new generations. The Coens more resemble Robert Altman, whose films such as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), and *The Long Goodbye* (1973) both engage and severely critique those genres (the Western, the detective film, *film noir*). This posture partly accounts for the Coens' hip and irreverent reputation.

The Coens consider themselves American independent filmmakers in a tradition very different from that of directors such as Jim Jarmusch or Gus Van Sant. The Coens believe that that tradition approaches American film through the eyes of the European art cinema, and receives its dominant distribution in small, elite venues and the film festival circuit. The Coens do not see themselves as avant-garde or experimental filmmakers and do not want to make films for an elite audience. Instead, they want creative control over low-budget, entertainment films for a wide market. Their model is more that of the American independent horror film of the past 30 years, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) or *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). They entered the film industry working with Sam Raime, whose films such as *The Evil Dead* (1983) and *Evil Dead II* (1987) precisely fit this model. The Coens like the independence that low budgets give them, but also want the wide distribution that major studios can provide.

Because of their interest in a wide audience, they have adjusted their vision to distribution realities. For example, they wanted to make both *Blood Simple* and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), which evoke old genres (*film noir* and screwball comedy) in black and white, but accepted color because color films are much easier to distribute. (They did, however, finally make the *noir*ish *The Man Who Wasn't There* [2001] in black and white).

In a manner related to their use of genre, they have rooted all their films in a strong sense of locale and time, with great attention to the look and feel of a place and an era. This goes far beyond standard elements such as period wardrobe, automobiles, and music and extends to climate, regional accents, and cultural trends and mores – everything from William H. Macy's idiotic office display of golfing memorabilia in *Fargo* to George Clooney's obsession with "Dapper Dan's Men's Pomade" and hairnets in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

The Coens have alternated the period settings for their films, setting the first two in the present, the next three in the past, the succeeding two in the present, and the most recent two in the past. No one, however, regardless of era, looks anything like any other. They have referred to their first film, *Blood Simple*, as "Texas gothic." Their second film, *Raising Arizona* (1987), has an entirely different look and mood. Although both are crime/kidnapping films set in the contemporary Southwest containing grisly humor (a detective's hand is graphically nailed to a wall in *Blood Simple* and a biker's head is blown off by a grenade in *Raising Arizona*), they have radically different looks and styles. *Blood Simple* develops a *noir*ish mood with its dark lighting, grim events, complex point-of-view structure, and almost bewildering plot turns. The brightly lit *Raising Arizona*, to the contrary, creates a mood of frantic, goofy slapstick comedy.

Next, the Coens made three films set in the past, with strong evocations of Hollywood genres. *Miller's Crossing* (1990), their first "period" picture, deals with rival Prohibition-era gangsters who control an East Coast city. Its gloomy, stylized look evokes gangster films of the 1930s, and its plotting and themes recall Dashiell Hammett's fiction, particularly the novels, *Red Harvest* (1929) and *The Glass Key* (1931). *Barton Fink* is actually about Hollywood in 1941. It concerns a leftist Broadway playwright, a champion of the "common man," who is brought to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter. The film critiques many of the romantic legends that have grown up about "serious" writers in Hollywood during the studio era. The Coens' third period movie, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, although set in the late 1950s, evokes both 1930s screwball comedy and 1940s Frank Capra films about

"common men" caught up in large social forces, such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). It is broadly played for farce and parody.

The Coens returned to contemporary life with their next two films: *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* (1998). *Fargo* is something of a white *noir* and the Coen film least steeped in Hollywood referentiality. *The Big Lebowski*, influenced by Raymond Chandler's fiction, is a rambling, shaggy dog crime comedy set in Los Angeles.

The Coens followed these films with two more period ones. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a kind of musical farce set during the Depression, gives broad, mythic associations to sweeping social movements and forces of the era, from religious revival meetings to Ku Klux Klan rallies to the appearance of sirenlike women to a climactic flood of nearly Biblical proportions. The Coens then shifted to the deliberate, turgid *noir*ish pacing of *The Man Who Wasn't There*, set in the 1940s, as somnolent in tone as *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was kinetic.

The three rubrics of genre, American independent filmmaking, and setting should provide insight into the place of *Fargo* within the Coens' work. Although *Fargo* is distinctive in the Coens' career for its minimal evocation of genre films, it very much fits their model of independent filmmaking. Working with a small budget and without major stars, they were, nevertheless, able to secure wide, mainstream distribution. Finally, much of the film's identity comes from the specificity of its setting.

Fargo is set in the frozen Minnesota/North Dakota landscape. Its story concerns Jerry (William H. Macy), who, deeply and fraudulently in debt, engages two half-competent criminals, Carl (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear (Peter Stormare), to kidnap his wife, Jean (Kristin Rudrüd), in hopes of extorting ransom money from his wealthy father-in-law, Wade (Harve Presnell). Things go wrong from the start. After kidnapping Jean, Carl and Gaear are stopped by a highway patrol officer. They murder him, as well as two passers-by who witness the crime. Marge (Frances McDormand), a pregnant police chief, investigates the murders, ultimately solving the case. But in the meantime,

bickering among the kidnappers, Jerry, and Wade spins pathetically out of control. Carl kills Wade as well as a parking garage attendant; Gaear kills Jean for making noise, then kills Carl. Marge captures Gaear, and Jerry is easily tracked down and captured by police. This downward spiral of chaotic ineptitude and homicidal hysteria is counterpointed by the domestic tranquility of Marge's homelife with her husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch), and the imminent birth of their first child.

This handbook includes five original essays that will enable the reader to further enjoy and explore both *Fargo* and its contexts. These essays are written in an accessible style and incorporate significant approaches of contemporary cultural analysis. They look at the film with respect to decisions that went into its making; its visual, narrative, musical, and performance strategies; its commentary on American history, myth, and culture; its production history and relationship to other films by the Coens; the importance of its setting; and the gender and racial issues it raises.

More specifically, David Sterritt's essay gives a production history of *Fargo*, describing how and why it was made, and charts its relationship to the entire body of the Coen brothers' work. Pamela Grace's essay explores the unusual way *Fargo* develops its central character as both a resourceful police officer and an expectant mother. Grace shows how the film's development of this character comments incisively on the history of gender relations.

Christopher Sharrett's essay illustrates ways in which the film's setting and characters comment trenchantly on dominant myths of American history and culture, particularly those of the Western frontier. He demonstrates how the appeals of many of the characters to the American Dream for self-validation are little more than a hypocritical reliance on long-discarded values; a reliance that points not to cultural superiority, but rather to the nightmare world of the modern horror film.

Mikita Brottman's essay implicitly deals with the issue of how *Fargo* can be seen as both comic and horrific. She develops the relationship of the film's comedy to its grotesque elements and shows how *Fargo*'s

comedy does not contradict but rather reinforces its grim themes and events. William Luhr's essay shows how *Fargo* both invokes and deviates from stereotypes of genre, setting, comedy, and characterization to simultaneously engage and disorient its viewers.

The book also reprints an interview with the Coen brothers about the film, as well as pertinent articles that incorporate commentary from people involved in the making of *Fargo*, such as Roger Deakins, its cinematographer, and Carter Burwell, its composer. In addition, it includes reviews by Thomas Doherty and Harvey R. Greenberg, a selected bibliography, and a filmography of the Coens' work.

DAVID STERRITT

2 *Fargo* in Context

The Middle of Nowhere?

"Out of respect for the dead . . ."
– from the opening text of *Fargo*

"A lot can happen in the middle of nowhere." So asserts the well-received promotional tag for *Fargo*, which has accompanied the film's propitious commercial and critical career from its 1996 theatrical release through its later video incarnation.

But while *Fargo* indeed takes place in the middle of nowhere – if one accepts the notion that Minnesota and North Dakota are thus accurately described – it was clearly not conceptualized there. Joel and Ethan Coen had written, directed, and produced six feature films during the eleven preceding years, and as of early 2003 they have completed three more. *Fargo* reflects, refracts, and refines various thematic and stylistic ideas that have preoccupied the brothers throughout this period. To appreciate *Fargo*, one must take into account the context in which it was made – a multifaceted context that encompasses not only the picture's production history, but also a set of social and cinematic notions deployed by the Coens with a vigor and consistency that make this grim comedy one of their most fully realized achievements, even though it encapsulates other qualities that many critics rightly find problematic.

The comparatively small scale and proudly monochromatic look of *Fargo* have been described as outgrowths of the fact that this movie

went into production at a ticklish time in the Coens' career. Their previous picture, *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), had fared disastrously at the box office, failing to recoup the then-imposing budget (reported at anywhere from $25 million to $40 million) that Warner Bros. had imprudently (and unnecessarily) poured into it.

This was not the first time the brothers found themselves in such a position. Coen biographer Ronald Bergan calls *The Hudsucker Proxy* their "most expensive film and their only box-office disaster,"[1] but the 1990 melodrama *Miller's Crossing* had also been a major disappointment, despite a high-profile premiere in the prestigious opening-night slot of the New York Film Festival and a major promotional push by Twentieth Century Fox intended to translate the art theater momentum established at Lincoln Center into a wave of mass audience appeal at neighborhood screens everywhere. Interestingly and perhaps perversely, the Coens' next picture was *Barton Fink* (1991), an aggressively surrealistic comedy for which the brothers themselves had appropriately skeptical commercial expectations. Shortly before *Barton Fink* debuted, I asked the Coens what project they would proceed to after it was launched. "Something people will want to see," they simultaneously replied in slightly different words, indicating rueful awareness that *Barton* was not destined for ticket window glory.

None of the previous Coen movies had been a walloping hit – *Blood Simple* (1985) did well and *Raising Arizona* (1987) did better, but neither was a blockbuster by Hollywood standards – and the lackluster returns of *Miller's Crossing* and *Barton Fink* were topped by the awful performance of *The Hudsucker Proxy*. The brothers' status in Hollywood's eyes at this time is crisply described by William Preston Robertson, a Coen commentator who speaks from his personal relationship with them:

> The broad artistic license the movie industry had granted them for so many years in the hope that such patience might someday be rewarded with a box-office hit in addition to a merely critical one was, the Coen brothers believed, swiftly narrowing. The clock was ticking. The heat was on.[2]

Many other filmmakers would have recognized their plight – for example, Martin Scorsese, when he tried to recover from Paramount's cancellation of *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1983 by turning to *After Hours*, which did not draw huge crowds when released in 1985, but reassured Hollywood that the serious-minded filmmaker of *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980) was perfectly willing to tell a quirky comic story with plenty of potential laughs. Feeling the heat and hearing the tick, the Coens did something similar when they moved from the relatively rarefied world of *The Hudsucker Proxy*, with its top-heavy budget and film referential glibness, to the leaner, meaner terrain of *Fargo*.

Not that anything connected with the Coens is likely to proceed quite so simply and straightforwardly.[3] They had expected to follow *The Hudsucker Proxy* with *The Big Lebowski*, which they had written before *Hudsucker* began its ill-starred theatrical run. But they wanted Jeff Bridges for the lead, and because he was not available at the time (although he did star in the picture when it was eventually made), they closeted themselves away and wrote the *Fargo* screenplay, exploring a subject and story that appealed to them for several reasons. Among these were the specificity of its setting in the part of the northern United States where they had grown up; their affection for plots that center on kidnapping (see *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* for further evidence); and the opportunity it presented for them to shoot "a crime film with characters away from the stereotypes of the genre," as they later put it. They also liked the prospect of engaging with a "smaller crew and a much more intimate production" after the *Hudsucker* extravaganza.[4]

In addition, the Coens were plugging into a current filmmaking trend – the vogue for intertwining elements of crime and comedy in deliberately exaggerated ways – that had taken on considerable momentum thanks in part to their own previous work, most notably *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*. Other such films released to American theaters in 1996 include Wes Anderson's *Bottle Rocket* and Benjamin Ross's *The Young Poisoner's Handbook*, both of which show signs of influence by the Coen approach.

By and large, the principal photography for *Fargo* went as smoothly as the Coens had hoped. (In this they were more fortunate than, say, Francis Ford Coppola, who embarked on *Apocalypse Now* in 1976, with high-spirited expectations of a fun action movie shoot that would contrast with the anxiety-filled intensity of making *The Conversation* and *The Godfather Part II*, only to be walloped by production woes ranging from star Martin Sheen's heart attack to a cataclysmic Philippines monsoon.[5]) Although anticipated support from Warner Bros. fell through, Eric Fellner and Tim Bevan of Working Title stayed committed to the project, along with PolyGram and Gramercy Pictures, which held distribution rights for the North American market. All were attracted by the $6.5-million budget, a modest but realistic figure that was the Coens' lowest since *Raising Arizona*, still their most profitable picture.

Shooting started a brief three months after the screenplay was finished, with Roger Deakins behind the camera in his third consecutive stint with the brothers after replacing Barry Sonnenfeld as their regular cinematographer. Production designer Rick Heinrichs worked with Deakins and the Coens on the challenge of making the film's midwestern landscapes look simultaneously bleak, boring, fraught with dramatic possibilities, and worthy of Dante in their potential for immanent horror. Heinrichs also devised the Paul Bunyan statue that towers portentously over the town of Brainerd with its axe murderer stance and mad, glaring eyes. Former assistant costumer Mary Zophres replaced her ailing employer Richard Hornung to design the characters' clothing. In the cast, Frances McDormand signed on to play Marge, working with her husband Joel in the first major role he had given her since *Blood Simple*. (The couple reportedly stayed in adjoining but separate hotel rooms during the shoot to maintain domestic and professional harmony.) Also on board was previous Coen collaborator Steve Buscemi (*Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*) as Carl Showalter, the picture's talkative thug. Rounding out the ensemble were Peter Stormare as Gaear Grimsrud, the taciturn thug; William H. Macy as Jerry Lundegaard, the larcenous car salesman (Fig. 2); Kristin Rudrüd in the thankless role of Lundegaard's

kidnapped wife; and Harve Presnell as her father, a businessman whose soulless self-absorption is a wry complement to that of his pathetic son-in-law.

Together this group headed for Minneapolis in January 1995, looking forward to vistas of endless snow, which failed to materialize, ironically, because this proved to be a historically warm winter for the Twin Cities area. Snow machines sufficed for a while, but eventually the filmmakers trekked on to North Dakota's chilly Grand Forks region, where they found sufficient snow for the icy exterior shots that they considered essential for the story's frigid mood. Virtually the entire film was shot on actual locations rather than studio sets, and Deakins used natural light whenever possible, seeking a documentary look that would suit the film's distanced, insects-under-a-microscope tone. Many scenes were worked out in storyboards, but some were left to last-minute inspiration to take advantage of the flexibility allowed by a comparatively small cast and crew. Postproduction also went smoothly, with the brothers editing the film under their pseudonym, Roderick Jaynes, and Coen regular Carter Burwell composing the score. Burwell incorporated elements of Scandinavian dance and religious music along with jazz and popular hits from the story's 1987 time period, producing an eclecticism that echoes the film's comic–tragic complexities.

Looking at *Fargo* in the context of its production history, one finds that the Coens brought forth this chilly, sardonic, sometimes savage movie through a filmmaking process notable for its cozy, companionable nature. One might see this as evidence of the professionalism they had cultivated by this stage of their career, combining no-nonsense technical competence with easygoing creative capabilities.

Alternatively, one might see the efficiency of the production as evidence of facile tendencies in the Coens' aesthetic sensibility. Calling their body of work "alarmingly coherent," critic Kent Jones attributes this quality to "their monotonous syntax, the sense that any given film has been fed through some hitherto unknown image/sound processor, with pre-sets for shot duration, centered framing, emotional tone, and visual handsomeness." On this view, one might imagine

2. Jerry, as things have gotten way out of control.

the Coens as amiable but soulless artisans presiding over a carefully calculated exercise that is as glib and mannered as it is meticulously designed and cinematically self-congratulatory. "You can set your watch by their remarkably uniform editing rhythm," Jones continues, "which features a percussive yet deadpan one–two combination: probably intended to surprise, it's become as predictable as the rising of the sun." So have "cartoonish play with scale" and "deliberately freakish use of actors popping up around the edge of the movie like paper cutouts on sticks."[6]

These criticisms apply to *Fargo* as to other Coen films – one thinks of the relentless Hollywood cleverness in *The Hudsucker Proxy* and the strenuous gag-mongering in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, among other examples – calling attention to the Coens' penchant for ingeniously arranged but self-enclosed and self-limiting cinematics. To be sure, *Fargo* embodies many of the best possibilities of Coen-style genre revisionism, with its genuinely surprising plot (is there a more jolting gambit in nineties film than the moment of Showalter's abrupt demise?) and its imaginative juxtaposition of contrasting characters, from Grimsrud the feral brute to Marge the articulate earth mother.

Yet the very exactness of its immaculately assembled tropes has an undertone as chilly and detached as the icy snowscapes captured with such clinical precision by Deakins's long-lens camera.

Genre revisionism is, of course, a crucial aspect of the Coens' creative signature, and their films can easily be sketched in the shorthand terms of this popular postmodernist game: *Blood Simple* blends *film noir* with EC Comics visuals; *Raising Arizona* is a mixture of crime comedy and live-action cartoon; *Miller's Crossing* is a Dashiell Hammett spin-off; *Barton Fink* introduces Nathanael West and Clifford Odets to William Faulkner and Luis Buñuel; *The Hudsucker Proxy* inflates a screwball comedy story with countless in-joke allusions; *The Big Lebowski* is a deliberate knockoff of Raymond Chandler's fiction; *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* bites off *The Odyssey* of Homer and *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) of Preston Sturges in one heedlessly ungainly gulp; and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), heavily influenced by the work of James M. Cain, ends with the hero writing his bittersweet tale for the sort of forties men's magazine that the movie's tones and textures have evoked from the beginning.

Fargo is less specific and more subtle in its genre parody characteristics than most other Coen films. Nevertheless, even casual spectators may easily detect the movie's roots in longtime traditions of small-town comedy, Grand Guignol grotesquerie, true crime docudrama, and especially *film noir* edginess; however, much of the brothers' heavy irony may seem to reconfigure the contours of seminal forties and fifties *noir*, and even of the neo-*noir* cycle that was partly launched by *Blood Simple*. The failure of *The Hudsucker Proxy* may have taught the Coens that too much film-reflexive foolery can be offputting to moviegoers who do not think of themselves as cineastes, but the sincerity of their own cinephilia shines through their inability to resist more of the same in their subsequent film. Still, they are careful this time to wrap genre horseplay in a mantle of humor, violence, sex, and suspense designed to satisfy mass audience expectations, even as film-savvy connoisseurs enjoy a steady stream of insider *frissons*.

Of the genre categories relevant to *Fargo*, the true crime label has generated the most critical attention. This began when some early reviewers noticed the contradiction between the film's standard-issue disclaimer in the closing credits – "The persons and events portrayed in this production are fictitious. No similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is intended or should be inferred," – and the claim of docudrama reality made in its opening text:

> This is a true story. The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

If casual moviegoers and careless critics tend to believe the first of these mutually canceling statements, it is for three reasons. First, the opening statement is foregrounded by its stark presentation in the film's first moments; second, there's no self-evident reason *not* to believe it; and third, the closing statement that contradicts it may not be heeded or even noticed by spectators accustomed to exiting the theater or hitting the fast-forward button long before the end credits are over.

People familiar with the Coens' work may be instantly skeptical about the "true story" assertion, however, because the brothers' imaginations have always inclined toward the surrealism of oneiric fantasy (e.g., *Barton Fink*) and psychological delirium (e.g., *The Big Lebowski*) rather than the realism of journalistic reportage or naturalistic docudrama. What is most compelling about the "true story" statement is the ingenuity with which the Coens have appropriated one of conventional cinema's most banal gestures to serve precisely the storytelling interests – oneiric fantasy and psychological delirium – that are their habitual stock in trade. Indeed, the bracketing of *Fargo* by paradoxical paratexts is one of the elements (along with bizarre plot twists such as the woodchipper scene, hallucinatory images such as the Paul Bunyan statue, and so on) that mark the movie as a quintessential Coen work.

Disorienting forms of duality and doubleness are integral to many facets of the brothers' *oeuvre*, from its mercurial moods (comic/tragic, menacing/reassuring, formulaic/innovative, etc.) to its penchant for parody. Parody is itself an inherently double-faced mode that reflects what literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "laughing aspect" of the world. When deployed in contexts of carnivalesque irreverence (such as a darkly humorous entertainment film), it serves as a "system of crooked mirrors, elongating, diminishing, distorting in various directions and to various degrees."[7] The opening text of *Fargo* is a parody in the root sense of the term: It *parrots* the commonly made truth claims of fact-based narrative, only to be comically contradicted by an opposing statement at the other end of the movie.

Its assertion of truth is negated by the disclaimer in the closing credits – assuming that the *second* statement is not the false one, but rather a deliberate hoax or a technician's mistake. It is also contradicted by producer and co-writer Ethan Coen, in his introductory essay to the published version of the *Fargo* screenplay. "The story that follows is about Minnesota," he writes. "It evokes the abstract landscape of our childhood – a bleak, windswept tundra, resembling Siberia except for its Ford dealerships and Hardee's restaurants. It aims to be both homey and exotic, and pretends to be true." The final clause grows out of that essay's brief discussion of the ubiquity of narrative in human experience and the difficulty of sorting out the factual from the false: "The stories that are not credible will occasionally . . . turn out to be true, and stories that *are* credible will conversely turn out to be false."[8] But it spills the beans about the veracity of *Fargo* even as it begs us to complete its gesture of make-believe by surrendering our good sense to the movie's aggressively ingratiating (and tantalizingly unstable) blend of hominess and exoticism.

Doubleness surges through Ethan's essay, which uses a long example of unverifiable family lore – the anecdote of "Grandma and the Negress," endlessly told to him and Joel by an elderly relative when they were children – to illustrate how even the simplest and folksiest truth claims are fraught with enough undecidability

to gladden Jacques Derrida's heart. Grandma's story is itself steeped in dualities, from the contrasting traits of its title characters to its invocation of Jewish-Russian values in Jewish-American surroundings. Ethan's discussion of it also has a dual structure, oscillating between psychological-narratological inducements to *believe* the anecdote and practical-commonsensical reasons *not* to; between the midwestern landscape imagined as white-screen abstraction and as commerce-crowded Ford and Hardee habitat; and between the intricately imbricated pleasures of the homey and the exotic, the familiar and the uncanny, that which is purposefully pretended and that which is tantamount to truth.

In all of this, Ethan's essay makes an appropriate gateway to *Fargo* as both screenplay and movie. The bizarrely twinned figures of Grandma and the Negress subtly anticipate the film's own obsession with doubles and doppelgängers, which bring into bodily form the ambivalent attitudes toward bedrock existential constituents of the human condition – joy and sorrow, hope and despair, love and hate, life and death – that characterize the darkest, richest moments in *Fargo* and other Coen works. Bakhtin traces a fascination with grotesque bodies in general – and the trope of twinning in particular – through a centuries-old tradition of carnivalesque art and literature. "All the images of carnival are dualistic," he writes; "they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death (the image of pregnant death), blessing and curse . . . praise and abuse, youth and old age, top and bottom, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom." Also common in carnivalia are "paired images, chosen for their contrast (high/low, fat/thin, etc.) or for their similarity (doubles/twins)."[9] Coen movies have tapped into this tradition ever since *Blood Simple*, which intermingles love and death in a tangled horror–comic dance with such grotesque elements as (among many other examples) an all-but-murdered man who cannot stay alive but refuses to rest in peace and a bathroom finale that evokes the fascination with "the material bodily lower stratum" that Bakhtin points to as a recurring preoccupation of carnivalesque art.

Carnivalism and grotesquerie work themselves into different Coen films in different ways, but certain of the brothers' strategies are tellingly consistent. One is their use of exaggerated speech patterns and distorted forms of body language to signal the inability of individuals to dwell harmoniously in the social world that surrounds and contains them. Another is their preoccupation with violence as not only a central factor in the American cultural ethos, but also a grimly efficacious conduit for social interactions perceived as necessary by their intellectually challenged characters. Still another is their sardonic view of business (i.e., capitalism) as a site not of mutually beneficial communication and cooperation, but of spasmodically destructive competition and exploitation. The brothers habitually explore these preoccupations through the social, cultural, economic, psychological, and discursive traits of particular American regions, which are rendered unfamiliar and grotesque via the brothers' distinctive tactics of overstatement, caricature, and parody. There is no Coen movie (even a comparatively "serious" one like *Miller's Crossing*) that does not etch a militantly parodic geographic and/or cultural chronotope, and in the years since *Fargo* this tendency has become even more conspicuous, culminating in the archly bizarre South of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and the somnolent California city of *The Man Who Wasn't There*.

Fargo marks a high point in the brothers' Bakhtinian habit of physicalizing – or desublimating, to use a psychoanalytic term – the complicated mixture of attraction and repulsion that characterizes their shared attitude toward cinema, toward storytelling, and apparently toward life itself. Every type of personality that figures in the story, for instance, is defamiliarized and destablized by the presence of what Bakhtin would call a "decrowning double"[10] that throws the personality's idiosyncrasies and mannerisms into high relief. The showily loquacious Showalter and the grimly taciturn Grimsrud are distorted mirror images of each other, up to and including the moments when Grimsrud finally imposes (eternal) silence on his counterpart by felling him with a Bunyanesque axe and feeding him into a woodchipping machine. The two of them are low-grade

parodies of businessmen Wade Gustafson and Stan Grossman, themselves a twinned pair of narcissists. The arduously unctuous Lundegaard and his horrifically victimized wife are another distorted-mirror duo, as are Marge's husband Norm and the psychologically troubled Mike Yanagita, a school chum whom she meets for a bittersweet rendezvous.

As an obvious heroine figure for the filmmakers, Marge herself escapes the full decrowning treatment, finding her comparatively dignified double in the fetus that's growing inside her. This is sometimes a source of bodily grotesquerie, as when she lumbers clumsily through a snowfield or when she announces, "I think I'm gonna barf," to her policeman partner. Also grotesque is the proximity that *Fargo* produces between the pristine unworldliness of her fetus (one need not be an antiabortion ideologue to find the fetus a signifier of life and innocence) and the existential horror represented by the physically decimated corpses and spiritually decayed psychopaths that her job regularly places in her path. (Bakhtin would have appreciated the dark irony of this motif, given his fondness for images that bring the opposite extremes of earthly existence, birth and death, into intimate dialogue.) Still, the fetus is fundamentally a symbol of Marge's human warmth and womanly stature, so much so that the story concludes with an image of her motherly anticipation: "I love you . . . . Two more months," the pregnant policewoman and her gentle husband identically say as the film prepares to fade to black.

In general, the prevalence of twinning in *Fargo* is one mark of this movie's refinement relative to the rest of the Coen canon. The brothers' other pictures are invariably populated with at least one fat man (played by such talented actors as M. Emmett Walsh, Charles Durning, John Goodman, and Jon Polito, to name the most prominent) whose very appearance contributes to the films' atmosphere of pervasive grotesquerie. (Or to the Coens' dubious habit of "turning actors into effects," if one shares Jones's intermittently skeptical assessment of their work.[11]) *Fargo* exchanges this visual motif for a more sophisticated tactic, however, replacing the comparatively crude humor of obesity with the subtler device of doubled character

pairs. Amid this film's flat landscapes, the excessive body becomes an excess of bodies.

The parodic use of regional speech patterns, another key component of the brothers' carnivalizing technique, brings us to one of the most important factors in contextualizing their work: their darkly ambivalent attitude toward American culture and, more particularly, their view of Americana as an expression and embodiment of the human capacities for error, immorality, and evil. Here, as with other aspects of the Coen canon, *Fargo* provides a key text.

Ethics in Coen movies "tend to be situational at best," as Harvey Roy Greenberg has observed, adding that the violence produced by their characters' harebrained schemes "is likely to partake equally of low comedy and Grand Guignol horror."[12] The penchant for depraved behaviors and baneful consequences is not a matter of individual predilections. Rather it is part and parcel of the American sociocultural ethos, which the Coens view in terms that might be construed as almost paranoid if they did not leaven their despairing vision with large doses of carnivalesque humor.

Perceptive critics such as Greenberg and Mikita Brottman have noted the links between *Fargo* and the parade of grim grotesqueries – violence, dementia, paranoid persecutions, and the like – limned by Mark Lesy in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, a 1973 book that has subsequently been made into a semidocumentary film.[13] It is interesting to observe that Lesy's volume did not reach the motion-picture screen until 1999, a quarter-century after it was first published; and it is tempting to speculate that the cinema world's belated interest was sparked not only by slow-blooming respect for the book, but also, more broadly, by a growing perception of the American Midwest as a place very different from the idealistic haven of work-driven pastoral values that traditional depictions have long painted. In a similar spirit, one might wonder if the Coens' perennial fascination with boondocks and backwaters has similar roots – that is, a sense that heartland America is unutterably darker, murkier, and scarier than American mythologies have commonly allowed – and whether the public responded to *Fargo* as readily as it did in 1996 because of

escalating skepticism toward middle America prompted by Timothy McVeigh's cataclysmic Oklahoma City bombing the previous year.

Coen films often take place in "small towns or heartland urban locales inflected by backwater mores," as Greenberg puts it, and *Fargo* follows this pattern, "construing both its Minneapolis and surrounding small-town settings as resolutely provincial." Greenberg adds, however, that the "usual scabrous wit and cool detachment" of the brothers "are here leavened by unexpected sympathy," attributing this to their Twin Cities roots and their "evident abiding affection for Midwestern folkways."[14] These are useful points, but one cannot help noticing that the filmmakers' sympathy is reserved for a small number of characters: Marge, Norm, perhaps Mike Yanagita, and a handful of bit players whom we meet only for seconds at a stretch. For the rest, *Fargo* is home to people who are not like the Coens or you or me. If it is a home at all, for that matter, it is in the sense of home as "the place where when you have to go there it will take you in, but at an extremely high price and perhaps it will destroy you," in the words of critic Richard Gilmore, who compares the film's North Dakota city with the Chinatown of Roman Polanski's eponymous thriller (1974) and the Farolito of Malcolm Lowry's harrowing 1947 novel *Under the Volcano*, to wit, "the place of the forbidden, at the outskirts of society . . . a place where children are told not to play and [which] even adults tend to avoid unless to do things out of sight of the regular members of the town society."[15]

In short, it is a home where Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe would fit right in – not as these characters have evolved in American legend, but as they have been rethought and refigured by the Coen brothers. Fabled for his feats of strength and altruistic habits, the folkloric Bunyan of countless "tall tales" was forever clearing new farmland, accumulating needed water, and accomplishing other helpful tasks across great spans of the nineteenth-century American continent. Whether digging Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest, scooping out the Great Lakes so Babe would not go thirsty, or rendering the Dakotas fit for human habitation, he was an intrepid hero who embodied the lustiest fantasies of an agrarian society that

3. Sinister night view of the Paul Bunyan statue.

venerated ideals of ambition, individualism, and sheer physical power. Clearly, it takes only a small step of the imagination to transmute this paradigm of unimpeded might into an uncontrollable beast, freak, or fiend, and clearly this is the sort of step the Coens enjoy taking.

In their film, Bunyan presides physically over Brainerd (Fig. 3), the community alongside which his statue stands. (Note the grotesque-body connotations of the town's name, conjuring up subliminal associations with gray matter along with terms like "brained" and "brain dead.") Spiritually he presides over the entire narrative, however, as his recurrent presence indicates. Because he is in fact the monstrous twin of the movie itself, it is worth pondering the appearance he presents to those entering his domain. He is intimidating by virtue of his size alone; his eyes have the glassy gaze of a visionary, an obsessive, or a maniac; and as Brottman suggests, his mouth is twisted into a malignant smile more suited to a bizarre totem pole than to the welcoming icon of a friendly town. Beetling brows and a rough-hewn beard make his features largely inscrutable, and his body is similarly hidden by a tightly buttoned flannel shirt and dark-blue dungaree

pants. Not hidden is the ominously tense-fingered hand swinging to his right or the lethal-looking axe slung over his left shoulder, one end bearing a dimly gleaming blade, the other resembling a cut-off stump that prefigures the Showalter leg we later view on its way into the woodchipper. Closest to the road he guards are his awful feet, arrested in midstride toward some mysterious and perhaps unthinkable destination. If the loyal Babe is not with him, it is because Brainerd has borrowed the beast for a different kind of service, bestowing the name of its genus on the Blue Ox motel where Showalter and Grimsrud strenuously fuck the brain-free hookers they pick up (Figs. 4 and 5) during their errand in the area. (In a neat visual rhyme, the Coens have made Bunyan's trousers blue and bulging, subtly amplifying the film's implicit linkage of Bunyan's iconic image – and hence the American frontier myth as a whole – with the brute force of untrammeled sexual aggression.)

Bunyan is to the film's visual discourse what exaggerated speech patterns are to its use of language: a grotesque, incipiently paranoid critique of American origin myths. Storytellers who distort regional dialects as fulsomely and unapologetically as the Coens do in their movies are not engaging in innocent linguistic horseplay. They are revealing a spasmodic attraction–repulsion response to kinds of language (and behavior and thought) toward which they feel deeply ambivalent; and more broadly, they are expressing a deeply felt dread of associations evoked by those kinds of language (and behavior and thought) in their minds and ours. In *Fargo*, the overwrought Scandinavian vowel sounds (and the overexpressive facial expressions that accompany them, from Marge's reassuring nods to Grimsrud's menacing glare to the hookers' vacant smiles) are indefatigable remnants of America's immigrant past and of the otherness – the quintessentially uncanny, incipiently terrifying, inexcusably *incomprehensible* otherness – embedded in those lingering remains.

This helps to explain the unexpected material that Ethan and Joel chose to introduce in their published *Fargo* screenplay. They obviously loved the Grandma who fought so colorfully, memorably, and spuriously with the Negress in the anecdote (another Bakhtinian

4. Carl and Gaear with hookers.

double-tale) that she enjoyed telling and they enjoyed hearing. But the exoticism of her Russian immigrant mind-set and the slipperiness of her Russian-inflected speech appear to have given the brothers a touch of uneasiness along with the entertainment value they provided.[16] Although the *Fargo* screenplay introduction deals manifestly with the elusive nature of recounted truth, it also interjects the theme of immigrant experience, which we might not otherwise think of in relation to the film's narrative, and contributes a note of nervousness, even anxiety, with regard to the presence of alien elements in American life.[17]

Idiosyncrasies of language play an important role in the Coens' body of work, from the emotionally strained argot of *Blood Simple* to the self-absorbed ranting in *Barton Fink* to the country-and-western narration of *The Big Lebowski* to the pulp-magazine lingo in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, for just a few examples.[18] But the game is played with particular ferocity in the film that brings them closest to their own origins, roots, and memories. The bleak, windswept tundra upon which *Fargo* unfolds is a relentlessly focused manifestation of Grandma's conception of Earth as an elemental "great ball thinly

5. Carl, Gaear, and hookers watching television.

crusted with oceans, soil, and snow" across which people "crawl . . . to arrive at some improbable place where they meet other crawling people."[19] Not all the characters in *Fargo* crawl, but at some point almost everyone winds up in a conspicuously low position – physically, psychologically, morally, spiritually, or all the above. The filmmakers' enthusiasm for treating these people's plights in savagely comic terms is partly a result of the TV-generation condescension that critic Jonathan Rosenbaum finds in their movies when he writes that

> if one considers all the laughs found in *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and *Fargo*, there are very few that aren't predicated on some version of the notion that people are idiots – the people on-screen, that is; those in the audience laughing at the idiots are hip aficionados, just like the Coens.[20]

But there is more at work in *Fargo* than the "peculiar posthumanist TV tradition" that Rosenbaum criticizes the Coens for embracing. On a deeper level, the brothers show signs of deriving a grim satisfaction from the act of humbling and at times humiliating

these funny-talking remnants of an Old World otherness that they themselves have come to terms with no more fully than Grandma came to terms with the apocryphal Negress who engaged her in battle.

To humiliate is to punish, of course, and sure enough, whiffs of brimstone from Dante's indelible *Inferno* undergird this film's dark carnivalism. In some ways, *Fargo* could be called a decrowning double of *The Inferno*, mimicking Dante's icebound "bottom of the Universe" with Minnesota's bleak, windswept tundra and recruiting a grotesque Paul Bunyan to replace the Kong-like Lucifer anchored in Hell's deepest pit. This notion is not as far fetched as it may seem – the frenetic *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is explicitly (if whimsically) modeled on *The Odyssey*, after all – and it produces an amusing variety of interpretive dividends, suggesting (for example) that one might explain Grimsrud's utter lack of human qualities (Fig. 6) by seeing him as a spiritual relative of Fra Alberigo, a damned sinner in the Ninth Circle who tells Dante that

> . . . when a soul betrays as I did,
> it falls from flesh, and a demon takes its place,
> ruling the body till its time is spent.[21]

Is there a more convincing way to understand Grimsrud than as a mortal so extravagantly rotten that Hell has whisked his soul away before his death, leaving his body to skulk around the Twin Cities area without a shred of sanity or humanity to call its own?

The point is not to cook up itemized connections between *Fargo* and *The Inferno*, but to stress the Coen film's broadly infernal underpinnings and to note the role these play in darkening and deepening its particular brand of carnivalesque narrative. In many respects, *Fargo* taps into a specific set of contemporary American anxieties related to pathologies of xenophobia, fantasies of race and gender purity, and a generalized fear of the ethnicized Other that has festered within this so-called nation of immigrants since its earliest days and lives murkily on in pop-culture petri dishes like the Coen brothers' canon. In other ways, *Fargo* reaches far beyond the American

6. Gaear shoots the trooper as Carl watches in horror.

experience, evoking centuries-old images of existential dread and deploying a similarly venerable tradition of comic–grotesque parody as an antidote. Both strains of expression can be found in all the Coens' films, twisted into a multitude of forms by psychodynamically driven mechanisms of cinematic condensation, displacement, and symbolization. Consider, for just one example, how the Dante-like trope of death-as-frozen-immobility so important to *Fargo* stretches all the way from *Blood Simple*, where an expanse of lumpish matter broods over the hapless detective's death, to *The Man Who Wasn't There*, where the melancholy barber's story ends in the implacable grip of an electric chair's restraining belts.

Broadly speaking, the aesthetic and psychological spirit of the Coens' best work grows from two sources that are as vigorously at odds with each other as the contradictory truth/fiction claims in the opening and closing texts of *Fargo*. One is the genuineness and intimacy of the all-too-human fears and fantasies that the brothers are honest and audacious enough to let their narratives reveal. The other is the compulsive cleverness of the slickly artificial strategies they employ: their crisply streamlined compositions and their obsessively

calculated montage, what Jones rightly calls the "machine-tooled perfection" and "tail-consuming circularity"[22] of their narrative ideas.

Whatever additional attributes it may possess, *Fargo* unquestionably imparts the bare-bones truth about a key ingredient of the Coen sensibility. The brothers have a prodigious amount of respect for the dead, or at least for the symmetry, stability, and rigidity that death bestows on its beneficiaries. They venerate this so much that they are willing to "rigor mortis" their own stories, characters, and themes in a stylistic deep-freeze that keeps them as audiovisually immaculate as they are conceptually and spiritually ossified. *Fargo* crystallizes the dead–alive duality that makes their most interesting work such an odd blend of fascination and frustration. Like the corpses who litter the brothers' narrative landscapes, *Fargo* and its Coen-spawned kin constitute a carnivalesque double of what habitually goes on in the bleak, windswept American psyche. The ultimate irony is that their work decrowns its own self-conscious shrewdness as ruthlessly as it parodies the mainstream cinema it seeks to surpass and transcend.

NOTES

1. Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), 161.
2. Ibid., 166.
3. The most helpful sources for the production history of *Fargo* are Bergan's biography of the Coens, already cited, and Josh Levine's identically titled *The Coen Brothers* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000). My account draws on both.
4. Bergan, 167.
5. Peter Cowie, *The* Apocalypse Now *Book* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 7.
6. Kent Jones, "Airtight." *Film Comment* 36:6 (Nov.–Dec. 2000), 44–9, cited at 46.
7. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 127.
8. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, *Fargo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), ix–x.
9. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 126. For extended discussion of the material bodily lower stratum, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), especially chapter 6.

10. Ibid., 127.
11. Jones, "Airtight," 46. Asking himself whether the Coens generally feel affection toward their characters, Jones suggests that the answer is "yes, but in the same way that a hunter likes his trophies," and adds that their directorial stance suggests Albert Dekker in *Dr. Cyclops*, gazing down at his menagerie of shrunken humans with glee (never more so than in the supposedly warmhearted *Fargo*). Jones captures the Coens' carnivalism when he says their attitude might be "less a question of cruelty than of bypassing respect altogether, creating a zoo-like enclosure of odd behaviors and eye-catching tics in which all characters are equal."
12. Harvey Roy Greenberg, "Prairie Home Death Trip," http://www.cyberpsych.org/filmforum, 1996. In this volume, pp. 142–49.
13. The book is Michael Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip* (New York: Anchor, 1991; first published in 1973), and the film is *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1999), directed by Jamie Marsh from a screenplay by Marsh and Lesy. See Mikita Brottman's contribution to the present volume. She also notes that the American Midwest produced Ed Gein, the serial killer whose flamboyantly bizarre spirit hangs over films as different as Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Psycho* (1960) and Tobe Hooper's scruffy *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974).
14. Greenberg, "Prairie Home Death Trip," in this volume, pp. 142–49.
15. Richard Gilmore, "The American Sublime in *Fargo*," http://members.tripod.com/mcrae_tony/american_sublime_in_fargo.htm, 2001.
16. The brothers share facts about her very selectively, and of the few they do throw out, the one they develop most thoroughly has to do with her unreliable grasp of language. Her old age brought a concurrent loss of memory and the ability to speak English, according to Ethan in his *Fargo* essay, and she spent the last year of her life speaking Russian for the first time in nearly eight decades. This certainly meant the end of her diverting (tall) tales, but she had already given at least two linguistic legacies to her two grandsons: the "Grandma and the Negress" yarn and, more unsettlingly, the phrase "Yayik do Kieva Dovedet," which she had encouraged them to memorize. Ethan translates this as, "By your tongue you will get to Kiev," and glosses it as, "If you don't know, just ask." He adds, "What use she thought we might find for that phrase in Minneapolis, we don't know." This is hardly a traumatic memory, but it is revealing that a screenplay set in an assertively Siberian version of the American Midwest should be prefaced by a childhood recollection of the uncanny overtones rung by an immigrant relative's unstable relationship with the English language. See the introduction to the *Fargo* screenplay, ix, x.
17. More evidence of this nervousness appears as early as *Blood Simple*, where the detective says, "I don't care if you're the Pope of Rome, President of the United States or Man of the Year, something can all go wrong. But go ahead, complain, tell your problems to your neighbor, ask for help, and watch him

fly. Now in Russia, they got it all mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else. That's the theory anyway. But what I know about is Texas, and down here . . . you're on your own." One suspects the Coens are more than a little skeptical of the specifically Russian "theory" their hard-boiled character cites.

18. They make similar play with ethnically marked names, some of which are amusingly allusive (the Snopeses in *Raising Arizona*), some assertively extravagant (listen to characters experience the polysyllabic endlessness of uttering "Freddy Riedenschneider" in *The Man Who Wasn't There*), some flamboyantly inappropriate (the biblically dubbed pedophile Jesus Quintana in *The Big Lebowski*), and some indicative of inner attributes (the *Fargo* moniker Gaear Grimsrud progresses from an intimidatingly unfamiliar cornucopia of vowels to a word signaling his grim nature).
19. Coen and Coen, *Fargo*, ix.
20. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Human Touch," *Chicago Reader*, 1996.
21. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: A Mentor Book, 1954), 279.
22. Jones, "Airtight," 49.

PAMELA GRACE

3 Motherhood, Homicide, and Swedish Meatballs

The Quiet Triumph of the Maternal in *Fargo*

Popular film rarely combines the mother and the law in a single figure, but in the Coen brothers' neo-*noir* comedy *Fargo*, the police chief is a very pregnant and very maternal woman. Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) carries a police revolver (clichéd phallic signifier of legal authority) *and* a large belly containing a child (proof of female reproductive power); a highly skilled and unusually self-possessed police officer, she demonstrates far more practical intelligence than any of the film's male characters. Marge is also a comic figure: she "walks funny," "talks funny," and constantly surprises us by violating the conventions of the crime movie. Throughout the film, her words and actions are implicitly contrasted with those of the more typical male cop. Many aspects of her job performance and personal life – her use of language, exercise of power, interpersonal relationships, and stated values – challenge cultural patterns and raise questions about familiar norms.

Marge is a powerful figure whose potency is kept in check by a combination of the film's overall ironic tone and its orchestration of comic incidents. One indication of her significance as the film's emotional and moral center is the image most commonly used to market the film. The still on the covers of *Fargo* videotapes and DVDs portrays a police officer (Marge) kneeling on the ground, looking down at a dead state trooper whose corpse is spread horizontally across the frame against a background of pure white snow. Compassionately

bent forward, wrapped in a large police parka, Marge wears an American flag on one shoulder and gold stars on her breast and hat. The positioning of the bodies, the exaggerated size of the female form in the bulky coat, and the gentle sadness of the woman's downward gaze at the murdered young man bring to my mind the composition of Michelangelo's familiar Piéta – his embodiment of pity (or compassion) in a sculpture of Christ's mother gazing down at her dead son laid out across her lap. Few viewers may have such an association, but it is clear that the image chosen to represent *Fargo* interweaves concepts of violent death, gentle concern, the law, and the nation. In the decade before the second terrorist attack on the World Trade Center suddenly transformed the police into national heroes – a decade when cops were repeatedly associated with brutal acts such as the Rodney King beating and the Abner Louima torture – an image linking law enforcement with innocence and maternal concern was strikingly unusual. *Fargo* is, at one level, a movie about a woman mourning the cruelty that people needlessly inflict upon each other. The film uses its maternal figure for its few direct expressions of sadness, showing straight-on close-ups of the policewoman's face and giving her lines, spoken in simple rural language, such as "It's a real shame" and "I just don't unnerstand it."

Marge's language, homespun sentiments, and pregnant shape, which are used to comic effect, have led to misreadings of the film. Several critics have missed the respect and affection that the movie conveys for its unlikely hero; they have seen Marge as a ridiculous figure, and have even described her as "vapid," "a clodhopper," and "insane." Joel Coen, co-creator of the character and real-life husband of the actor, countering readings of this kind, underscores Marge's ordinariness and competence without mentioning her strongest qualities. He describes her as "banal in a good way" and "capable, which the other characters aren't," commenting that she "wears a funny hat and walks funny, but is not a clown."[1]

The play of opposites, central to the construction of Marge, also operates in the structure of the film as a whole. *Fargo*'s neo-*noir* world of scheming characters and strange images (we see a beleaguered man

arrange to have his wife kidnapped and an inept criminal grinding up his accomplice in a wood chipper) is also a childlike, black-and-white world where the law is entirely benevolent (the state trooper loses his life refusing a bribe), where the killers have no redeeming qualities (they murder without remorse and betray each other), and where the police hero lectures a hardened criminal about values as she delivers him to jail ("There's more to life than a little money, you know"). The lecture – an extraordinary moment in this hip, sophisticated film – is not merely ironic; it also comes across, in all its simplicity, as nakedly true. It works because Marge is more than an ordinary country woman and honest cop; she is associated with deeply buried desires for safety and nurturance, infantile wishes that must be cloaked in humor.

COP IN BED: MARGE AND "WOMEN'S LANGUAGE"

In introducing the police chief, the Coens instantly undercut traditional genre and gender expectations. When a telephone rings in the early hours of the morning with a report about a triple homicide, it is answered not by a gruff male detective but by a pregnant woman in a flannel nightgown neatly tucked under the covers with her pudgy, balding husband. Marge and Norm (John Carroll Lynch) – and yes, his name is Norm – are pictured the way a young child likes to think of parents at rest – desexualized, modestly covered, peaceful, and instantly available in any emergency. Marge seems to be part of a *Dick and Jane* world where all the police and parents are good.

After the phone call, a more typical movie would focus on the crime and the important function of the detective, but *Fargo* takes a narrative detour, temporarily setting aside the drama of the killings and developing Marge's role as wife. While she is on the phone, we hear only Marge's side of the conversation, which begins with an informal "Hi, it's Marge" and continues with "Oh, my . . . Ya . . . Oh, geez." Saying she'll be there "in a jif," Marge hangs up the receiver and turns her attention to her husband, telling him he can go back to sleep. Asking simply, "Gotta go?" Norm insists, three times, on making

breakfast. Marge protests firmly the first time ("That's okay, hon. I gotta run"); the second time she protests weakly, with the kind of rising intonation one uses in a question ("Aw, you can sleep, hon?"); and the third time she capitulates with a smile of great affection and pleasure ("Aw Norm"). The most unusual aspect of this scene is the absence around which it is structured: there is no mention of the purpose of the telephone call – the triple homicide. By withholding the sound of the voice from the unseen end of the telephone line (a stylistic choice rarely used in this film despite its numerous phone calls) and by not having Norm ask what is happening, the scene elides any reference to the crime Marge is about to investigate, focusing instead on Norm's offer to get up and make breakfast and Marge's thoughtfulness and responsibility.

Marge's language in this scene emphasizes behavioral traits culturally associated with women. Answering the phone with "Hi, it's Marge" exemplifies the police chief's democratic style of interacting with her subordinates and her avoidance of unnecessary, ego-enhancing titles. (Later in the film, while on official business, she will check into a hotel in an equally modest fashion, not as "Chief" or "Officer" but as "Mrs." Gunderson.) This linguistic modesty, over the course of the film, will become a trademark of Marge's quiet confidence and lack of need to exhibit her status.

Other elements of Marge's speech, however, constitute an interesting study in what the linguist Robin Lakoff calls "women's language" – a self-effacing style of talking that girls and women learn involuntarily in male-dominated societies. Consisting of intonation and word choices that sometimes vary only slightly from standard speech, this form of language diminishes a woman's authority and preserves the illusion of male superiority. Marge's mild "Oh, my" response to the news of the triple homicide, which downplays her important role in dealing with what is probably the biggest crime in the town's history, is an example of female use of a weak particle, specifically a weak expletive. Lakoff gives two examples of "syntactically deviant" sentences with weak particles: "Oh fudge, my hair is on fire" and "Dear me, did he kidnap the baby?" She states that

> . . . choice of particle is a function of how strongly one allows oneself to feel about something, so that the strength of an emotion conveyed in a sentence corresponds to the strength of the particle. Hence in a really serious situation, the use of "trivializing" (that is, "women's") particles constitutes a joke, or at any rate, is highly inappropriate.[2]

The Coens' choice of language for Marge *is* in part a joke. It plays with viewer expectations and forces us to see that self-effacing language is not necessarily correlated with lack of effectiveness. Indeed, *Fargo* suggests that often the opposite is true: the male characters who repeatedly assert their importance end up dead or in jail, and the understated Marge emerges as the hero. Lakoff's statement on the connection between expressing emotion and being taken seriously by others goes a long way toward explaining many initial viewer responses to Marge:

> . . . surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions, and a speaker unable – for whatever reason – to be forceful . . . is much less likely to be taken seriously. . . . Here again, then, the behavior a woman learns as "correct" prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual.[3]

Intonation is at least as important an element of "women's language" as word choice. As Mikhail Bakhtin stated in the 1930s, intonation or "evaluative accent" is often the most significant element in determining the meaning of an utterance. Even words such as "Well!" – which are, in lexical terms, virtually empty of meaning – when delivered with significant intonation, can constitute very complex communication.[4] Writing on women's intonational patterns, Lakoff says that, in a declarative statement, the use of rising inflection typical of a yes–no question is an example of female unwillingness to assert an opinion – a common pattern, often learned in childhood. Rising inflection in a declarative statement is a "superficial linguistic behavior that may have nothing to do with inner character, but has been imposed upon the speaker, on pain of worse punishment than not being taken seriously."[5] Marge's rising inflection in "Aw, you can

sleep, hon?" elicits the expected response: Norm does not take his wife seriously on the topic of breakfast – and most viewers, at this point in the film, probably do not take Marge seriously at all.

The scene concludes with Marge "defeated" in the affectionate argument. The grateful recipient of her husband's kindness, she smiles at his domestic "triumph" as the editing abruptly and comically ends the scene with her belly almost touching the camera. The ideas suggested in the sequence – that pregnancy and womanly submissiveness may render Marge an ineffective cop – will remain in the air, although they are consistently disproved throughout the rest of the film.

TRIPLE HOMICIDE: MARGE AS DETECTIVE AND BOSS

After a sequence that developed Marge as a loving and, in some ways, conventional wife, the film places her in a traditionally "masculine" arena – the site of the brutal roadside murders. This scene advances the portrayal of the police chief in two contradictory directions. It demonstrates that neither Marge's pregnancy nor her gentleness will interfere in any way with her work; and at the same time, ironically, the scene seems at first glance to undercut Marge's authority by focusing attention on comedic elements such as her awkwardness in walking through deep snow, her simple country speech, and her ability to think of her husband's needs in the middle of dealing with a homicide.

While most of the other officers keep warm in their cars, Marge trudges through the snow, examines the victims, and instantly and perceptively sizes up the situation that had confused her subordinates. Casually summarizing her findings, she says that a trooper pulled someone over, there was a shooting, a high-speed pursuit of a passing car, and an "execution-type deal" involving witnesses of the trooper's murder. She adds that the suspect was a "big fella" and probably not from the local town of Brainerd. As we know from having witnessed the events, this description is precisely right, but Marge's lightning-quick analysis is not accompanied by dramatic music, silent punctuation, a close-up of her face, or a reaction shot showing

7. Marge investigating the crime scene.

the admiration of another officer. On the contrary, the Coens insert a joke, which is likely to push Marge, in the viewer's eyes, temporarily back into the traditional role of a pregnant woman (Figs. 7 and 8). Immediately after analyzing the grisly evidence, she suddenly has a strained look on her face and bends down. A subordinate

8. Marge's nausea during her investigation.

officer, Lou (Bruce Bohne), asks, "Ya see something down there, Chief?" Marge answers "Uh – I just, I think I'm gonna barf." Within a few seconds, her morning sickness has passed and she is focused back on the case, but the moment has had its effect. It seems, at first glance, that the Coens have pulled the rug out from under their hero just after demonstrating her extraordinary skill. In fact, they are pulling the rug out from under us by challenging our conventional expectations. The surprising demand that we integrate investigative brilliance *and* morning sickness into our already genre-bending view of the police chief usually leads to a burst of laughter from the audience. On first viewing, we may momentarily resolve the conflict by slipping back into seeing Marge as merely a comic character; but, on subsequent viewings, we can only regard her brief moment of sickness and quick recovery as proof of her strength. No longer a surprise, the incident becomes a reminder that the police chief's advanced pregnancy never interferes with the investigation.

The pattern of seemingly contradictory perspectives on Marge is repeated when she and Lou go down the road to the location of the state trooper's murder. (It is here that Marge kneels down and bends over the dead man, creating the image reproduced for the film's publicity.) She makes a remark that, in her typical way, combines quick observation and compassion in banal language: "Well, he's got his gun on his hip there, and he looks like a nice enough guy. It's a real shame." Again, she perceptively analyzes the evidence. She comments that there were two suspects, notes that the lights in the trooper's car were turned off, and concludes that the smaller of the suspects must have sat in the trooper's car waiting for his buddy to return from his murderous pursuit of the witnesses. After demonstrating deductive skill that Sherlock Holmes would have envied, Marge again becomes the butt of a Coen joke. She asks Lou: "Ya think, is Dave open yet?" Lou: "You don't think he's mixed up in . . . " Marge: "No, no, I just wanna get Norm some night crawlers." Marge's maternal-wifely act takes us entirely by surprise; it seems comically out of place in the context of solving a triple homicide. The joke, like many others in *Fargo*, is based on genre expectations. We are not used to seeing male

detectives who are working on multiple murder cases do errands for their wives on their way back to the office. Only in retrospect are we likely to appreciate the grace with which Marge integrates her professional and private commitments.

The final incident of the roadside sequence demonstrates Marge's skill as chief of her department. As she and Lou drive back to town, she asks him for the last entry in the state trooper's citation book. Lou mentions a tan Ciera "with license plate DLR" and comments that the trooper was probably shot before he could finish writing the plate number. Marge gently but firmly corrects her dim-witted assistant: "I think that vehicle probably had dealer plates. DLR?" Lou: "Oh . . . Geez." Having pointed out Lou's mistake, Marge then relieves his embarrassment by telling him a joke: "Say, Lou, Ya hear the one 'bout the guy who couldn't afford personalized plates, so he went and changed his name to J2L4685?" Lou: "Yah, that's a good one."

As the film cuts to an extreme long shot of Marge's police car zooming down the empty highway, we hear, in a sound bridge to the next scene, the voice of Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell) talking about the crime that led to the triple homicide: "All's I know, you got a problem, you call a professional." Much of the irony in *Fargo* comes from the contrast between the ineptness of the swaggering males and the professional skill of the self-effacing Marge.

FOOD, RECIPROCITY, AND GENDER ARRANGEMENTS

As it does with language, *Fargo* uses food and drink as major devices for delineating and comparing characters. The film incorporates an interesting twist in its portrayal of Marge. Although she is a strongly maternal character, she does not provide the people around her with the most primal substance, food. Except in relation to her unborn child, Marge is a receiver, not a giver of physical nourishment – and she is continually associated with eating. As mentioned above, the first scene in which she appears is centered around Norm's insistence on making her breakfast. The next scene shows the couple eating at the kitchen table, and the one after that begins with the police officer

Lou giving her some coffee. When Marge arrives back at the station, she finds Norm waiting in her office with lunch; and a few scenes later we see the couple loading their plates up with fried vegetables and Swedish meatballs at a restaurant smorgasbord (Fig. 9). Much has been made of Marge's prodigious appetite. Critics have commented on the large quantities of food she eats (although her behavior is normal for a pregnant woman) and even Ethan Coen remarks, "She wants to catch the criminal, but nothing gets in the way of lunch."[6]

Coen's comment (perhaps playfully) reinforces a regrettable tendency in the literature on *Fargo* to emphasize Marge's eating at the expense of her professional skills and efficiency. The semantically rich lunch scenes, usually cited as evidence of Marge's huge appetite, show her not only eating, but also working. They demonstrate her proficiency as a manager, her decisiveness, and her pattern of immediate follow-up on significant information. While sharing lunch at the office with Norm, for instance, Marge receives a report from Lou about the suspects' stay at the Blue Ox Motel. The scene ends with a cut to her arrival at the motel where, in a humorous and touching scene, she skillfully interviews two young prostitutes and obtains an important lead. During the smorgasbord lunch, Marge is given a report from another subordinate officer and immediately follows up with a trip to Minneapolis in pursuit of the killers.

These lunches, like the return drive from the crime scene, which involved planning next steps with Lou and picking up night crawlers for Norm, blur traditional boundaries between the professional and domestic spheres. Marge's well-integrated life also blurs the lines between conventional male and female behavior. In the lunch scenes with Norm, the husband provides the food as the wife gives her mate encouragement about his work. These scenes involve the kind of mutual recognition and reciprocity that the feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin places at the core of human relationships – they display a way of interacting in which each person consistently sees the other as a subject with needs rather than merely an object to satisfy one's own desires.[7]

9. Marge and Norm at lunch.

The Coens portray this reciprocity with wit and irony. At the smorgasbord lunch, they zero in on the clichéd aspects of the generic restaurant – the mounds of greasy food, over which the camera slowly glides, and the muzak, which floods the sound track. In Marge's lunch at the office with Norm, the humor is broader and the display of affection is hammed up. Returning from the crime scene with the paper bag of night crawlers in hand and finding Norm waiting with a bag of fast food, Marge is touched by her husband's thoughtfulness. She looks into her bag, saying, "What do we got here, Arby's? Oh yum, looks pretty good." As she speaks, the camera cuts to the contents of the bag she handed Norm and we see a close-up of the wriggling worms. Marge munches on her hamburger and asks how Norm's painting is going. Hearing that a pair of very successful artists are competing to design the same postage stamp, she says, through a mouthful of food, "Aw hon, they're good, but you're better'n them." Brightening up, Norm kisses her on the cheek, smearing her with his lunch.

Far from a romantic hero, Norm at times verges on the grotesque. Combining appealing qualities (honesty, generosity, devotion, and

particular form of artistic talent) with unappealing ones (dullness and physical sluggishness), his character does not invite identification but does suggest a new look at gender roles. Norm embodies many traits that men have traditionally denied in themselves and attributed to women. He is childishly dependent on his mate and eager to please her; he lacks confidence in his professional abilities, but feels comfortable in a domestic role; he is associated with nature (he loves fishing and earns his living painting birds); he is often vague (he tends to drift off as others talk); and he is always concerned about food (on one occasion, he is shown asleep with an empty potato chip bag next to him on the bed). Norm will probably be the child's main caretaker, and his flexible schedule and frequent lunches with Marge will allow the little girl or boy to have plenty of contact with both parents. This implied plan touches on an issue that has long concerned feminists and theorists of the family – the cultural and psychological effects of predominantly female child rearing in capitalist society.

Nancy Chodorow is one of the leading authors who has written on this topic. In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*,[8] she discusses the cultural impact of the major changes in family and work patterns over the last two centuries. During this time, as men's jobs have moved away from the home and family size has diminished, the lives of middle-class women have involved less productive work and more time caring for a decreasing number of children. The changes in the sex gender system have separated men from their children and placed women in the narrow role of family nurturer, caring for emotionally dependent husbands and children. The result is an ongoing reproduction of nurturant females, who lack confidence in the public realm, and nonnurturant males, who are deprived of a full emotional life. In other words, the social organization of gender, at a deep psychological level, perpetuates inequality and limited, unfulfilling lives for both sexes.

Dorothy Dinnerstein, in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, describes the current situation in

more drastic terms. Referring to the title of her book, with its references to part-human mythical creatures, she states that

> Until we grow strong enough to renounce the pernicious prevailing forms of collaboration between the sexes, both man and woman will remain semi-human, monstrous.... While much of our pleasure in living has been woven into these arrangements, they have apparently never felt wholly comfortable or beneficial to either of the sexes. Indeed, they have always been a major source of human pain, fear, and hate: a sense of deep strain between women and men has been permeating our species' life as far back into time as the study of myth and ritual permits us to trace human feeling.[9]

Now, with scientific and concomitant social advances, it is possible – and urgent – Dinnerstein says, to reorder arrangements that for millennia have seemed inevitable. However, in attempting to break old patterns, we confront resistances that are both institutional and internal:

> The prevailing symbiosis between men and women is something more than a product of societal coercion. It is part of the neurotic overall posture by means of which humans, male and female, try to cope with massive psychological problems that lie at the heart of our species' situation. At the present stage of technological development, it is primarily because they help us to maintain this doomed posture that the specific societal mechanisms supporting the sexual status quo continue to feel necessary.[10]

Dinnerstein links the "massive psychological problems" to the same child-rearing patterns that are discussed by Chodorow. Because mothers are the nearly exclusive caretakers of young children, an intimidating sense of the awesome power of the female is retained, at archaic strata of the personality, in men and women. Dinnerstein states that the attempt to deny this primitive belief results in defensive posturing:

> What we have worked out is a masquerade, in which generation after generation of childishly self-important men on the one hand,

> and childishly play-acting women on the other, solemnly recreate a child's-eye view of what adult life must be like.[11]

In its portraits of married men, *Fargo* juxtaposes two extremes: the exaggeratedly domesticated Norm and the hopelessly posturing car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy), whose pathetic attempts to appear authoritative constitute one of the film's central tragicomic elements. Other male posturing includes the "take-charge" approach of Jerry's father-in-law and boss, Wade, to the kidnapping of his daughter – a tough-guy stance that results in his death – and the bungling, self-destructive activities of the kidnappers.

The counterpart to these "childishly self-important men" is Jerry's wife Jean (Kristin Rudrüd), a "childishly play-acting woman." Deferential to her husband and girlishly submissive to her father, Jean seems to have nothing better to do during the day than watch television and knit. Her character parodies the conventional image of the bourgeois housewife, and her kidnapping sends up a type of scene often found in early cinema: a helpless woman, alone in the house during the day, is suddenly confronted with male intruders. Like some of Griffith's heroines, Jean retreats farther and farther into the house, uselessly locking a door and trying to telephone her husband (Fig. 10). Unlike most endangered heroines of the silent screen, she is not rescued by a male savior, but is dragged off by the terrifying and ridiculously incompetent men hired by her own husband. The kidnapping is played for comedy and arouses little sympathy for Jean, a cartoon character whose hysterical screaming eventually leads one of the kidnappers to shoot her just to stop the noise. The scenes with Jean, with their comic horror, depict the sense of helplessness and inferiority that women often develop when their lives are centered exclusively on the home. However, the depiction of this condition is not sympathetic. Jean is already degraded by her situation by the time we meet her, and the film suggests no lost or undeveloped positive qualities. Although I disagree with critics who accuse the Coens of a general coldness toward their characters,

10. Jean's terror as the kidnappers close in.

I would describe the portrayal of Jean as more than cold: it is cruel and dehumanizing.

ABSENT FOOD, ABSENT LOVE

In its depiction of Marge and Norm, *Fargo* makes a strong connection between food and love, comically represented as excessive food and folksy affection. Inverting the motif, the film uses an absence of food in a restaurant scene to emphasize the failure of a romantic advance, the absence of a love relationship. While in Minneapolis, Marge meets an old high school classmate, Mike Yanagita,[12] in the bar of a Radisson Motel. Clearly a bit excited at the thought of getting together with an admirer, Marge arrives wearing a frilly maternity blouse. It is the only time in the film that she is shown wearing anything other than her police uniform (representing the law) or her flannel nightgown (associated with desexualized domesticity). Marge's momentary pause in the doorway, as she almost blushingly looks for the man she is about to meet, is the closest the film comes

to allowing her any sexual feelings, and a nonworking meeting with an old friend is as close as one can imagine Marge ever coming to adultery (Fig. 11). But even in this very limited encounter, things go awry. Shortly after Mike greets Marge, he becomes oddly emotional and tries to sit next to her in an overly familiar way. Marge gently but firmly asks him to return to the other side of the table and – significantly in terms of the film's interweaving of food and domestic love – only orders a diet Coke. After placing so much emphasis on food in the hero's marital relationship, *Fargo* carefully avoids having Marge share even a snack with another man. We never see her consume a single calorie with Mike.

In contrasting Marge's domestic life with that of the leading male character, Jerry Lundegaard, the film depicts two dinnertime scenes at the Lundegaard household. The first is a meal involving Jerry, his wife Jean, their 12-year-old son Scotty (Tony Denman), and Jean's father, Wade. The dinner involves none of the hokey affection and massive food consumption we find with Marge and Norm; instead, it is organized to demonstrate the family's financially based patriarchal control, its exaggerated concern with money, and its lack of love. Having just arranged for his wife to be kidnapped in a bizarre scheme to force money out of his rich father-in-law, Jerry arrives home with a bag of groceries. He finds Wade at the house watching a hockey game on television. "Is he stayin' for supper, then?" Jerry nervously asks his wife in the kitchen. Jean in turn calls the question to her father who, without waiting for an invitation, calls back "Yah." Dinner is silent until young Scotty, leaving his hamburger unfinished, says, "May I be excused?" and heads off to meet his friends at McDonald's. Before Wade can finish disapproving of the supposed permissiveness of his daughter and son-in-law, Jerry begins to nag him about investing $750,000 in a business deal. As a family member, Jerry hopes, to no avail, to bypass the usual approval process, and argues that the deal "could work out real good for me and Jean and Scotty." The scene ends with a close-up of Wade as he grimly mutters: "Jean and Scotty never have to worry." For all its barrenness and cruelty, this evening at the Lundegaard's is far better than the next. When Jerry arrives

11. **Marge primping as she prepares to meet Mike.**

a second time with groceries, mealtime at the house reaches its logical conclusion – a dinner that never happens. Cheerfully walking through the doorway after trying to cancel the kidnapping scheme on the mistaken belief that he could weasel money out of Wade for the business deal, Jerry discovers that Jean has already been dragged away. Still holding the grocery bags, he walks upstairs and helplessly gapes at the evidence of the crime: a ripped-out phone, a missing shower curtain, and an open window. The food is never seen again.

For a final contrast with the dinner scenes of both families, the Coens throw in an over-the-top set-piece in which one of the kidnappers settles in for a solitary meal. Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare), the monosyllabic cold killer, sits surrounded by food wrappers in a shabby cabin, staring intently at a flickering television set and eating a TV dinner. As the camera pulls back, we see what is on the floor next to him: tied to a knocked-over chair and silent at last is his kidnapping victim, the now dead Jean. In every theatrical screening I attended, the visual revelation of the corpse led to outbursts of laughter. Even a cruel death elicits no sympathy for the unfortunate Jean.

THE LAW OF THE MOTHER: MARGE AND CRIMINALS

Marge's dealings with suspects and known criminals, like her work with colleagues, demonstrates effective police work without the rough methods often associated with male cops. These interactions also continue the film's pattern of first depicting Marge doing excellent work and then leading the viewer to question her authority. The method of reversal in these situations, however, is different. Rather than following an impressive achievement of Marge's with a comic episode of morning sickness or a line about night crawlers – references to the police chief's private life in the midst of her public work – the Coens have Marge back away from her own successes by slipping into girlish language. In her interview with Shep Proudfoot (Steven Reevis), a car mechanic who placed Jerry in contact with the kidnappers, Marge starts her interrogation gently and respectfully, calling the suspect "Mr. Proudfoot" and giving him ample opportunity to volunteer information. When Shep refuses to cooperate, Marge gradually exerts more and more pressure: "I saw some rough stuff on your priors, but nothing in the nature of a homicide.... I *know* you don't want to be an accessory to something like that." Clearly frightened, Shep says "Nope," and Marge knows she'll get the information she needs. Her response to her own success, however, is not triumphant. Perhaps empathizing with the man she has trapped, or possibly experiencing a flicker of discomfort at her own small victory, Marge suddenly sounds almost apologetic as she wraps up the interview. Smiling unnecessarily and using almost childlike intonation, she asks: "So, you think you might remember who those folks were who called ya?"

A similar pattern occurs in the interrogation of Jerry. Marge is so effective that she frightens the man into fleeing the interview, making himself a suspect. However, in the process, she briefly, and comically, lapses into words and inflections that clash with her overall efficiency and authority. Describing the leads that brought her to Jerry's office, she smiles and says with rising, girlish intonation, "... so it's quite a coincidence if they weren't, ya know, connected?"

Marge's mixture of consistently effective action and occasional girlish talk (Lakoff's "women's language") conforms to a pattern that was identified in 1929 by Joan Riviere, a colleague of Freud. Riviere found that highly successful women frequently experienced anxiety about their possession of what was considered to be "masculine" knowledge or skills. To avoid real or imaginary reprisals, they often camouflaged their abilities by retreating into exaggeratedly "feminine" behavior or speech patterns.[13] Marge's retreats tend to make us laugh, and our laughter – or at least the laughter of many female viewers – may be in part a recognition of this involuntary defensive strategy.

The Coens' study of female language takes a different turn near the end of the film. Marge still "talks funny," but she also enunciates values that the brothers clearly admire but rarely express straightforwardly in their movies. Discovering Grimsrud in the act of grinding his accomplice's body in a wood chipper (the protruding foot is one of the grisly–comic highlights of the film), Marge manages to capture Grimsrud single-handedly. The exciting scene of the arrest, amplified by the deafening noise of the wood chipper, is followed by a quiet, contemplative drive toward the police station. With the silent murderer handcuffed in the back seat, Marge reflects on the events that led to Grimsrud's arrest. Speaking softly, half to herself, half to the murderer, she adds up the list of victims, clearly dismayed by all the useless killing. Glancing at Grimsrud in the rear view mirror, she sadly asks "And for what? For a little bit of money.... There's more to life than a little money, you know." Looking more intently at her captive, she gently asks: "Don't you know that? ... And here ya are, and it's a beautiful day." Marge's simple words and her idea of a beautiful day – a snowstorm – invite and have received ridicule, as no doubt the Coens expected. A straightforward expression of down-home emotion in a witty, ironic Coen brothers' movie is extremely unusual, but it is consistent with the hero around whom this film is structured. *Fargo* would be incomplete if it did not allow Marge to give simple expression to the Law of the Mother – the law that renounces violence and demands nurturance of life.

BACK TO BED: MARGE, AS MOTHER-TO-BE, PUTS IT ALL IN PERSPECTIVE

The last scene with Marge finds her where we first saw her – in bed, the place of lovemaking, conception, and dreams. As in Marge's first scene, the striking element is an absence, and it is the same absence. At a moment when all narrative and social conventions seem to demand it, there is no mention of Marge's extraordinary, and now famous, multiple homicide case.

The scene, like the quiet drive through the snow with Grimsrud, follows a sequence of dramatic action (in this instance, the capture of Jerry by the police) and provides another welcome change in mood. It begins with a shot of Norm watching television in bed, soon joined by Marge. As the flannel-clad couple, hand in hand, gaze at the TV, Norm says "They announced it." We assume that "it" refers to something about Marge's case. But, as the conversation continues, we realize that Norm is referring to the choice of his mallard painting for a three-cent postage stamp (and of his competitor's illustration for the twenty-nine cent stamp). Although we may be surprised, Marge is not; this is the news she was eagerly awaiting. She enthusiastically congratulates her husband and reassures him that people need the little stamps whenever postage rates are raised. Gazing back into the TV, she says "I'm so proud a you, Norm."

The ironic lack of any reference to Marge's heroism and the focus on Norm's relatively minor accomplishment is perfectly in keeping with the rest of the film. In an earlier bedroom scene, when Marge is awakened by a telephone call from her old friend Mike Yanagita, who says with great excitement that he just saw her on TV in connection with the homicides, she diverts attention from her own celebrity and asks how Mike is doing. The film collaborates with Marge's modesty: the footage that Mike saw – like the television coverage that undoubtedly attends the capture of Grimsrud and resolution of the murders – is never shown.

12. "Two more months."

Fargo's closing scene, like much of the film, addresses us on multiple levels. Ironic in its hokey parody of cozy bourgeois life, the scene is also touching in its evocation of infantile desires and its appreciation of simple virtues. The scene's atmosphere of domestic safety (and claustrophobia) contrasts sharply with the terror and loneliness that the film depicts in a series of earlier bedroom scenes centered on the one child character, Scotty Lundegaard. A mildly rebellious preteen before his mother was kidnapped, twelve-year-old Scotty, terrifed by his mother's abduction, is reduced to sitting alone in his room nervously hugging his teddy bear. By the end of the film, his mother and grandfather dead and his father on his way to prison, the little boy is entirely alone in the world.

In contrast, Marge and Norm's eagerly awaited child is the center of the parental universe. The closing scene, like much of the film, blends irony and sentiment, cultural commentary and escapist fantasy. Side by side in their cozy bed, the couple forget about Marge's workaday world of murder and greed as they joyfully anticipate the arrival of the next generation. With his hand on his wife's large belly, Norm

says, "Two more months." Marge answers, "Two more months." (Fig. 12).

NOTES

1. Quoted in Lizzie Francke, "Hell Freezes Over: The Coen Brothers Talk About Images from *Fargo*, Their Unnerving New Film," *Sight and Sound* May 1996, 25.
2. Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper, 1989), 10.
3. Ibid., 11.
4. See Bakhtin's interesting discussion of an entire conversation consisting of one iteration of the word "Well." V. N. Volosinov, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art," Appendix in *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*, edited by I. R. Titunik and Neal H. Bruss, trans. I. R. Titunik (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana, 1987), 99. The essays are generally seen as written by Bakhtin, although they were published under Volosinov's name.
5. Lakoff, 17.
6. Quoted in Francke, *Sight and Sound*, 25.
7. See Benjamin's book-length discussion of "inter-subjectivity" as opposed to "object relations" as a model for human relationships. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
8. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1978).
9. Ibid., 6.
10. Ibid., 7–8.
11. Ibid., 87.
12. The film's only Asian-American character, Mike Yanagita is found to have "mental problems." See Krin Gabbbard's essay, in his forthcoming Rutgers Univ. Press book, discussing *Fargo*'s representation of members of ethnic minority groups.
13. See Riviere's essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *Joan Riviere: The Inner World and Joan Riviere, Collected Papers 1920–1958*, edited by Athol Hughes (New York: Karnac, 1991), 90–101. Riviere writes from her experience as a therapist and as a colleague of the early, predominantly male, psychoanalysts. The essay's extreme deference to Ernest Jones, Freud, and others illustrates the very phenomenon that Riviere finds in her patients.

CHRISTOPHER SHARRETT

4 *Fargo*, or the Blank Frontier

The Coen brothers' comic crime drama *Fargo* (1996) is so appealing perhaps because it is so wittily involved in a critique of American civilization, particularly the late twentieth-century family and community. In this, the Coens share common interests with the quasi-independent cinema of the past 30 years, represented by such diverse films as *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Happiness* (1997). The Coens played with such a critique in their earlier explorations of genre film, especially *Blood Simple* (1983), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), and the comedy *Raising Arizona* (1987). As with much postmodern art, a concern for eccentric stylization, a preoccupation with genre convention that borders on fetishization, and above all a form of cynicism and snide sarcasm (basic to their humor) tend both to enhance their comedy and blur the credibility of their observations. Like David Lynch, Todd Solondz, and other postmodernists, the Coens approach their material from a bemused distance, with the sense that sympathy for their characters (and for humanity) may be the earmark of the sucker (the worst thing to be in the hip posture of postmodernity), to the point that their critical perspective is often difficult to ascertain. The Coens also share, perhaps precisely because of this apparent sensibility, an inability to suggest a sense of an alternative to what they critique. What some critics see as an element of the ineffable in their work may be their refusal to take their material seriously or, worse, their

tendency to view the world with haughty disdain that their jokes barely mask.

These problems were never more manifest than in *Fargo*, simultaneously their most commercial, accessible, witty, and frustrating film – frustrating perhaps because in their bid for a larger audience, the Coens seem to have partaken fully of a particularly noxious current of postmodern liberal sensibility, namely, a need to affirm what is simultaneously belittled,[1] frequently from an elitist posture that views with contempt all aspects of middle- and working-class life to a point that no character escapes derisive caricature. Many critics have noted the film's mockery of the Scandinavian accents and regionalisms of Minnesota and environs; it is sufficient to appreciate how the Coens interlace their presentation of everyday "true crime" in contemporary life with a dismissal of small-town middle-class life in a way that may be more conservative than radical or simply nihilist.

Still, *Fargo* is a compelling film that satirically distills ideas and images central to American myth, folklore, history, and popular culture. The film seems to be a product of the bankruptcy of the postmodern American scene, stricken with anxiety about a "politic of meaning" – hence the assurances of the "true crime" preamble that opens the film – soliciting nostalgic, if quizzical, yearnings for a dubious time of innocence, when the small-town community supposedly represented a culture of mutual support and collective values. *Fargo* views these assumptions with suspicion, through aforementioned snide humor that ultimately becomes complicit in a qualified restoration of normality and assertion of "family values," all with a postmodern nudge-and-wink typical of the style's expression.

In its opening images, *Fargo* draws on several genres, especially the epic and the Western – the latter seems especially manifest. It is a commonplace that films examining the American community, the image of the family, the rule of patriarchy, and the consequences of expansionism, reference the Western with some consistency. *Fargo* is aware of the genre's conventions and iconography, but with an eye toward inverting them.

13. **Final shot of the Paul Bunyan statue.**

The title itself is loaded with signification but is little involved with the film's story other than being the place where Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) plots the kidnapping of his wife with two comically grotesque, incompetent gunsels, Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare). The fact that the town of Fargo is merely a point of departure for the narrative suggests the emptying-out of meaning basic to the narrative, the sense that the American tale is vacuous, its mythology impoverished and ludicrous even in the midst of consumer plentitude as capitalism declares itself, at the end of the twentieth century, triumphant. Shep Proudfoot (Steve Reevis), the Native American convict-turned-garage-mechanic who puts Jerry in touch with Gaear Grimsrud, remarks that Gaear comes from Fargo; there is a suggestion that this folkloric place where the action begins is a repository of evil.

Fargo, North Dakota, located on the Red River (itself deeply resonant, the title of the Howard Hawks film, and a place recurrent in representations of the winning of the West) was named after William George Fargo, co-founder of the Wells Fargo transport company and,

later, American Express. Wells Fargo is important to the mythos of the American frontier as the preeminent stagecoach line and currency transport service that listed among its hired guns such frontier luminaries as Wyatt Earp.[2] The company, its spin-offs in finance capital, and the town it helped spawn represent the romance and reality of American expansionism, conquest, development, and exploitation. But if Wells Fargo and Wyatt Earp are part of the narrative of regeneration through violence that forged the national myth, *Fargo* is about the dead end and essential silliness of this myth. The family turns in on itself, and the restoration of normality carries with it no sense of epic historical moment, as its consolations seem trivial (inverting the theme of rescue and recovery, basic to archetypal Westerns like *The Searchers*). Fargo's actions begin in the town of Fargo, but the town is important only as a jumping-off point for a tale of banal evil, as the American small town, be it Fargo, Brainerd, or some other rural Midwest outpost, is interesting only in its insularity, peculiarity, and psychic atmosphere of latent dread covered over by a forced normalcy.

The normalcy is belied by numerous little touches, like the bizarre grimace on the face of the Paul Bunyan statue that stands on the outskirts of Brainerd.[3] Featured in close shot several times in the film, the statue has particular resonance when Gaear kills Carl with an axe and stuffs his body in a wood chipper in the film's penultimate moment (Fig. 13). The scene brings the consoling fantasies of the opening up of the land home to roost in grotesquerie represented in images derived from the modern gore film. Implicit in the Paul Bunyan myth (which evokes a knowing chuckle each time it is mentioned in the movie) is the rampage of the civilizing process. Nineteenth-century politicians advocated the sharp axe and the true rifle as more crucial to the opening of the land than book learning – the consequences of this ethic are shown, jokingly, in *Fargo*. No one produces anything (except perhaps Norm's paintings of ducks), no one knows very much, most evince real stupidity, and the central activity consists of bilking the public, various flimflams, and finally kidnapping and murder.

THE OPENING THEME

Carter Burwell's main musical theme, now closely identified with the film, begins with some mournful notes played on a fiddle. The tune, derived from Scandinavian folk music, might recall for the 1990s audience the sentimental early American folk songs popularized by Ken Burns's mammoth TV documentary *The Civil War*, as well as "Ashokan Farewell," the series' theme. *Fargo*'s contrived epic scope and ambition is amplified as the fiddle music burgeons into a thunderous, surging orchestra that picks up and fully articulates the portentous title music. The theme recalls the great Hollywood orchestral scores of Dimitri Tiomkin, Alfred Newman, Ernest Gold, and particularly Miklos Rozsa, Burwell's principal source. Motifs of the theme appear throughout the film to annotate moments in traditional Hollywood fashion; however, there is nothing in the film to merit such music, which recurs in the closing moments as Marge brings in Gaear. We can see *Fargo* as epic only in the sense that *The Shining* may be seen as such, although Kubrick's film has quite obvious ambition in its associations of the bourgeois family and the madness it engenders with the monumental crimes of the nation. Rather than being a microcosm-of-America narrative, *Fargo* is a work that sends up the pretenses of art with epic concern, which *The Shining* clearly does not. Kubrick uses Bartok and Penderecki to give apocalyptic dimension to his tale of male madness, the nuclear family, and the entire legacy of the American past. As the motifs of *Fargo*'s main theme appear here and there, they have the parodical function of the Merle Haggard tune about the woes of big city life played at a country and western bar as the plot begins, or the heavy metal music in the machine shop at Jerry's auto dealership (heard also on the car radio as Carl and Gaear head for the Twin Cities), or the muzak version of "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?" in the buffet as Norm and Marge have lunch, or the Jose Feliciano song at a hotel supper club as Carl woos a hooker. As with much postmodern art, the film sets artistic convention in relief. The high drama of Burwell's title music is regularly set against the *kitsch* of pop culture as the film deflates itself,

undercutting any sense that *Fargo* might offer instruction about the failure of American life. The film takes this failure more or less for granted, but refuses its project any element of grandiosity. The portentous main theme becomes a comment on the ambitions of such themes, and the current bankruptcy of such ambitions, as "serious" music dissolves in the consumer sink with all other forms of expression.

SNOW

The opening titles begin against the whiteout conditions of a northern midwest snowscape. A vehicle emerges from the blizzard as the main title finally appears, images slowly taking shape within the nullity of the landscape. In the fullness of the narrative, we get the sense of this frozen land as another desert vista, but the inverse of the wastelands of the Southwest. While the southwest of folklore and the Hollywood Western portrayed an arid promised land awaiting transformation into a garden, this frozen desert is about the new golden land now "under erasure,"[4] an inversion of its earlier manifestation, its promise long since faded. It is noteworthy that two pivotal revisionist Westerns, Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1972) and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1996), both take place in cold northwest terrain. Although the southwest desert suggests a place often infertile and inhospitable, our culture has given its stunning vistas a romanticism that conveys a sense of potentiality, and the images of struggling pioneers crossing desert plains often imply a simmering eroticism. The frozen north, in contrast, conveys a strange sense of petrifaction – the promise of spring is seldom implied, the overall mood one of repression and emptiness. In *Fargo*, the emptiness is reinforced by the overly sanitary feel of the thoroughly bourgeois, commodified, fast-food civilization of postindustrial America.

This landscape is about absence on various levels, particularly in its exclusion of the racial other (discussed by Krin Gabbard in his forthcoming book on race and music in film), a matter about which the Coens may not be all that sensitive. Although the film takes its

14. Carl, wounded and deciding where to hide the ransom money in the snow.

racial politics rather blithely, it wants it both ways by implying social commentary and by suggesting through its landscape the emptying out of meaning in the American community. The snowscapes of the Dakotas and Minnesota suggest circularity and frustration as much as emptiness. The film is a neo-*noir* precisely in its redefinition of setting and space. Obviously not an urban film, it instead depicts consistently dreary open land, a rural void with as many ellipses and silences as the urban noirs of the forties and fifties. Because the film is partially a comedy, the tone is not Expressionist grimness, but sitcom joviality constantly undercut by a sense of seething frustration and hysteria. Reinforcing this tone, the lighting is for the most part a kind of wintry high key, giving the image a vapid, slightly drained blandness appropriate to the routine, irate, or vaguely zombified behavior of its key characters. We see repeated high-angle shots of cars in parking lots, as when Jerry tries, with hysterical frustration representative of the trials of his life, to scrape ice from his windshield. Marge finds the body of a dead trooper alone in a snowfield, the film's signature still. The frozen wilderness image contains the joke that whatever the

police want to protect seems to have long since vanished, since the community itself is nowhere in sight. And there are the numerous back-and-forth trips – Jerry to his home, Carl and Gaear to the Twin Cities, Wade to meet with the kidnappers, Jerry to meet with Wade and Stan, Marge from Brainerd to Minneapolis and back, Jerry to flee Marge, Marge to capture Gaear, and the police capture of Jerry at a motel. Carl's burial of the ransom in a roadside snowfield, at a spot he could not possibly locate later (we assume the police never find the money), provides the denouement for the entire dramatic function of this landscape – it nullifies much of the action of the film, suggesting that all characters will be buried by a landscape indifferent to their petty lives. Yet Carl's hopelessly stupid burial of the loot has a weird logic – one place seems as good as another in the void the characters occupy (Fig. 14).

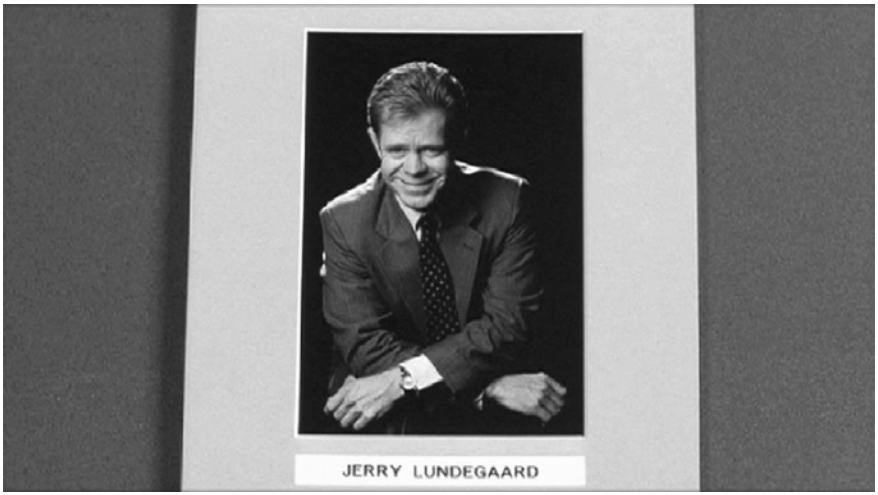
The sense of movement and action going nowhere and accomplishing nothing is accompanied by attention to the trivial details of middle-class consumer America. *Fargo*'s satire is built on conflict between the apparent plentitude and comfort of bourgeois life and the actuality of its bankruptcy and barrenness. Yet the Coens' satire often loses the critical force usually associated with the form, as satire and parody run very close to pastiche because the film's humor underscores the emptiness in its characters and situations without focus to its critical project.

BANALITY

Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil" – her comment on Eichmann – may have become exhausted and trivialized with repetition, but it has some application to *Fargo* if we make adjustments for the particular scope and ambition of the Coens' film. Much of the action – beginning with Jerry Lundegaard's plan to have Carl and Gaear kidnap his wife – is characterized by a sense of exhaustion (and stupidity – the two are interlinked in the world of the film) that suggests a corruption both profound and risible. The crimes of this story are casually endemic, part of everyday interaction in an increasingly dreary, happily ignorant society. Our introduction to

15. The auto dealership wall of pictures.

Jerry in his workplace is also our introduction to the world of *Fargo*. The camera shows a wall at the auto dealership with dozens of portraits of its many sales managers past and present. The shot lingers a bit before cutting in closer to highlight Jerry's picture (Figs. 15 and 16). The gesture recalls classic establishing shots in *film noir*, with the



16. Jerry's picture on the auto dealership wall.

camera panning over the cityscape to close in on one building, the suggestion being that we are seeing "one story among many in the naked city." The device is similar here, with the photo gallery suggesting that Jerry is one venal jerk among many, and that the camera could as easily have chosen another culprit in the line up of used car grifters. The shot of the photo gallery, along with other pop culture images, evokes the silkscreen art of Andy Warhol, with its sense of how mass-produced culture and the commodification of virtually all experience have eroded affect in daily life.

When Carl tells Jerry that he "isn't going to debate" at two points in the film, the implication, especially as we come to know Carl's incompetence, is that he is incapable of debate, or even of understanding his circumstances. As Jerry stammers his way through his explanation of the crime at the opening bar scene, Carl says the plot "doesn't make sense" and that it's "like robbing Peter to pay Paul," not really an apt characterization. Jerry's kidnap plot becomes quickly circumscribed by the sense of humdrum evil encompassing most interactions. A running gag involves Jerry being harried by a GMAC finance officer angry with Jerry for defrauding his company on a large loan. Although this crime seems associated with Jerry's sinking financial situation and the resultant kidnap plot, it can be seen as both linked to the kidnapping and separate from it, because this sort of flimflam is part of business as usual in entrepreneurial capitalism. A similar and more evocative scene involves Jerry ripping off a middle-aged couple in purchasing one of his cars, as Jerry foists his expensive "tru-coat" undercarriage sealant on them after they have already agreed on the terms of the deal. The atmosphere of pervasive chicanery in the scene is extended with Wade's rip-off of Jerry. After Jerry pleads with Wade (Harve Presnell) to finance a deal to buy some parking lots, Wade appears to accept. Jerry is so elated he tries to cancel the kidnap plot (he does not know how). Then Wade and his lackey Stan Grossman (Larry Brandenburg) turn the tables on Jerry, offering him a "finder's fee" while cutting him out of a deal to build parking lots, which Jerry misunderstood from the start in any event. One sees Jerry as the favorite target of schoolyard bullies in his backstory; his sad sack status provoking garden-variety antisocial resentment

17. Carl shoots Wade.

that makes him despise the world, not like a disgruntled postal worker gone hog wild, but a nebbish who suffers silently until his cockeyed schemes make him self-destruct.

Fargo, affirming Freud's notion of the universality of neurosis, shows the everyday craziness and masquerade of middle-class life. Wade's sociopathic behavior is not far from Jerry's. Jerry rehearses his bogus dismay about Jean's kidnapping before phoning Wade; Wade practices a hothead speech to intimidate the kidnappers as he checks his .357 Magnum. Carl recognizes Wade's small-time and incompetent patriarchal authority as he guns him down ("fuckin' asshole!"), himself getting shot in the face in the process (Fig. 17). The rules of the game, including the classic face-off between men, never work out in *Fargo*. The Wade/Carl showdown is the culmination of the film's jokes about professionalism and the competence of the male group, long a subject of lampooning in revisionist genre cinema (cf. *Reservoir Dogs*).

Recalling dialogue in the films of Quentin Tarantino, everyday discourse has a bankrupt aspect, with many exchanges marginal to exposition. Gaear and Carl have a brief argument about secondhand smoke and eating at a pancake house; Carl tries to fill empty

conversational space with ruminations on the skyscrapers of the Twin Cities; Marge and Norm (John Carroll Lynch) discuss fishing, nightcrawlers, Norm's bird paintings, and their Arby's sandwiches. Phrases are often repeated over and over, as if no one has much to say once the niceties have been exhausted ("Dad, are you stayin' for supper?" "It's a pretty sweet deal!"). During the brutal home invasion to kidnap Jerry's wife Jean (Kristin Rudrüd), Gaear cuts himself and becomes fixed on finding a container of "unguent." Marge's rendezvous with Mike Yanagita (Steve Park), her old high school chum, initially sounds like more banal chitchat, although it also contributes to the film's twisted sexual/family politics.

Fargo gets its notion of banality in part from a fixation on media culture evidenced both in the characters' watching television and their tendency to behave as if their personalities have been thoroughly shaped by media (actually a fairly common notion about the postmodern subject). Wade is watching an ice hockey game, ignoring Jerry and his daughter, as Jerry discovers him at his home; Carl and Gaear watch *The Tonight Show* after screwing two hookers at the Blue Ox Motel; Carl bangs away at an old TV after he and Gaear reach their hideout with the kidnapped Jean – the snowy TV image dissolves into a National Geographic-style program on bark beetles playing on Marge's and Norm's TV as they drift off to sleep. Jean watches a brain-dead TV morning show as Jerry and Carl break into her house (her response is the same slack-jawed bewilderment/interest that she focused on the show). Gaear sits Lincolnlike in front of the TV that Carl tries to adjust and watches soap operas as he awaits the return of Carl with the ransom money. When the state trooper stops Jerry and Carl, Carl incompetently tries to bribe the cop in a manner apparently picked up from watching crooks on TV cop shows.

Fargo regularly introduces or reintroduces characters with static close-ups, showing them idly chewing a toothpick, grumbling, or staring off into space, as when we see the blank face of Stan Grossman, the yes-man to Wade, and then Wade, as the men discuss the plans for dealing with the kidnappers.

THE FAMILY

The film seems deliberately *not* a Joe McGinnis drama of family betrayal and murder on the model of *Fatal Vision* or *Blind Faith*, simply because *Fargo* does not view such crimes as monstrous aberrations in an otherwise benign middle-class society, nor does it develop the sense that the pathology of the patriarch is something cleverly hidden. Jerry's family does not see his evil only because they are too dumb; for the audience, the monstrousness of Jerry is manifest, as is Wade's nastiness and tyranny. The Coens paint all of this with broad comic strokes, implying that the unconscious is not hard to penetrate, and also that personality and the family dynamic that creates it are essentially contemptible, worthy of burlesque rather than drama.

Jerry Lundegaard's actions have the elements of the "true crime" thriller, hence the preamble title card. In many respects, his actions can be regarded as "truer" than the McGinnis-type thriller because they lack the tension and melodrama that this form usually attaches to its storytelling. Although Jerry may be a sociopath along the lines of, say, Jeffrey MacDonald, his mendacity flows not from some previously unseen inner demons but from the stultifying family conditions and community life that define him. It is hard not to keep flashing to the car dealership photo gallery that introduces Jerry to the audience. Jerry is perfectly representative of his class, and William H. Macy gives the character an iconic resonance recalling any number of TV sitcom dads and their comic strip variants (Dagwood in *Blondie*).

Fargo defines the family as suffocating and unstable, and although it leavens this image with a lot of humor, its depiction of the family depends a great deal not only on the Western, but also the legacy of Hitchcock and the modern horror film. As with the film's individual characterizations, its portrayal of the family takes a low-key strategy, displaying not overwhelming mania but simmering resentment and confinement, at some moments moving toward rage.

Wade Gustafson, Jerry's father-in-law and the obvious patriarch figure, is the kind of family lawgiver usually portrayed by someone on

the order of Charles Bickford in earlier genre film (*The Big Country* [1958], *The Unforgiven* [1960], *Days of Wine and Roses* [1962]). He is a morose, withdrawn, unkind figure, concerned only with his dimwit daughter Jean. When Jerry tries to get Wade's sympathy for his financial predicament by reminding him of the threatened future of his daughter and grandson, Wade cruelly tells Jerry that "Jean and Scotty will never have to worry." The statement is merely a dig at Jerry, not a consolation either for Jerry or his own daughter. Wade's very presence upsets Jerry. When Jerry finds Wade in his home, he warily asks his wife if Wade will be staying for supper; Jerry's face sinks further when the answer is a growling affirmative. Jerry's relationship to Wade, and also to his wife Jean and their son Scotty (Tony Denman), suggests the film's sense of the basic falsity and pathology of the family. Plenty of movies and TV programs contain jokes about grouchy in-laws (the theme is fairly basic to shows like *The Honeymooners*). Jerry Lundegaard, however, simply has no feelings at all for his wife and child, and certainly none for his father-in-law, who clearly has a veiled contempt for him. Yet Jerry goes through the motions of affection and respect for those he thinks expect to receive these feelings. *Fargo*'s humor flows from its matter-of-fact acceptance of the phoniness of the family construct.

Wade's continuity within a line of Charles Bickford-style patriarchs is apparent in the décor of his office, with two Frederick Remington statues on a credenza behind his desk, and landscape paintings on the walls. Although Wade resembles the ill-tempered family overseers associated with earlier narratives of the frontier and the American community, *Fargo* finds no reason to give him the benefit of the doubt or to view his conduct as anything other than a given of so-called normal bourgeois life. Jerry is the emasculated Howdy Doody boy-man, whose inferiority, indulgence, and narcissistic outlook might be associated with the overbearing law of the father, which, as we learn, has no real efficacy anyway, and leads to the further familial disintegration that Jerry has set into motion with the kidnap plot.

Scotty, the son of Jerry and Jean, sends up the idealization of children and their role in "cementing" family union. The relationship between Jerry and Jean does not appear to have any real basis because

18. Scotty alone in his room after his mother's kidnapping.

they share little in common (although we have no real sense that either one has any inner life whatsoever), and we might assume that their relationship centers on their son. But Scotty seems to have little sympathetic interest in his parents until the kidnapping of his mother, whereupon his concern is centered more on his own fear, grief, and abandonment. Scotty's situation underscores how marginal Jerry really is to his household. Before the kidnapping, Scotty seems trapped by family strictures, his room the typical middle-class teenager's hideaway. When he says "no fuckin'way" to rebuke his parents' laying down the law, Jerry and Jean react with overly dramatized shock, especially forced in Jerry's case. A plastic bottle of Sunny Delight sits on the kitchenette table during the angry little exchange – one of the fast-food culture's emblems of false cheeriness that annotates the fake relationships of the family members. After the kidnapping, Scotty's situation drives home Jerry's emptiness and cruelty. The terrified and confused boy desperately seeks assurances from Jerry as to his mother's safety. Jerry, almost absentmindedly, responds only with clichéd palliatives, his indifference to the boy's fear doubly cruel considering Jerry, in fact, caused it (Fig. 18).

MARGE

By far the most noteworthy and memorable feature of *Fargo* is the character of Marge Gunderson, the pregnant chief of police of Brainerd who cracks the case, arrests Gaear Grimsrud, and is instrumental in bringing Jerry Lundegaard to justice. Marge, a plum role that won an Oscar for Frances McDormand, is seen by many as another innovation for the image of women in film, a novel character overturning conventions in a most unconventional film. To be sure, much about Marge deviates from images of women in most of the postmodern neoconservative cinema. She is not a phallicized female Rambo on the order of the protagonists of the *Terminator* films, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Courage Under Fire*, *The Matrix*, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, or the countless other action/adventure films that acknowledge the female only insofar as she acts like a man, that is, willing not only to kill but to do it with some joy and aplomb, while demonstrating skills in gunplay and other killing arts associated with the male cult of death inscribed in genre entertainment. In Marge, the Coens seem to counter the trend toward constructing female characters along male expectations, but I suggest Marge reveals some of the disingenuousness of the film.

On first glance, Marge seems a riposte to the whole notion of the cop in the history of the Hollywood crime film. One could say that her characterization makes *Fargo* a true neo-*noir* simply by the way her bright disposition upsets most expectations about the urban gumshoe. Above all, Marge is decidedly not Jack Webb, that archetype of the tough cop whose staccato monologues browbeat suspects while searching for "just the facts." On the contrary, Marge is affable, her interviews with suspects (Jerry, Shep Proudfoot) low key, even nurturing, but with an intelligence that tolerates no guff and easily spots disingenuousness. However, the characters are all so risible that one could argue Marge's skills are of a piece with the comic ambience that renders such talents unremarkable given the silliness of the world of the film.

Marge's stature is significant, not only because she dominates the screen after she appears about a third of the way into the narrative,

but also because she seems superior to every other character in the film, including her husband Norm, who comes across as something of a dullard. Yet, her extraordinary authority in the narrative seems undeveloped and false because the Coens' matter-of-fact approach to it raises suspicions. How, after all, did she gain her job as police chief in the first place? A state eccentric enough to elect Jesse Ventura its governor could conceivably allow a woman to run a small town police force, but the dynamics of all this are not seen as worth developing. The film's political interests are limited to the way that the middle class interacts with itself, and with the underclass in the form of Shep Proudfoot, Carl and Gaear, and various hookers, cashiers, innkeepers, and local yokels. Marge is kind to everyone, represented in the bonhomie of the regional catchphrases and expressions ("Oh yeah?," "You betcha!"). Marge seems an innovative character until we examine conscientiously the whole notion of the phallicized female constructed by the mainstream cinema in the last 20 years. Such an examination makes Marge essentially a comic extension of the kind of figure portrayed by Jodie Foster in *The Silence of the Lambs*, the female who shows the virtues of intelligence over brute force and works confidently and unquestioningly on behalf of state power. Nevertheless, Marge's final recourse to the gun in bringing down Gaear places her within the gunfighter tradition – that she does not use strong-arm tactics before so doing does not change her role as protector of traditional institutions and notions of the normal.

In her pregnancy and role as police chief, she possesses the phallus twice over, but in ways far more routine to patriarchal culture than the woman-with-a-penis movies that transmogrify the female into the type of killing machine made popular by the Stallone/Schwarzenegger films. Although her pregnancy neither empowers her in the sense of increased access to social status and power, nor the particular sympathetic concern allowed the female during pregnancy, it becomes a signifier of the restoration of the community that she eventually accomplishes. Marge's pregnancy-as-phallic-authority is suggested by her central role in her household, with Norm the dependent partner. The pregnancy also marks Marge and Norm as normal to a fault – we can wonder if Norm's name is a pun. The

Lundegaards suggest the family gone comically wrong, while the Gundersons are a family comically right for the postmodern age. The family is constantly acknowledged as absurd, but nevertheless demanding protection and restoration. The need for such protection is emphasized by a conventional contrasting of the functional with the dysfunctional, keeping in mind that the film continues to want it both ways by presenting notions of self/other with tongue in cheek, all the while asserting the construct.

Seeing *Fargo* as, in part, a story of warring clans helps to situate it within genre cinema. From *My Darling Clementine* to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, we find the notion of the civil vs. barbarous families, an idea made increasingly problematical in films like *Chainsaw* and similar developments of the seventies horror film. While the horror film eroded the dichotomy of normal/abnormal, making the family construct itself monstrous, *Fargo* restores its essential goodness with postmodern irony. Part of the irony stems from the portrayal of the "evil" clan, the Lundegaards, whose failings may be less involved with the greed and narcissism of Jerry than with the domination and ultimate stupidity of the patriarch Wade. The Gundersons have no such looming patriarchal figure, and it would seem that Marge and Norm live outside the traditional nuclear family expectation. Their relationship appears to be one of mutual support and nurturance, with Marge looked after by her husband, and Norm supported in his painting avocations by Marge. Marge's pregnancy might suggest a fresh potentiality, a new beginning for the family itself, while the actuality of the spoiled and too-soft Scotty Lundegaard may signify the consequences of traditional patriarchal rule.

The difficulty in all this resides in the sense that while a role reversal has occurred in the Marge/Norm household, such a reversal has importance to human liberation only in the more compromised, bourgeois variations of feminism. Marge is the chief breadwinner, but her situation supports rather than subverts the middle-class household and the assumptions it perpetuates about the standing social order. As the chief of police, she is protector of family and community, warding off the evil other in the form of Jerry, his bemused but

dangerous (and "funny lookin'") underlings, and Shep Proudfoot, the linchpin to Jerry's plot. The kidnap plot, after all, is a direct assault on the family, an assault that Marge cannot quite set straight. Marge's solving the crime is not just about restoring the family (*The Searchers* comes to mind not only in this, but also in the confrontation with the Native American transgressor, who helps set the plot in motion) but about allowing the American way of life to continue ("Norm, you know, we're doin' pretty good"). Although Marge is too late to save Jean, the salvific act is actually Marge's protection of her own household, assuring the audience that everything will be okay as she nestles with Norm in their bed, the TV functioning as hearth.

The portrayal of the Gunderson household is accomplished with an element of sly derision basic to the film. Norm is something of a big balding baby, the docile partner content in his lethargy. His semiverbal, dependent manner (meeting Marge for lunch each day) underscores an infantile relationship with his wife. Although the patriarch may be dangerous, his absence may produce the threats to masculinity that caused John Wayne to rail against the "flabby" patriotism engendered by the domesticated centrism of the 1950s. But does the film want us to take the Norm–Marge relationship seriously? An element of the repulsive penetrates the Gunderson household almost as much it does the Lundegaards'. Norm hawks up the night's sputum just after he insists on making Marge breakfast when she is called to investigate the triple homicide. When Marge returns to her office, Norm opens a bag of nightcrawlers, Marge's present to him, as she eats the Arby's sandwiches provided by her doting husband; an image of the worms is counterposed with Marge's delight with the food. The recurring images of food add to a sense of repulsion, perhaps even to Marge's pregnancy, as Marge pigs out at a buffet in another scene that would seem a throwaway, so little involved is it in exposition, were it not for its apparent function in conveying a sense of the characters' vapidity. Like David Lynch, the Coens use such images to insinuate a sense of discomfort and displeasure, but from a vague, noncommittal ideological position.

The most intriguing crack in the plaster of the film's restoration of normality would seem to involve Marge's encounter with her old high school chum Mike Yanagita. Their rendezvous begins with a late night phone call to Marge that at first seems to have something to do with the homicides. Marge apparently never mentions the call to Norm, and it appears that she views as pleasantly fortuitous that Mike's proposed meeting with her takes place at Minneapolis during her stopover to investigate Jerry Lundegaard. She finds the best place in town for the tryst (the Radisson) and primps before going into the dining room to see Mike. Although she is put off by Mike's forward manner (his attempt to sit next to her), her curiosity wanes only when it becomes apparent that Mike is a pathetic – and quite disturbed – figure. It might be argued that Marge meets with Mike out of a nonsexual curiosity, or perhaps merely as a charitable gesture for an old schoolmate. But the shot of Marge touching up her hair as she enters the dining room suggests that there are areas of her life left unfulfilled by her bland husband, who seems rather asexual even as he fathers a child. The Coens may be suggesting in this scene, totally removed from the central narrative, something of the "normal" pathologies of everyday life, with Marge wanting both her marriage and other forms of sexual attention, as if such dalliances are in fact the only way to make the monogamous marriage function. Yet, Mike is finally an aberration (notably a racial other), another of the story's kooks who is dismissed just before Marge begins to close in on her prey. As such, the film continues its basic premise of the absurdity of daily bourgeois life, coupled with the need for its affirmation and protection. The scene with Mike and Marge suggests the necessary accommodations and safety valves needed to allow the continuation of this way of life. Analysis of this moment becomes difficult because knowing anything about the authenticity of these characters – even one as seemingly straightforward as Marge – is one of the resistances of *Fargo*.

Outside the scene with Mike, Marge is an unproblematic character, the only one in the film save for some marginal figures. But are we supposed to accept her as the film's moral center, its locus of charity,

common sense, and emotional stability? The only answer seems to be simply that she is posed as the film's hero, with all the qualities usually ascribed to the male in most action/adventure genres, especially the Western. She is a righteous, although benign, protector of the community, and is therefore left uninterrogated due to the rules of genre that always circumscribe such figures. *Fargo* performs a rather predictable (knowing the direction of commercial narrative and its tendency to relegitimatize itself) sleight of hand in offering a provocative protagonist who is supremely conventional.

AMERICANA FAREWELL

In the penultimate scene, Marge brings Gaear Grimsrud back to Brainerd. We see Gaear in the back seat of Marge's police prowler, partially obscured by wire mesh. Marge wonders aloud, schoolmarm-style, asking Gaear, obviously a dangerous psychopath, if he knows that "there is more to life than a little money." Gaear stares blankly as the car passes the Paul Bunyan statue. Does he have the same fascination with roadside *kitsch* as the average tourist? Does he find kinship in the statue's implicit narrative, having just dispatched his weasly little partner with an axe, and then thrown him into a wood chipper? The "truth" of this scene has more to do with Gaear and that statue than Marge's motherly ruminations, about which he could no doubt care less. With the last shot of the Paul Bunyan statue, we might recall the other *kitsch* icons that casually decorate the film, such as the figures of little African-American golf caddies that sit in Jerry's office, and Wade's Frederick Remington statues. As Marge's car makes its way into the snowscape, the opening scene is repeated, except that this time a vehicle is moving into the void rather than coming out of it. The scenes that follow – of Jerry's pathetic arrest and the cozy reunion of Marge and Norm – have less impact than the absorption of the story by the blank horizon of the previous shot. But all the film's final moments, with their simultaneous sense of cancellation and affirmation, are emblematic of the tensions of this film, entangled as it is with the postmodern project.

NOTES

1. The concept is Robin Wood's, derived from his "Rally' Round the Flag, Boys, or Give it Back to the Indians," *CineAction*, Vol. 9, 1987, 9.
2. A sketch of Fargo is on the town's website at www.wellsfargohistory.com/states.nd/htm. A discussion of Wyatt Earp and Wells Fargo is in *Allen Barra, Inventing Wyatt Earp: His Life and Many Legends* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1998).
3. On the Bunyan statue, see booklet to DVD release of Fargo, MGM/UA Home Video.
4. The idea of the western under erasure is developed in Gregg Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure: *Dead Man*," in *The Western Reader*, edited by Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight, 1998), 381–405.

MIKITA BROTTMAN

5 "Kinda Funny Lookin'"

Steve Buscemi's Disorderly Body

The Coen brothers' hit movie *Fargo* is haunted by a disturbing cast of characters. There is hardly a conventionally handsome face or traditionally appealing body among film's odd cast, whose corporeality often verges on the grotesque. The story is a simple one. Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) plots the kidnapping of his wife to get ransom money from her father, Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell), who regards him with contempt. Furthermore, Jerry is in danger at his job because he has borrowed money on false pretences, and his debts are being called in. To perpetrate the kidnapping, Jerry hires a pair of bungling crooks, Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare). When the kidnap plan goes horribly wrong, Brainerd Police Chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) is called in to investigate.

Marge has a body that bespeaks its physicality in every scene. Heavily pregnant, she waddles through the snow, her swollen belly ballooning underneath her parka. We witness her ravenous appetite, as well as her suspicion that she is about to vomit – although this does not stop her from picking up a bag of "night crawlers" for Norm (John Carroll Lynch), her artist husband who likes to fish. Norm himself is a large, clumsy, clunking creature, and when the pair of them lie in bed together watching a nature documentary on the television, their joint bulk is conspicuous.

Jerry and Wade are characters that are equally distorted from the dominant cinematic aesthetic in that they all seem on the verge of being betrayed by their bodies, over which they seem to have very little control. Jerry seems unable to keep a lid on his mounting anxiety; his attempts at salesman-like aplomb are constantly betrayed by his restlessness and tendency to sweat profusely. When finally cornered by the police, he panics, desperately "flees the interview," and is eventually discovered stuck in an undignified position half way out of a motel bathroom window (Fig. 19). Wade is so dense and unyielding that even when shot, his body hardly twitches. Too thick-witted to anticipate the assault, his heavy body reacts indistinctly to death; the only time we ever see him respond involuntarily is when he jerks and clenches his fists while watching a hockey game on television. Equally stoical is the aggressive, inscrutable Native American Shep Proudfoot (Steve Reevis), who puts Jerry in touch with the two crude goons who offer to kidnap his wife. Proudfoot's bodily presence is almost as intimidating as that of the ferocious and menacing Gaear Grimsrud.

In this context, the most compelling of *Fargo*'s odd cast of bodies is that of Steve Buscemi's Carl Showalter, a randy hood with a cheesy smirk. Fresh from similar roles in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Desperado*, Buscemi plays Showalter as a nervous, gabby weasel, an unlikely contrast to Grimsrud, his big, blond, taciturn partner in crime. With Showalter in charge, the crime goes dreadfully wrong, and it immediately becomes obvious that this pitiful crook is completely out of control, a state that most clearly manifests itself in the contortions and distortions of his ferrety body, as well as his verbal attempts to compensate for its many peculiarities and failings.

From the first time we meet him, Showalter seems unable to hold himself together; he appears constantly on the verge of total breakdown, unable to escape his own physical impulses and bodily demands. The imperatives of the kidnap plot are put to one side whenever he needs to eat, drink, or get laid. In one scene, Showalter and Grimsrud – in adjacent twin beds – have vigorous intercourse with a

19. Jerry, hysterical as he is captured by police.

pair of hookers they have just picked up, then afterward lie exhausted in bed with their companions watching "The Tonight Show." When tracked down later by Marge Gunderson, Showalter's companion can recall only that he was "kinda funny lookin'." When pressed for details, she remembers that he was uncircumcised but cannot describe him any further, except to repeat that he was "kinda funny lookin'. More than most people, even."

Throughout the second half of the film, Showalter's body seems to be constantly battered and bleeding from his most recent fight or gunshot wound. Shep Proudfoot beats him savagely (Fig. 20), and Wade Gustafson shoots him in the face (to which he reacts by screaming, flying into a rage, shooting the prostate Gustafson several more times, then kicking his lifeless body with an undignified fury). Crude and profane, Showalter is a walking contradiction to the notion of the mind mastering the body. Though he is humiliatingly incompetent to begin with, his body betrays him at every turn; his attempts to squirm out of awkward situations go horribly awry, and he starts oozing anxiety like a cornered rodent. His eyes roll and his hands shake

20. Shep strangling Carl during a humiliating beating.

spasmodically, his cheesy grin becoming manic as he clutches and paws at his battered, wounded face, constantly trying to stem the blood leaking from the side of his chin.* In a hysterical attempt at compensation, he continues to gabble nonstop even with blood pouring from his lower face. Finally, he is killed with an ax and shoved piecemeal into a woodchipper, from which his severed leg, still fully clothed, grotesquely protrudes (Fig. 21). Perhaps the first thing that Grimsrud shoved into the wood chipper was Showalter's mutilated mouth, finally putting an end to his mindless jabbering.

In his work on Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the way in which certain texts have the ability to "carnivalize" the site of the body by emphasizing grotesque images of humanity anatomized and

* In an interesting case of life imitating art, in the early hours of the morning of Thursday, April 12, 2001, Steve Buscemi was stabbed in the jaw, throat, and arm during a fight at the Firebelly Lounge, a bar in Wilmington, North Carolina. In town to shoot a John Travolta film, *Domestic Disturbance*, Buscemi was hanging out with co-star Vince Vaughn and the film's screenwriter, Scott Rosenberg. Buscemi was rushed to New Hanover Regional Hospital in critical condition, but by the following afternoon he had been discharged and returned to New York. There was no mention of whether he gabbled hysterically on the way.

21. Gaear shoving the last of Carl into the wood chipper.

dismembered. From a Bakhtinian perspective, *Fargo* is a text which draws attention to the importance of inside-out and upside-down in the movements and acts of the body, presenting a series of anatomical images that is essentially a reiteration of the human body *out of control*, and thereby made comic and ridiculous. Marge Gunderson is a particularly carnivalesque figure, her monstrous belly enlarged to gigantic dimensions. When she stumbles across Showalter's dismembered leg sticking out of the woodchipper, her pregnant body draws attention to the connections between death and birth. Bakhtin comments on the way in which, in carnival, "death and death-throes, labor and childbirth are intimately interwoven."[1] Showalter's undignified death evokes Bakhtin's description of the grotesque or *clownish* portrayal of death in carnival, when the image of death takes on humorous aspects: "death is inseparable from *laughter*."[2]

Bakhtin was one of the first philosophers to draw explicit attention to the interrelated nature of horror and laughter. The kind of laughter evoked by *Fargo* – laughter at the expense of the disordered human body – liberates the consciousness from the confines of its own discourse (in an interesting postmodern twist), and hence,

according to Bakhtin, creates freedom. "Seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and liberates us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him."[3] By directing attention to the carnivalesque nature of the human body, particularly the human body swollen, dismembered, or otherwise disordered, *Fargo* signals some of the many connections between the horrific and the comic in the way both manifest the return of the repressed in the guise of bodily miscontrol.

The dominant representation of the human body in cinema is of a body that is not only aesthetically pleasing, but also under control. In texts such as *Fargo*, which carnivalize the site of the body, however, there is a close and intrinsic connection between violations of the aesthetic bodily norm, ritualistic horror, ritualistic parody, and clownishness: comedy, tied to the gross realities of life, takes its place in permanent conjunction with death.[4] Witness the scene in which Showalter's inept, bumbling attempt to bribe the state trooper near Brainerd is interrupted by Grimsrud suddenly shooting the trooper dead: the laughable becomes shocking at the flick of the trigger. Bakhtin emphasizes the *libidinal* nature of laughter and its associations with tension, bad taste, and the mocking of the body. Underlying the comedy, however, is a more serious implication. The site of laughter in this scene is the spectator, not the characters involved, but there is a way in which these two sites are inextricable in this film. By parodying the mortifying incompetencies that render us powerless, by making us conscious of our vain pretensions to order and dignity, *Fargo* reminds us of the pitiful inescapability of our own "funny-looking" bodies.

Significantly, Showalter is a lonely figure who needs constant attention, and continually berates his taciturn partner Grimsrud for failing to communicate with him. "Would it kill you to say something?" he nags Grimsrud in the car. Failing to provoke a response, Showalter then loudly vows to keep quiet himself, to show Grimsrud what it feels like to be ignored, but he cannot manage to control his hysterical need to verbalize even for a minute ("total fucking silence," he keeps repeating, "total fucking silence"). Whether nagging his

partner or bitching and swearing about his bleeding face, Showalter exudes a constant stream of prattle. Threatened by isolation in the backwoods cabin where he and Grimsrud have taken their kidnap victim, he bangs furiously on the side of an old black-and-white television set, muttering to himself angrily:

> . . . days . . . be here for days with a – DAMMIT! – a goddamn mute . . . nothin' to do . . . and the fucking – DAMMIT! – signal . . . plug me into the ozone, baby . . . Plug me into the ozone – Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! . . . .

Most significant in this context is Showalter's inability to stop gabbling to himself even after (or even because of?) being shot in the face. Driving around in his car clutching desperately at his mutilated cheek, he babbles a constant stream of obscenities. And despite bleeding copiously from a serious gunshot wound, he is unable to resist killing a parking garage attendant, presumably because the man reminds him of another attendant with whom he had earlier argued over a petty charge. Showalter's compulsion to vocalize, however fragmented and disfluent his utterences, becomes increasingly anxious and symptomatic as the film proceeds. He cannot keep quiet even at the Jose Feliciano concert to which he takes another bored hooker ("With Jose Feliciano, you got no complaints!" he flounders, after all his pathetic attempts at conversation have fallen flat; Fig. 22). The fact that the gunshot wound is adjacent to his jaw is significant in this regard. The injury is symptomatic of the terrible failure of the kidnappers' plan, and Showalter's constant stream of talk is an obvious attempt to compensate for this failure, and that of his own body, by creating a pathetic veneer of control.

Unable to stop his stream of brainless jabber, Showalter is a victim of habit. Caught in a truly horrifying situation, he is nevertheless behaving in a way we recognize as completely typical of him. Showalter obviously does not find it funny, nor does anyone else in the movie, but we do. To see someone behave in this habitual, mechanistic way in the middle of such dreadful circumstances is, according to Bergson, the essence of comedy because it shows that we are entirely at the

mercy of our bodily reactions, despite the claims of our "higher consciousness."

We also find the situation funny because it makes us feel superior to the pathetic, contemptible Showalter, in thrall to the demands of his increasingly "funny-looking" body. Bergson asserts that laughing is "social ragging; [it] always implies a secret or unconscious . . . an unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed."[5] For Bergson, the social significance of human laughter is always inextricably associated with hostility. The laugh "always implies a secret or unconscious intent, if not of each one of us, at all events of society as a whole."[6] Despite their often-conflicting views on the subject, both Freud and Bergson agree that humor resembles mental disturbance in that, in both cases, a distressful or offensive idea leads to logical peculiarities.[7]

Significantly, much of the humor in *Fargo* emerges from the characters' inability to communicate. In fact, this failure to connect is one of the film's most significant themes, and is something that infects its entire cast. At their first meeting in a neon-lit barroom, the two kidnappers and Jerry Lundegaard realize they have confused the time of their appointment, "a portent of mutual incompetence and a preview of Jerry's nervous stumbling as the scheme snowballs and comes crashing down around him."[8] When Showalter's pathetic kidnap attempt goes horribly wrong, he begins to squabble hysterically with both Grimsrud and Jerry on the phone ("Blood has been shed, Jerry!" he exclaims, portentously). The pitiful "mission" of course miscarries, and Jerry soon becomes almost as hysterical as Showalter. This becomes most obvious in the scene in which he tries to finagle his way out of giving a series of vehicle license plate numbers to a GMAC loan representative. A pathetic attempt to fox his creditors, this ploy reveals that Jerry is in serious debt and has been using false collateral to obtain fraudulent loans. It also shows us how desperate he is for money (hence his involvement in a scheme as drastic as the reckless kidnapping), and how incompetent. He weaves and dodges his way through the phone call, but the pressure begins to show and he starts to stutter and stumble, his anxiety betraying the despair

22. Carl and hooker in nightclub.

that lies beneath his slick salesman's patter, "his voice . . . progressing from an overeager quaver to a despairing whine."[9]

Just as the film distorts the dominant cinematic aesthetic of the body, it also distorts the dominant cinematic aesthetic of the rural United States. *Fargo* is set in the harsh, uncompromising landscape of rural Minnesota and North Dakota – a landscape akin to that of the Wisconsin home of Ed Gein, America's most bizarre serial killer who skinned human bodies in his backwoods shack. This is a territory of blank horizons and dull, monochromatic vistas, breeding ground of social isolation and violent explosions of cabin fever: expressions of the pioneer spirit run amok. Appropriately enough, the small town of Brainerd in which the film is mainly set, which proclaims itself "the home of Paul Bunyan," is overshadowed by a huge icon of the legendary frontier woodsman wearing a bizarre, malignant grin. This ax-wielding figure, which looms over the town like a grotesque totem pole, is symbolic of the film's dominant mood, which consistently blurs together comedy and horror.

In *Fargo*, the Coen brothers deliberately replace the usual representation of the rural Midwest as dull and "clean" – its inhabitants corn-fed, whitebread dunderheads – with the Midwest of Mark

Lesy's 1973 photographic memorial, *Wisconsin Death Trip*. In this book, Lesy documents the unsettling record of one small corner of rural America, turning up accounts of barn burnings, attacks by gangs of armed tramps, threatening and obscene letters, death by diphtheria and smallpox (some years, the Wisconsin townsfolk had to attend several funerals a week), alcoholism, madness, business and bank failures, and even a case or two of witchcraft. He uncovers accounts of Protestants behaving very strangely, an outbreak of craziness, multiple murders, suicides, ghost sightings, epidemics, guntoting teenagers, schoolmarms hooked on cocaine, and general mental illness (an insane asylum was nearby), all in a little town called Black River Falls, populated, like Brainerd, mostly by descendants of German and Scandinavian immigrants.

Critics like Steven Carter and Thomas Doherty have commented on the film's comic use of the local dialect, which provides yet another kind of deviation from the usual cinematic practice. In most films, accents are used to codify a character or give us more information about them, but here the disarming lilt of the characters' Scandinavian inflections seems to give us less information, not more. The unusual rhythms of the characters' speech tend to conceal the extent to which these contagious verbal tics replace genuine human communication. The chipper, folksy accent and cute backwoods mannerisms detract from the film's numbing expanse of emptiness – both literal and emotional – in which characters struggle to communicate with as much facility as the heavily pregnant Marge Gunderson struggling through the snow. As Steven Carter puts it, "*Fargo*'s central subject is disparity."[10]

One particularly compelling example of this disparity is the scene in which Marge meets up with her old high school chum, Mike Yanagita (Steve Park), in the restaurant of the Radisson in the Twin Cities. Marge is under the impression that they are getting together for a drink and a chat about old times, unaware that Mike, recently released from a psychiatric institution, hopes they are meeting in the hotel to have an affair. When Marge tactfully disregards his pathetic attempts at seduction, Mike breaks down in a manic-depressive

crisis, blaming his state on the recent death of his wife from leukemia. Later, Marge finds out that he still lives with his parents, and has never been married – in fact, like Carl Showalter, *all* Mike Yanagita says is a desperate compensatory cover for his powerlessness and terror.

Scenes like this one, or the scene in which Marge Gunderson questions the two bar girls who spent the night with Showalter and Grimsrud, suggest a landscape in which human communication has broken down into a series of meaningless noises and verbal tics: "you betcha . . . for Pete's sake . . . okey dokey . . . in a jiff . . . thanks a bunch . . . jeez . . . end of story . . . ". While providing much of the film's comedy, this continual stream of verbal parataxis means that the characters function at a basic level of communication, emotionally mute, their "conversations" more like instinctive, habitual noises and gestures than a process of understanding. Sometimes, as in the case of Marge and Norm, these habitual noises and gestures can be deep, familiar and comforting, but generally the film presents us with very little mediation of meaning through the shared verbal communication of ideas.

In fact, the dialogue of *Fargo* constitutes a very literal and perhaps depressing version of Bakhtin's claim that all language is essentially a negation of the uniqueness of personal experience and of the possibility of establishing any human communication through words. All language, according to Bakhtin, is prestratified into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, languages of generalizations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of authority, and the discourse of various circles and passing fashions of the day, even of the hour. Within every single word, within every single utterance, Bakhtin identifies a large and ancient collection of ideas, motives, and intentions used by centuries of speakers and writers.

Others have made the same point. The characters in many of Beckett's plays are crippled by the fact of language, which consistently obliterates the possibility of any kind of personal expression. Lacan writes that, from birth, whatever is named loses life. And Sartre

makes a similar point in *Being and Nothingness*: "the 'meaning' of my expressions always escapes me. I never know if I signify what I wish to signify. . . . As soon as I express myself, I can only guess of the meaning of what I express – i.e. the meaning of what I am."[11]

Theoretically, the vernacular speech mannerisms used by the characters in *Fargo* bring everything down to a single level, obliterating all distinctions in language and all stratification of discourse. Bakhtin makes the case that this kind of folk language is a progressive and democratic means of escape from outmoded styles and period-bound language. It brings separate layers of discourse together, allegedly uniting that which has traditionally been kept distant and disunified, assimilating all levels of language into one heteroglottal stratum. Bakhtin explains that, like carnival, folk language suppresses hierarchies and distinctions, "recalling us to a common creatureliness."[12]

What *Fargo* makes clear, however, is that this notion of a "genuine folk discourse" is an idealized, utopian illusion. The vernacular of *Fargo* is not "genuine folk language" but a travesty of it – a kind of speech that, in revealing the artificial limits and constraints of such discourse, ends up mocking and erasing itself. In this bleak landscape, dialogue becomes monologue; the characters simply play at communication, without ever achieving it. Any sense of connection between individuals is false and illusory. Language in *Fargo* has become static and out of sync, never molded into working for the speaker's unique purpose but merely handed back and forth in a meaningless ritual. There is no real consistent dialogue; instead, the film reprocesses discourse and presents a world in which language has fragmented and verbal communication has failed.

Most often in the film, restrictions in communication manifest themselves in the inability of the mind to convey its intentions to the body, and the tendency of the body to betray itself, despite the higher instincts of the mind. In other words, the body is compelled to articulate those truths that each character is either attempting to conceal or is afraid to admit. Language never communicates, it merely attempts to compensate for the failings of the body or functions as a ritual comment on its own failure to signify.

23. Jean, hooded, bound, and hysterically lost in the snow after her kidnapping.

From this perspective, the characters in the film seem less funny than sad, incomprehensible and strange, their distortions of communicative relations marked by bodies that bespeak the trauma, violence, and estrangement of the human condition. This sense is

24. Carl breaks into the Lundegaard house as Jean watches.

captured perhaps most vividly by the scene in which Jerry's kidnapped wife Jean (Kristin Rudrüd), gagged and blinded by a sack that the kidnappers have placed over her head, runs off into the snow in a pathetic attempt to escape. Instead of getting away, however, she ends up running in circles, disoriented and hysterical, her cries for help transformed into undignified grunts and squeals (Fig. 23). This is another example of a character trapped in a truly horrifying situation, and yet doing something we know to be fairly typical of them. Showalter and Grimsrud take a moment to stand by and observe her pitiful confusion. Grimsrud is expressionless; Showalter breaks out into laughter.

The scene is another classic example of Bergson's description of the mechanistic nature of comedy, and of laughter as a purely intellectual response that serves the social purpose of assuaging discomfort over the unaccustomed and unexpected. The two kidnappers stand watching the scene; one is laughing, and we are invited to laugh as well, joining in this hostile, veiled attack that satisfies an aggressive motive in the form of the socially acceptable "assault by joke." As we know from experience, the penalties for social aggression are diminished when that hostility is expressed through humor. Consequently, as here, humor is often used as an acceptable social outlet for those frustrations, tensions, and hostilities that have no other means of release in a society that seeks to exercise control over the aggressive drives of its members.

We laugh at Mrs. Lundegaard quite instinctively, just as we laugh at Showalter continuing to jabber as his face spouts blood, but perhaps not for as long. The comedy here is less easy because – unlike Showalter – Mrs. Lundegaard is a victim of circumstance, guilty of nothing more than being mildly annoying (Fig. 24). Also, by laughing, we automatically place ourselves in the same position and on the same level as Showalter and Grimsrud. The kidnappers' laughter reveals an unconscious acknowledgment that Mrs. Lundegaard's pathetic state is a clear mirror of their own – just as, when *we* laugh at Showalter, it is because we recognize ourselves in him, and our risible bodies in his.

When we laugh at Showalter, however, our laughter feels comfortable, but here, we laugh despite ourselves. After all, what is laughter but an involuntary spasm confirming the mechanical power of our bodies over the "higher motives" of our minds? Other scenes in the film may appear to trangress the line that separates humor from horror, but this scene shows us that this line is an illusion. The funny isn't *close to* horror, it *is* horror. In a narrative full of communicative failures and grotesque, inept, wounded bodies, Mrs. Lundegaard's plight is symptomatic. A more vivid and pitiful metaphor for the human condition could not be imagined.

NOTES

1. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 151.
2. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 196.
3. Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970–71," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, edited by Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 44.
4. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," 194.
5. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Breretson (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 16.
6. Ibid., 18.
7. Avshalom C. Elitzur, "Humor, play and neurosis: the power of confinement," *Humor*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1990, 29.
8. Thomas Doherty, "*Fargo*," (review), *Cineaste*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1996, 48, reprinted in this volume.
9. Ibid., 48.
10. Steven Carter, "Flare to White: *Fargo* and the Postmodern Turn," *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 7, 1999, 238.
11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Penguin, 1957), 373–4.
12. Terry Eagleton, "Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera," in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, edited by Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 188.

WILLIAM LUHR

6 *Fargo*

"Far Removed from the Stereotypes of . . ."

Fargo's (1996) opening shot sets the tone for the film (Fig. 25). It is all white, the forbidding white of a Dakota winter in which we can not differentiate snow-smothered earth from sky. Here, and at other points in the film, the white is oppressive, almost malignant. A car emerges from the whiteness, and it soon becomes sadly evident that the greedy, desperate man driving the car and the criminals he drives to meet will not only cause great harm to others, but are also blindly and recklessly weaving their own doom.

This kind of plot and these kinds of characters resemble those in the hard-boiled novels of the 1920s and 1930s (such as Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*) for which Joel and Ethan Coen have expressed great affinity. Characters in such works, driven by overheated compulsions, typically embark on a sinister scheme. The scheme falls horribly apart as the schemers go "blood simple," a term from Hammett referring to the self-destructive, short-sighted and half-crazed behavior that people involved in murder often display.[1]

Critics have frequently associated *Fargo* with *film noir*, which it resembles in its doomed endeavors and grim theme of desperation. The Coens, however, have attributed their inspiration not to *film noir* but to the hard-boiled fiction upon which many classical *films noirs* were based. They have said they do not want to make "a Venetian-blind

25. Jerry's car emerging from the snow in the opening scene.

movie,"[2] referring to the dark, chiaroscuro lighting style associated with many *films noirs*. *Noir* means black, and critics have used it to refer to both the themes and the visual style of films like *Double Indemnity* (1944) or *Out of the Past* (1947).

The dominant color in *Fargo*, however, is white, and "white *noir*" seems contradictory. It is understandable that many would associate its grim tale of building doom with comparable tales in classical *film noir*, but *Fargo* has neither the dark look nor expressionistic camera angles associated with *film noir*. However, the white functions as its own kind of darkness – an oppressive, ominous environment comparable in this to the murky and sinister look of films such as *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), or the Coens' first film, *Blood Simple* (1985). Joel Coen has said "*Fargo* is closer to *Blood Simple* than our other films, but only in subject-matter. *Blood Simple* is a very dark movie and more baroque in its camera style. The idea of *Fargo* was to put things against a white, bright field."[3]

The Coens' choice of white as the visual environment for this dark and often ugly film underscores other strategies to develop their material in offbeat ways, "far removed from the stereotypes." A second

strategy is evident in their setting of the movie's grim events not in a decadent-looking city but in an area of Middle America associated more with resolute family values and innocent good cheer than sinister plotting and bloodshed. Third, the Coens use a great deal of humor. This film that opens by declaring itself a respectful recreation of actual events, events that involve horrid family betrayal as well as half a dozen brutal murders, has become widely known for its comedy; in fact, some critics have even classified it as a comedy. Fourth, its central character, a homicide investigator, breaks virtually every stereotype associated with such a role. Ultimately, *Fargo*'s deviations from widely held stereotypes (of genre, region, gender, and ethnicity) have the cumulative effect of undermining the validity of those stereotypes, as well as the cultural validity of the society that perpetuates them, and that society includes the audience.

The whiteness of *Fargo*'s "look" also evokes its setting in the snowy North Dakota – Minnesota area bordering on Canada, a part of Middle America so seldom explored in mass media that it strikes most viewers, even in the United States, as exotic. Like all Coen brothers' films, *Fargo* establishes a strong sense of locale; the region is a palpable and hermetic presence, as palpable as its whiteness. Mainstream culture has often characterized this "white bread" region with its Scandinavian reserve, racial homogeneity, relentless good cheer, regional accents (many "Yah's" to signify assent), and expressions ("You're darn tootin'") as provincial, even comical. Some critics, in fact, have called the film patronizing in its portrayal of the people of the region, their accents, their ethnicity (largely Scandinavian), their unfashionably bulky winter clothes, and their world of all-you-can-eat restaurants and truck stop diners.[4] This is not an area associated with sinister betrayals and violent crime. Outside of books like *Wisconsin Death Trip*, American horror movies of the past 40 years, and David Lynch films, rural Middle America has traditionally been portrayed as more innocent and more bland than places like New York or Los Angeles, as a repository of uncorrupted, "traditional values." Consequently, the dark events in *Fargo*, because they appear so strikingly out of place, become particularly unsettling.

26. **Carl chattering away.**

Why then, in June 2000, did the American Film Institute place it on its list of the top 100 American film comedies? If "white *noir*" seems strange, "comic *noir*" is even more so. Although some of the film's humor comes from its depiction of regional manners and its concluding scene typifies the narrative resolution of Romantic Comedy, much of its comedy is interwoven with its grim events. Andrew Sarris once observed that Blake Edwards' comedies often violate the traditional axiom that audiences will laugh at physical humor only as long as no one gets hurt: "Unfortunately for the axiom, Blake Edwards is one writer-director who has got some of his biggest laughs out of jokes that are too gruesome for most horror films."[5] The same can be said of the Coen brothers. In *Fargo*, Steve Buscemi plays Carl, a multiple murderer who compulsively talks during virtually every moment he is on screen (Fig. 26). Near the end of the film he is shot at close range in the face, near his mouth, and yet he continues to talk nonstop. The same events in a film by another director would likely be entirely grim but, here, the spectacle of Carl with his mutilated mouth hemorrhaging blood, yet still ranting on, is presented with grisly humor. The humor at Carl's expense continues even after

his partner murders him with an ax. Our final glimpse of Carl is of his foot sticking out of the roaring wood chipper that his partner has shoved him into, presumably mouth first.

As with the film's color scheme, its setting, and its comedy, Marge (Frances McDormand), the sheriff investigating the case, is "far removed from the stereotypes."[6] She barely resembles a genre homicide detective. She does not radiate the world-weary, "tough guy" cynicism associated with such characters; in addition, she is both a woman and visibly pregnant. Furthermore, her regional accent, her lack of attention to traditional codes of "feminine beauty," her unstylish clothes and bulky police uniform seem initially calculated to characterize her as a comic figure but, by the end of the film, those early cues have proven misleading. She is clearly someone for the audience to admire, not laugh at. Most laughter at her results from the spectator's inability to see past moribund stereotypes, the same stereotypes that lead to the destruction of the characters that accept them.

More profoundly, Marge and her husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch), embody an alternative value structure to the failed cultural agenda and compulsive greed that dooms the other characters. Without appearing to be either avant-garde social rebels or oddballs in their community, the couple neither conforms to traditional gender roles nor displays anxiety about not doing so. She is the sheriff who enforces the law and carries a gun, while he is the househusband. These characters, who at first appear somewhat goofy, gradually grow in stature. Their growth underscores the complexity and diversity with which the Coens depict a region that, itself, initially appears monochromatic (Fig. 27).

A scene illustrating the film's strategy of invoking and then undercutting a cultural stereotype occurs when Marge investigates three brutal murders. After carefully inspecting one of the victims, she bends over and prepares to vomit in the snow. But then, after matter-of-factly telling a subordinate officer that the brief nausea came from morning sickness due to her pregnancy, she continues to give an astute and detailed analysis of the crime scene. Viewers might have

27. Marge and Norm in bed.

initially interpreted her nausea as reinforcing traditional prejudices about women being likely to lose control in a shocking situation, thereby rendering them unfit for "man's" work, such as homicide investigation. It quickly becomes evident, however, that Marge's nausea means nothing of the kind, and that such an interpretation underscores faulty preconceptions on the part of the audience. Throughout the film, she demonstrates extensive professional skill, climaxing with her capture of a multiple murderer in a violent confrontation.

Marge's successful negotiations of the demands of her job parallel, but never intersect, those of her domestic life. *Fargo* closes, after Marge has successfully solved the case, with a scene evocative of Romantic Comedy. She and Norm cuddle together in bed, eagerly awaiting the birth of their child two months hence, and reaffirming their love. We never see the couple discuss the case; Marge seems to keep the demands of her two worlds entirely separate.

The romantic bliss of the closing scene provides trenchant counterpoint to the scene in which she meets with her old school chum Mike. He makes pathetic romantic overtures, and his life is clearly a disaster. Although this scene, like those with Norm, has nothing

to do with the film's crime narrative, it places Mike in the company of the desperate and posturing failures that consume the rest of the narrative. Marge is capable of dealing with these people, but is also capable of insulating her personal life from their all-consuming and self-destructive desperation.

II

When asked about the appeal of the film's subject matter to him and his brother, Joel Coen said:

> First it happened within an era and a region we were familiar with, which we could explore. Then it concerned a kidnapping, a type of event which has always fascinated us. . . . And finally there was the possibility to shoot a criminal movie with characters far removed from the stereotypes of the genre.[7]

His third comment applies not only to the characters, but also to the setting and the genre. Just as Marge is far removed from stereotypical homicide police detectives, *Fargo*'s color scheme, setting, and use of comedy deviate from traditional patterns in "true crime" films as well as *film noir*.

Film noir turns up repeatedly in discussions of *Fargo* (as well as other Coen movies, such as *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* [1990], *Barton Fink* [1991], *The Big Lebowski* [1998], and *The Man Who Wasn't There* [2001]). Perhaps the most influential of American film forms, *film noir* is notoriously difficult to define, and there is considerable disagreement as to whether it is a genre, a style, a transgeneric phenomenon, or anything at all. It is a label from which the Coens have repeatedly distanced themselves, and for good reason. They do not want to be seen as simply remakers of old films or as filmmakers entrapped within nostalgia for the past. However, in their very distancing of themselves from the stereotypes of *film noir*, they may, in fact, place themselves centrally within its tradition.

In current popular usage, *film noir* refers to a few stereotyped tropes that originated in roughly a score of films from the mid-1940s. These tropes include a corrupt and shadowy urban setting, a trench-coated

private detective, world-weary voice-over narration, a *femme fatale*, emasculated men, an atmosphere of deterministic futility, and narratives impelled by doomed desire. When the films first appeared during World War II, these tropes were not stereotypes, but instead held great creative potency and, often, entirely different meanings. Today, however, because the films now provide windows into a past era and a past mode of filmmaking, the tropes are often regarded with comforting nostalgia. The original films were anything but comforting; many were deeply disturbing to audiences upon their release. They held little in common but a sensibility attuned to the anxieties of the wartime and postwar era, the look of that era, and its production strategies. Extremely diverse in content and technique, the films were only retrospectively connected by critics. In fact, many filmmakers of the era later commented that they had no idea they were making *film noir* when they were making *film noir*, and they were correct. They had no sense of working within a tradition because there was no known tradition. This cannot, however, be said of filmmakers (like the Coens) working in that tradition after 1960, when *film noir* had become established and recognized. Filmmakers working in that tradition after 1960 do so in numerous ways, but they can no longer ignore or claim ignorance of it.

Filmmakers working after the era in which canonical *films noirs* appeared have used different strategies to engage the form. One is to remake one of the original black-and-white *films noirs* in color but to set it in the era of the original film, as with *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981). This makes it a "period picture," or a film about the past in ways the original films never were. The original films commonly dealt with the ugliness of their "today"; the period films are about the ugliness of a past era, a strategy that commonly evokes not discomfort but nostalgia. Another strategy is to set a film in the present but to suffuse it with thematic and stylistic references to *noir*, as with *Body Heat* (1981). These approaches tend to treat *film noir* as a fixed entity.

Other approaches treat it as a constantly evolving form, one with different meanings and different strategies appropriate to changing times. The Coens and other directors realize that you cannot make

a 1944 *film noir* in 1985 or 1996 and expect it to affect its audiences as the original films affected theirs. Even the original films hold different meanings for today's audiences than they did for their initial audiences. In the 1940s, the films were about "today"; now they are artifacts of the past. One thing that many *films noirs* held in common was the transgressive, anxiety-producing effect they had on their initial audiences. But times have changed, filmmaking has changed, and cultural notions of what is disturbing have changed. What was once disquieting may now be nostalgic and even comforting. Some filmmakers have sought to incorporate such shifts into their work. When Blake Edwards made *Gunn* (1967), based on his 1950s *noir*-like television series, he set the film not in the 1950s but rather in the late 1960s. He also shot it not in shadowy black and white but rather in highly saturated color. Peter Gunn, the film's private detective, knows that his world is changing around him; this man of the 1950s is no longer attuned to his times (now the late 1960s) but is rather distanced from them, partially outmoded. The film also deals with themes, such as transvestism, forbidden in 1950s media. Although Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) is set in the Los Angeles of the 1930s and concerns a private detective investigating a crime, it does not court nostalgia but, instead, invokes disturbing themes such as incest and ethnic prejudice seldom dealt with in the films of that era.

The Coens have expressed admiration for Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), an adaptation of Raymond Chandler's novel. Chandler, perhaps more than any other figure, is associated with *film noir*. He not only wrote hard-boiled novels, many of which were adapted into popular *films noirs*, but he also worked on respected screenplays in the form, such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Blue Dahlia* (1946). Furthermore, his style of dialogue and prose descriptions provided models for the tough guy wisecracks and voice-over narration in many films written by others.

Altman's *The Long Goodbye* outraged many fans of both Chandler and *film noir* who believed it betrayed the style and values of the earlier, cherished tradition. In many ways it did, and that was the point. If anything, it was antinostalgic. Altman set the film in the 1970s but

presented its central character, Philip Marlowe, as living according to the values of 1940s films. The movie does not, however, present him as heroically retaining the noble values of a romanticized past in the debased present but rather as an anachronistic fool. Marlowe is lost in the calcified values of the past, a dinosaur unable to adapt to inexorably changing times. As Altman has done with other genres such as the Western, he uses the film to question the genre's premises. In doing so, he underscores the fact that genres cannot remain fixed, that they change with time and require constant reinvention if they are to avoid ossification.

Leigh Brackett wrote *The Long Goodbye*'s screenplay. Thirty years earlier, she worked on the screenplay for Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946). That movie, also an eponymous adaptation of a Chandler novel, starred Humphrey Bogart as Marlowe and has become one of the most famous of *films noirs*. In adapting *The Long Goodbye*, Brackett said that her first challenge lay in the fact that 30 years had passed between the two Chandler adaptations. The era in and about which Chandler had written, the era of classic *film noir*, was long over. His novels no longer reflected "today's" world but rather had become historical artifacts, and that simple fact could not be ignored. Instead, it had to be directly confronted.[8]

Part of what had to be confronted was not only the difference in eras, but also differences in approaches to "hard-boiled" material. Much *film noir* deals with crime and with detectives. The Coens believe it important to bring their own sensibility to their films, and are not fond of "serious" and largely humorless crime films such as *Against All Odds* (1984) or *Gorky Park* (1983). *Blood Simple* and *Fargo* are characteristically filled with a great deal of humor, often at their most grisly and disturbing moments.

Although the Coens are often described as mounting "hip" assaults on tradition, in many ways their perceived irreverence toward traditional *film noir* places them squarely within the *noir* tradition. Speaking of *Blood Simple*, Ethan Coen remarked,

> When people call *Blood Simple* a *film noir*, they're correct to the extent that we like the same kind of stories that the people who made those

> movies liked. We tried to emulate the source that those movies came from rather than the movies themselves.[9]

By declaring their affinity to the source fiction of many *films noirs* rather than to the films, they reveal a desire to engage the creative origins of the films without copying them. They are very aware that genres change considerably over time and wanted to make movies as disturbing for their era as the original films had been for theirs. What was original in 1944 with films such as *Double Indemnity* or *Murder, My Sweet* has become part of today's cultural stereotypes. By avoiding the stereotypes, the Coens try to approximate the early films' disquieting effects, but in original ways appropriate for their own time.

In this they parallel the efforts of other filmmakers in the 1990s to distance themselves from the nostalgia associated with genre film traditions by linking their work to literary sources for those traditions. Francis Ford Coppola placed the Victorian novel's author in the title of his *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) as a way of asserting lineage, not with the 1931 Bela Lugosi film, but rather with the novel on which it was based. Kenneth Branagh did the same thing with *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994).

The value to the Coens of engaging a genre in the first place relates to the importance they give to the settings of their films. Discussing the importance of its setting to *Fargo*'s development, Ethan Coen said,

> It's probably a subject we wouldn't have dealt with outside of that context. When we begin to write, we try to imagine very specifically the world in which the story unfolds. The difference is that, up until now, these were purely fictional universes, while in *Fargo* we needed you to be able to smell the place. As we were from the region, it helped us to understand how it might play within that milieu.[10]

His belief in the importance of "the world in which the story unfolds" also applies to the story's genre, which creates a psychic world all its own.

A look at *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* (1998) shows how the Coens work with locale and genre. It also underlines their awareness of

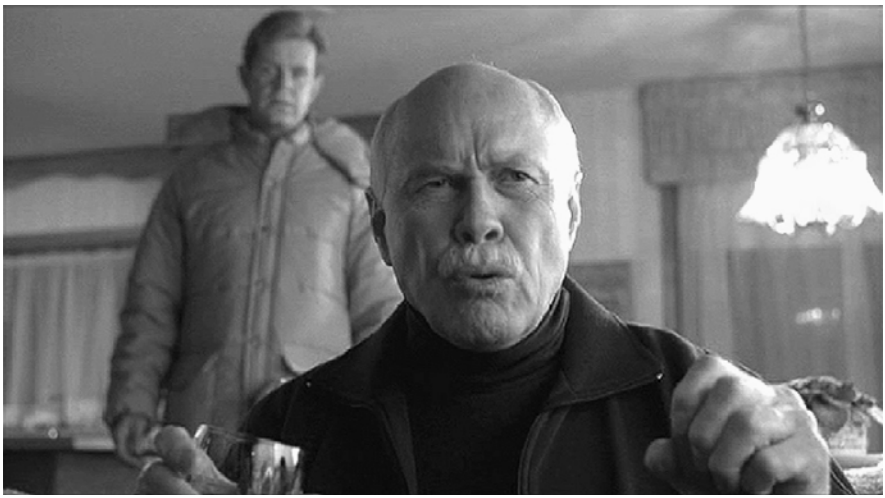
how locale and genre, and stereotypes based on them, change over time. The Coens wanted to make *The Big Lebowski* after *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994). Jeff Bridges, its proposed star, was unavailable then, so they postponed *Lebowski*, made *Fargo*, and then followed it with *Lebowski*.[11] They consciously modeled *Lebowski* on Raymond Chandler's fiction, both in its episodic investigative structure and in its exploration of Los Angeles. Chandler has been called the novelist who most poetically evokes the Los Angeles of the 1930s and 1940s. But the Coens set *Lebowski* in the Los Angeles of the late 1990s, a different world. As with Joel Coen's rationale for making *Fargo* (cited above), *Lebowski* develops a very specific sense of locale, concerns a kidnapping, and gave the Coens "the possibility to shoot a criminal movie with characters far removed from the stereotypes of the genre." However, *Lebowski* looks and feels nothing like *Fargo*, and that emerges from the difference in locales. Furthermore, not only are the two films set in different regions, but each film also indicates how those regions have changed substantially over time.

In *Lebowski*, "The Dude" (Jeff Bridges), attempting to solve a kidnapping plot, wanders through contemporary Los Angeles encountering bizarre characters and situations. He is not a hard-boiled detective of the 1940s, but rather a burned out 1960s hippie living in the 1990s. Where Chandler's Philip Marlowe has come to represent much about the Los Angeles of the 1930s and 1940s, the Coens present The Dude as representative of it today. Furthermore, the movie has a sort of narrator in "The Stranger," a grizzled, laconic, Old West cowboy (Sam Elliott). The film begins with "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," a song associated with old Westerns, on the soundtrack. In *Lebowski*, the Coens use the structure and setting of a Chandler novel, but at the same time refer to three different eras in Los Angeles history. Where Philip Marlowe might have mythically represented the city in the World War II era, he no longer does, and would be out of place in the 1990s; 1960s burnouts more capture its contemporary flavor. Furthermore, the city's origins are associated with the nineteenth-century West, represented by the cowboy, who could be comparably out of place in either the 1940s or the 1990s. The characters are very

different and their three eras are very different, but the setting gives them continuity.

The first song we hear in *Fargo* is not a cowboy song like "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" but Merle Haggard's "Big City," a country-and-western lamentation about the woes of big city life. The town of Brainerd is dominated by a huge, ax-wielding statue of Paul Bunyan. In a way similar to the cowboy "Stranger" in *Lebowski*, this statue gives *Fargo*'s setting an historical context. Bunyan is a mythic figure representing pioneer, agrarian America. He is a powerful and benign clearer of the wilderness for the coming civilization, even predating the era of the cowboys.[12]

But Bunyan represents a cultural model that is entirely absent from *Fargo* and manifest only in its absence. The land no longer needs powerful, ax-wielding men to clear it for a coming civilization; that civilization has come and is in decline. The characters who fail so dismally in *Fargo* do so because they aspire to a notion of powerful masculinity that is lost in legend, if it ever existed. Although the Coens wanted to avoid stereotypes in making *Fargo*, most of the film's male characters fail so dismally because they want to become stereotypes. They want to be powerful, respected, and in control of their world, like Paul Bunyan. Jerry (William H. Macy) initiates the kidnapping plot because he has fallen hopelessly and fraudulently in debt, presumably to maintain his middle-class lifestyle and veneer of business success. He has decorated his office with golfing memorabilia, probably his notion of the leisure activity of a successful businessman, but preposterous in his snow-covered world. As things go from bad to worse for him, he grins compulsively and talks as if he had everything under control, fooling nobody (Fig. 28). His overbearing father-in-law, Wade (Harve Presnell), acts like a ruling patriarch with the money and power to prove it, but he fails dismally in his attempt to get his daughter back and gets killed in the process. The kidnapper Carl constantly swaggers and endlessly chatters about how he knows what he is doing and how he will get it done; of course, he fails at every juncture and winds up in a wood chipper. Perhaps the



28. **Wade watching television as Jerry stands sheepishly in the background.**

saddest is Mike (Steve Park), an Asian high school chum who desperately tries to convince Marge of his business success and evoke her sympathy for the recent death of his beloved wife, his high school sweetheart. In fact, Marge soon learns that Mike was neither married nor employed, lives with his parents, and has had serious mental problems. His desperation is apparent almost as soon as he appears, and he breaks down pathetically (Fig. 29), but he is little different from the other men who posture themselves according to the stereotypical images of masculine success and power they so desperately, and hopelessly, desire.

The Paul Bunyan statue evokes a powerful myth whose time has long since passed. In today's world, its meaning has changed. The Coens photograph the statue in different ways at various points in the film. At times it looks oddly out of place; at other times it resembles not a benign pioneer, but rather a monster wielding an ax. Underlining this image, Carl's partner in crime, Gaear (Peter Stormare), kills him with an ax before grinding his body to fragments with a contemporary logging tool. Gaear himself is referred to as looking like

29. Mike breaking down during his meeting with Marge.

the Marlboro Man, not because of the American cowboy image, but simply because he smokes constantly. This film presents the myths of the cowboy and of Paul Bunyan as irrelevant, simply vestigial (Fig. 30).

Marge and Norm stand apart from all this. Although Marge embodies the power of the Law, she has no psychic investment in demonstrating her power. Comparably, Norm seems oblivious to the postures of power so desperately important to the other men. The two seem to inhabit a different genre from the other characters. The two are "far removed from the stereotypes" and that is their strength, and that of the Coens.

Film noir is often categorized by its hermetic atmosphere of inevitable doom. Titles such as *Caught*, *Cornered*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, and *One Way Street* reflect this. Most of the characters in *Fargo* inhabit such a world, but not Marge and Norm. The others desperately try to live up to failed ideals of power and destroy themselves doing so, ending up dead, mad, or in prison. They seem plucked from a repository of *film noir* characters. In contrast, Marge and Norm live their

30. First shot of the Paul Bunyan statue.

lives as Romantic Comedy.[13] They do not share the deluded goals of the others, construct their lives on entirely different premises and, at the end, eagerly anticipate a benign future, embodied in their coming child.

NOTES

1. See Ann Billson, "Simply Bloody," in *Joel and Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, edited by Paul A. Woods (London: Plexus, 2000), 24.
2. Hal Hinson, "Bloodlines," in *Joel and Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, edited by Paul A. Woods (London: Plexus, 2000), 35.
3. Chris Probst, "Cold-Blooded Scheming," *American Cinematographer*, March 1996, 28, reprinted in this volume.
4. See Krin Gabbard's essay, "The Big Whiteout: Music and Race in *Fargo*," presented at the 2003 Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film, and appearing in *Magical Negritude: White Hollywood and African-American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004) for a discussion of the racial politics of the film's setting.
5. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 92. See also Mikita Brottman's essay in this volume for a discussion of the humor in *Fargo*.

6. See Pamela Grace's essay in this volume for a discussion of Marge's character.
7. Quoted in the interview with the Coen brothers by Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret, "Closer to Life than the Conventions of Cinema," *Positif*, September 1996, reprinted in this volume, pp. 109–18.
8. See Leigh Brackett, "From *The Big Sleep* to *The Long Goodbye*," in *The Big Book of Noir*, edited by Ed Gorman et al. (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1988), 137–41.
9. Quoted in Hinson, "Bloodlines," 35.
10. Quoted in Ciment and Niogret, "Closer to Life Than the Conventions of Cinema," in this volume, pp. 109–18.
11. See David Sterritt's essay in this volume for a detailed discussion of *Fargo*'s relation to other Coen films.
12. See Christopher Sharrett's essay in this volume for a discussion of the historical/cultural context of the film's region.
13. I am grateful to Andrew Horton for this insight.

MICHEL CIMENT AND HUBERT NIOGRET

7 Closer to the Life Than the Conventions of Cinema

Interview with the Coen Brothers (conducted in Cannes on May 16, 1996)

Was* Fargo *inspired by a news item, as the press dossier claims, or have you invented a false trail?

JOEL COEN: Generally speaking the movie is based on a real event, but the details of the story and the characters are invented. It didn't interest us to make a documentary film, and we undertook no research on the nature or details of the murders. But, by telling the public that we took our inspiration from reality, we knew they wouldn't see the movie as just an ordinary thriller.

Did that kidnapping (of a woman, organized by her husband) have many repercussions back in 1987?

ETHAN COEN: No. In fact, it's astonishing how things of that nature receive so little publicity. We heard about it through a friend who lived near to where the drama took place in Minnesota, which is also the state we originate from.

Why have you called the film* Fargo *when the main action is situated in Brainerd, which is a town in Minnesota?

JOEL: Fargo seemed a more evocative title to us than Brainerd, that's the reason.

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ETHAN: It's literally the sound of the word that we liked. There's no hidden meaning.

JOEL: There's a Western connotation, with Wells Fargo, but we didn't intend that, it's just something people have picked up on.

***You return in a certain way to the territory of your first films,* Blood Simple *and* Raising Arizona.**

JOEL: There are resemblances, but important differences as well. These three movies are set on a small scale. They're about criminality and kidnapping and are very specific in their geographical location. Frances McDormand plays in both *Fargo* and *Blood Simple*. But we've always considered *Blood Simple* as belonging to the tradition of melodramatic novelists like James M. Cain, with an additional horror – movie influence. In *Fargo* we attempted a very different stylistic approach, tackling the subject in a very dry manner. We also wanted the camera to tell the story as an observer. The construction is tied to the original true story, but we allowed ourselves more meanders and digressions. Each incident didn't necessarily have to be at the service of the plot. We even took the liberty of not introducing the heroine, Inspector Gunderson, until the middle of the movie.

ETHAN: It was also a way of telling the audience not to expect a genre movie. It's different from *Blood Simple*.

What have you brought to the subject?

JOEL: There were two or three things that interested us in relation to that incident. First it happened within an era and a region we were familiar with, which we could explore. Then it concerned a kidnapping, a type of event which has always fascinated us. In fact, we have another very different script on a kidnapping that we'd like to film. And finally there was the possibility to shoot a criminal movie with characters far removed from the stereotypes of the genre.

ETHAN: It's probably a subject we wouldn't have dealt with outside of that context. When we begin to write, we try to imagine very specifically the world in which the story unfolds. The difference is

that, up until now, these were purely fictional universes, while in *Fargo* we needed you to be able to smell the place. As we were from the region, it helped us to understand how it might play within that milieu.

In the credits, was the function of "accent adviser" a joke?

ETHAN: No, not at all. Most of the actors came from the region and they had no need of advice, but Frances McDormand, Bill Macy, and Harve Presnell needed coaching so that their accents harmonised with the others.

JOEL: The people there speak in a very economical way, if not monosyllabic. That seems as exotic to other Americans as it does to you in Europe! In fact, the Scandinavian influences on the culture of that region, the rhythm of the sentences, the accent, are not at all familiar to the rest of America: it might as well have happened on the moon! New Yorkers have a general conception of the Midwest, but they ignore all of those cultural "pockets", those microsocieties with their idiosyncrasies and peculiarities.

ETHAN: When we were small, we weren't really conscious of that Scandinavian heritage that marked the region so strongly because we had no points of comparison. It was only on arrival in New York that we were astonished there weren't more, like Gustafsons or Sondergaards. All the exoticism and strangeness of that region comes from the Nordic character, from its politeness and reservation. There's something Japanese in that refusal to show the least emotion, in that resistance to saying no! One of the comic wellsprings of the story comes from the conflict between that constant avoidance of all confrontation and the murders gradually piling up.

JOEL: We didn't have to do much research into that manner of speech, those expressions, the cadences were all familiar to us. Our parents still live in that region, so we go back there regularly, and we know its culture. After all, it formed us as people. But not having lived there for a long time, we've the feeling of being half-divorced from the environment in which we grew up.

The episode featuring Marge and her old friend from school is a digression from the very tight central narrative.

ETHAN: Someone pointed out that in the scene Frances plays very withdrawn, like an Oriental, while her Japanese friend is voluble and irrational like a "typical" American. By creating that digression we really wanted to draw a contrast.

JOEL: We wanted to give another point of view of Frances' character without it being related to the police enquiry. That's also what happens in the scenes with her husband.

ETHAN: Our intention was to show the story had a relationship to life rather than to fiction, setting us free to create a scene that had no relationship to the plot.

The Hudsucker Proxy ***was without doubt your most "theatrical" film. This one, as a contrast, is probably the least.***

JOEL: We wanted to make a new start from a stylistic point of view, to make something radically different from our previous movies. And the impetus was the previous movie, which was the most stylised of all. But, curiously, by starting from real events, we've arrived at another form of "stylisation". The results are maybe not as different as we'd envisaged!

A little like Kubrick with **Dr. Strangelove**, ***you begin with a quasi-documentary presentation, and then gradually, with a cold humour, everything becomes dislocated and absurd.***

ETHAN: That comes partly from the nature of the story itself. There's a shot composed at the beginning that's modified later in the film, as the characters lose control.

JOEL: It's implicit in the construction of the narrative. When a character suggests to you, in the first scene, how things are going to happen, you know full well it's going to unfold very differently. The reference to Kubrick has been made before, but I understand it more now. There's a very formal side to his approach, as well as a steady progression from the commonplace towards the baroque.

How do you manage not to fall into caricature, which could overwhelm your work at any time?

JOEL: I suppose it's partly intuition about the tone, and it particularly depends on the actors' capacity to know how far they can go. There is, for instance, with Frances a very authentic manner, very open in presenting her character. It prevents Marge from becoming a parody of herself. Frances was very conscious of the dangers of excess, with that mannerism of dragging out words at the very end of each sentence.

ETHAN: It was a constant process of adjustment on set between the actors and us. They gave us a wide range of behaviour and mannerisms that we constantly discussed throughout the shooting.

JOEL: We work a lot with *feeling*. It's difficult to express through words why Marge, in the movie, is not a caricature but a real, three-dimensional person.

ETHAN: All we know is that, when we wrote the script and when the actors interpreted their roles, none of us thought of the story as a comedy.

JOEL: And that helped to make the characters comical and credible at the same time. The comedy wouldn't have worked if it had been played as comedy, rather than with sincerity.

The relationship between Marge and her husband is also very strange.

JOEL: We were seduced during casting by the very direct acting and impassive face of John Carroll Lynch, who seemed to us perfectly suited to the tone of the movie.

ETHAN: He totally personifies how undemonstrative people are in that place. The relationship with his wife is based on the unsaid, but they succeed in communicating somehow.

The end resembles a pastiche of the classic Hollywood "happy ending", with the wife and husband in bed symbolising a return to order and normality.

JOEL: It's true that it's a return to normality, but we didn't intend for it to be a parody! There was an article in the *New York Times*, where the journalist asked why the people of Minnesota didn't like the ending when it all turned out so well for them!

The only question mark at the end concerns the money. But wasn't the money the main component of the plot?

JOEL: All the men in the movie are preoccupied by money.

ETHAN: At the same time we didn't want to be too specific, for instance, concerning the nature of the debt contracted by Jerry. It was sufficient to understand that that character was trapped by engaging in something which turned out badly. Elsewhere, during the whole movie, Jerry is a poor lost soul who can't stop improvising solutions to get out of the situations he's already gotten himself into. He never stops trying everything, brimming over with activity. He's almost admirable in that respect!

JOEL: What interested us from the start in the William Macy character was his absolute incapacity, even for one minute, to project himself into the future and evaluate the consequences of his decisions. There's something fascinating in that total absence of perspective. He's one of those people who construct a pyramid without thinking for a moment that it could collapse.

Did writing the script take much time?

ETHAN: We began it before shooting *The Hudsucker Proxy*, then returned to it; so it's difficult to evaluate the time it took us. Two years have passed. What's certain is that the writing was easy and relatively quick, particularly in comparison with other scripts like *Miller's Crossing*.

Was it established from the start that the kidnapped woman wouldn't have any physical presence?

JOEL: Absolutely and even at a certain point in the story, it was clear for us she would cease to be a person to those who'd kidnapped her. Besides, it was no longer the actress Kristin Rudrüd playing the part, but a double with a hood on her head. So, we weren't interested in

the victim! And, it didn't seem at any point that the husband himself was at all preoccupied with what could happen to her! Carl, one of the kidnappers, didn't even know her name!

Did you choose Steve Buscemi for the role before thinking of Peter Stormare as the other kidnapper?

ETHAN: In fact, we wrote both roles for those actors. Likewise for Marge played by Frances McDormand. Peter's an old friend of ours and it seemed interesting, given his Swedish origins, to give him this part. Of course, his character is an *outsider* in relation to the milieu, but at the same time he maintains ethnic bonds with it.

How do you work with your musical composer Carter Burwell?

JOEL: He's been our collaborator since we started. Usually, he looks at the movie from the outset, from end to end, then he composes sketches on the synthesizer to give us an idea of the direction in which he intends to work. Before creating his score, he plays us bits on the piano, and we reflect together on their relationship to certain sequences of the movie. Then he moves onto the next stage.

ETHAN: In the case of this movie, the central theme is based on some popular Scandinavian music that Carter found for us.

JOEL: We often work with him that way. For *Miller's Crossing* the music came from an Irish folk theme which he orchestrated and added to it bits of his own composition. For *Raising Arizona* he used American popular music, with Holly Hunter singing a tune. On the other hand, for *Blood Simple* and *Barton Fink* he wrote all the music, without external inspiration. With *The Hudsucker Proxy* it was different again, a mixture of original compositions by Carter and bits from Khachaturian.

ETHAN: When he's orchestrated his score we go into the studio with him for the recording. For the last two movies, he conducted the orchestra himself. As the movie's projected while he works, he can modify the score as he goes along. Our entire collaboration lasts a maximum of two or three months.

How long did the editing take you?

JOEL: Twelve weeks. Which is short for us because normally we take longer, as we don't begin editing while we're shooting.

Did the photography pose any particular problems?

JOEL: It was simpler than for the other movies. We discussed it at length with Roger Deakins because we wanted to do a lot of shots without coverage. At the start we decided to have only fixed shots.

ETHAN: Then we realised that "purist" attitude was a little stupid.

JOEL: We made some adjustments by sometimes moving the camera, but in such a way that the audience doesn't notice. We didn't want to make the camerawork as stylised as we'd done in the past, because we didn't want to emphasise the action, to make it too dramatic or crazy.

ETHAN: Roger Deakins worked with a camera operator whereas before he's mainly been his own cameraman, including on the two movies he photographed for us. This time he didn't take everything in hand, although he often took control of the framing. On *Fargo* we'd had problems with the weather because we needed the snow, but the winter when we shot was particularly soft and dry. We had to work in Minneapolis with artificial snow. Then, as the snow hadn't yet fallen, we went to North Dakota for the end of the shoot, the big exterior scenes. We had what we wanted there: a covered sky, no direct sunlight, no line on the horizon, and a light that was neutral, diffused.

JOEL: These landscapes were really dramatic and oppressive. There were no mountains, no forests, only flat desolate stretches of land. It's just what we wanted to convey on the screen.

Do you often put your eye to the camera?

JOEL: On the first movie we made with Roger Deakins, *Barton Fink*, we constantly looked in the viewfinder. On *Hudsucker Proxy*, less. And even less on *Fargo*. That's undoubtedly due to the material and the different visual approach to each movie, but also to the growing affinity with our cinematographer. He understood our intentions more and more, and we trusted him more and more. When we work regularly

with a collaborator, a kind of telepathic language is established. I also think Roger enjoys working with people like us who have an active interest in lighting, rather than with filmmakers who rely entirely on him.

There's contradiction between the press package, which attributes the editing to you, and the credits, which list a certain Roderick Jaynes.

JOEL: When we assemble the movie ourselves, we use the pseudonym Roderick Jaynes. We prefer to lend a hand rather than be seated beside someone and tell them what to cut. It seems easier to us. Besides, we're both in the cutting room. When we work together we obviously don't get that feeling of isolation that others sometimes feel. On *Barton Fink* and *Blood Simple*, we were our own editor. On the other movies, we had an editor but we'd still be in the editing room whenever we could. If we've occasionally called in Tom Noble or Michael Miller, it's because the cutting had to begin during shooting.

Your films take place in New Orleans, New York, Hollywood, in the West and Midwest. It seems you like to explore the geography of America.

JOEL: We'd like to shoot elsewhere, but, strangely, the subjects that come to mind are always situated in America. That's what seems to attract us.

ETHAN: It always seems that the world in which our stories take place is connected to us, however remotely. In the case of *Fargo*, the bond was much tighter, of course.

JOEL: We need an intimate knowledge of the subject or at least an emotional relationship with it; at the same time, it only interests us if it's kind of exotic in some way! Minnesota, for example, we know very well, but not the characters who people *Fargo* and their type of behaviour. Or again, in the case of *Barton Fink* and *Miller's Crossing*, the exoticism comes from the temporal distance.

What are your relationships with the characters in* Fargo *who, for the most part, are a little deficient?

JOEL: We like all of them, perhaps most of all the simple ones!

ETHAN: One of the reasons for making them simple-minded was our desire to go against the Hollywood cliché of the bad guy as a super-professional who controls everything he does: In fact, in most cases criminals belong to the strata of society least equipped to face life, and that's the reason they're caught so often. In this sense too, our movie is closer to life than the conventions of cinema and genre movies.

JOEL: We're often asked how we inject comedy into the material. But it seems to us, that it's present in life. Look at those people who recently blew up the World Trade Center. They'd rented a van to prepare the explosion, and, once the job was finished, they returned to the rental agency to reclaim their deposit. The absurdity of that is, in itself, terribly funny.

What are your current projects?

ETHAN: At this moment we're preparing two scripts without knowing which will be finished first, or which will be financed first.

JOEL: One of them concerns another kidnapping, but in a very different manner. And the other's a kind of *film noir* about a barber in Northern California at the end of the Forties.

CHRIS PROBST

8 Cold-Blooded Scheming

Roger Deakins and *Fargo*

Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC's association with the filmmaking duo of Joel and Ethan Coen began on *Barton Fink*, and the echoes of that first collaboration still haunt the cinematographer.

"Roger still teases us about making him track down the plug-hole in the sink," says writer/producer Ethan Coen. Joel, who co-writes and directs all of their films, laughs and adds, "It was the only moment on *Barton Fink* when I think we really surprised him. But that shot was a lot of fun and we had a great time working out how to do it."

Interrupting his brother, Ethan continues their simultaneous telephone interview tag team act, which the duo insists upon with unsuspecting journalists. "But now, whenever we set up or talk about a shot that's even *remotely* strange, Roger arches an eyebrow and says, 'Don't be having me track down any plug-holes now!'"

With *Fargo*, Deakins and the Coens continue in the outlandishly quirky and unique vein they previously tapped in both *Barton Fink* and *The Hudsucker Proxy*, while the cinematographer's other credits present a diverse mix that includes *1984*, *Sid and Nancy*, *Mountains of the Moon*, *The Secret Garden*, *Passion Fish*, *The Shawshank Redemption* (which earned him last year's ASC Award, as well as an Oscar nomination) and the recent Tim Robbins film *Dead Man Walking*, which has garnered widespread critical acclaim.

Reprinted with permission from *American Cinematographer*, March 1996.

Set in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the dead of winter, *Fargo*'s storyline revolves around debt-stricken car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William Macy), who has engineered a plot to have his wife kidnapped by hired thugs (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) in order to extort a heavy ransom from his wife's tight-walleted father. Lundegaard schemes to use the funds to dissolve the financial avalanche that is threatening to bury him, but his flawlessly planned crime goes awry when his hired abductors gun down a state trooper and two hapless bystanders while transporting Lundegaard's wife to a remote cabin.

After his experience with the Coens on the large-scale, stylistic genre-parody *The Hudsucker Proxy* (see *American Cinematographer*, April 1994), Deakins submits that a smaller budget and crew was a welcome change. "It was nice doing *Fargo* with them after *Hudsucker Proxy*," he attests. "*Hudsucker* was quite a big picture. [The budget wasn't] a huge amount of money by today's standards, but that project had its own momentum. *Fargo*, on the other hand, was a small picture, but in a certain sense we could be more flexible because of it. Less pressure, a smaller crew and a much more intimate production are advantages in many ways."

"It was fun for all of us," Joel Coen agrees, "and a relief in a way. It was back to working with each other and a small crew in a very controllable environment, which was similar to how we had done *Barton Fink*. On *Hudsucker*, Roger had to essentially oversee four different units: the main unit, the second unit, the blue screen unit, and the miniature stuff."

Early on in *Fargo*'s reproduction, the Coens had meetings with Deakins to discuss and solidify the visual style of the film, which is based upon real events that took place in the upper Midwest. "We always involve Roger very early," notes Joel. "Basically, what we do after we finish the script is sit down with him and talk in general terms about how we were thinking about it from a visual point of view. Then, in specific terms, we do a draft of the storyboards with Roger – showing him a preliminary draft of what we were thinking

about – and then refine those ideas scene by scene. So he's involved pretty much right from the beginning. The style of the shooting is worked out between the three of us."

Even with the detailed preparation, Joel confesses that elements of a scene may depart radically from the storyboarded preconception. He explains, "Frequently, [storyboards] can be tossed out the window when we get on the set and the three of us see something that we'd prefer to do, given the location or whatever. But they're there as a guide, a point of departure for us to start talking about the movie with Roger from a visual point of view."

On set, Deakins and both brothers will work out the dynamics of a given scene, with Joel and Ethan frequently switching hats. "Either of them will be talking about the shot, lenses or whatever," says Deakins. "They just swap around duties. I think having a relationship with them on a couple of films before this made it easier to do a project on a small budget and get more out of it. Once you've got a pattern of working, you know how to cut corners, and what each other's wants are. We don't have as much discussion on the set anymore about shots. We basically block the scene in the morning and go through the shots. It's quite a quiet set!"

"We're very interested in the cinematography," submits Joel. "From the beginning, it's something that we've always spent a lot of time on with Roger because we enjoy it, we enjoy thinking about it, and it's fun for all of us to work out together."

Deakins has had a longstanding debate with the Coens about their affinity for wide-angle lenses, which all too often results in an on-set bidding-war for the optimum lens choice. Ethan proclaims, "We've gotten better actually, partly because of Roger's influence." Joel expands wryly, "He has been quietly bringing us around to longer lenses. It's a joke between the three of us. We're now up to 32mm and 35mm lenses!"

Laughing, Deakins retorts, "On *Hudsucker* I'd put on a 26mm and they'd say, 'Shouldn't this be an 18mm?'" But after three films; Deakins' cajoling seems to have taken root. "On *Fargo*, we shot longer

lenses than the Coens have ever shot before," he notes. "Our main lens was probably a 40mm or a 32mm, whereas normally it would be a 25mm."

"I think it still is a prejudice with us – wanting to go wider more often," admits Ethan. "It has to do with wanting to enhance the camera moves. For instance, in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, a lot of the effects stuff, the falling shots, were quite wide in the interest of making the moves and the falling more dynamic."

"And that was sort of the idea of this movie," relates Joel. "It was interesting to try and restrain ourselves. Unlike the movies we have done in the past, we wanted to take a more observational approach to this, because the story is partly based on real life. We moved the camera far less and used a lot more over the shoulders."

The Coens and Deakins also strove to accentuate the dull and non-eventful nature of the rural Midwest, and to juxtapose this atmosphere against their highly eventful tale. Explains Joel, "First of all, we were trying to reflect the bleak aspect of living in that area in the wintertime – what the light and this sort of landscape does [to a person,] psychologically. It was very important for us to shoot on non-sunny days. We talked early on with Roger about shooting landscapes where you couldn't really see the horizon line – so that the snow-covered ground would be the same color as the sky – on these sort of slight gray or whiteout days that you get in Minnesota. We scheduled the shoot so that we would be able to avoid blue skies as much as possible."

"In one respect," he continues, "we were unlucky in that there was very little snow in Minnesota while we were shooting there. We actually ended up moving to North Dakota for the end of the shoot – chasing the snow. On the other hand, the landscape up there is even flatter and bleaker than it is around Minneapolis. We wouldn't have shot there had the weather been alright in Minneapolis, so in a sense we got more interesting exterior than we might have, otherwise."

Deakins concedes, "They wanted [the look of the exteriors] to be quite bland. It's kind of difficult balance to do something that's bland but not boring. They wanted it very real, very middle America. In fact,

we chose some of the locations because they were particularly bland. Both the designer [Rick Heinrichs] and I would say, 'Well, that's *really* nothing!' I mean, you still have to make it interesting, but they always manage that anyway. I think the Coens could probably make a blank white wall interesting."

Deakins once again employed his camera of choice, an Arriflex BL-4, outfitted with Zeiss prime lenses. He exposed on his favorite stock, Eastman's 200 ASA EXR 5293. "I've shot on BLs for years. When we were doing car rigs it was probably −10° to start with, plus we were going along at 40 miles per hour. It was pretty cold, but the old BLs handle that pretty well. We also made up heater barneys for the camera and special heated boxes for the batteries so the charge wouldn't drain too quickly."

With its limited budget, all of the film save for a small bathroom set was shot on location in Minnesota and North Dakota in practical, working establishments and locales. Utilizing available exterior light through windows and augmenting the existing lighting in a location proved to be a quick and efficient methodology.

"I was very much working off of natural sources," recalls Deakins. "It's not something I always do, but I suppose I do it more often than not. Particularly on *Fargo*, where we wanted a naturalistic feel. I was working a lot more with practicals – boosting practicals and putting little gag lights in. A lot of the film was shot in bars and clubs, so basically you have to work with the production designer to install the kind of practicals you want."

Bill O'Leary, Deakins' gaffer, specifies, "Usually, we go with a high-wattage standard household bulb, like 150 or 200 watts. We then always put the lights on dimmers. *Fargo* was basically lit with existing fixtures with higher-watt bulbs: "We'd go over-wattage, put it all on a dimmer, and then dial it down to warm it up a bit."

"To me, that's the essence of lighting in locations – getting the right practicals," states Deakins. "I'll spend a lot of time with the prop-buyer and set dresser just to make sure I've got options with practicals, so that if I want a certain amount of light in a certain place, I can put a practical there rather than have to rig a light. I may also hide

a light behind the practical. It gives me flexibility on the set and is much more realistic. Maybe I have a problem thinking that I can't put a light there unless there's a reason for it."

"I didn't really have a big lighting package at all," he remembers, "but I worked within those terms. On something like *The Shawshank Redemption*, everything was lit. But on *Fargo*, if there wasn't daylight, we literally couldn't do the shots."

Besides the added intimacy of the smaller crew and a tighter collaboration with Deakins, the Coens also enjoyed being liberated from the logistics of large-scale film production and immense stages. "The last movie we did with Roger was shot entirely on stage, and this movie was entirely real locations with the exception of two small bathroom sets," explains Joel. "Most of the interiors, which were mainly small bedrooms, houses, and offices as opposed to big spaces, were lit by window-light during the day. The impulse here was to de-dramatize things rather than dramatize things. And that extended to the lighting as well."

Says Deakins, "I think it's a dark comedy. You usually light up comedies, but the Coens didn't want to do that. This film was closer to the contrasty style of *Barton Fink*. *Hudsucker*, on the other hand, was deliberately less contrasty, deliberately more lush; it wasn't necessarily flat-lit, but it was meant to look kind of opulent. *Fargo* is meant to look real and raw."

"I religiously do diagrams of every set or location," he continues. "I plan the lighting so that when I get to the set we've had the electricians pre-rigging, and I can look to see if the idea I was going for is working. That also gives me more time to play with the lighting before everybody else is ready to shoot."

For the car chase near the opening of Fargo, the Coens elected to contrast the day snowscape exteriors with a stark-black sepulchral night sequence. "We wanted the effect of being on the road at night, when everything is totally black," says Deakins. "Then we cut to the daytime, when everything is totally white. There's an incredible contrast. We decided not to do anything like an ambient moonlight effect; we lit the nighttime chase with 12-volt rigs attached to the

bumper of the car, as though the shots were lit by washes off the headlights."

For the traveling car rigs, O'Leary says that he and best boy Bill Moore utilized "surplus lamps and housings that are used on military-type vehicles and that are actually smaller than a car headlight. Bill, who builds a lot of these rigs, built a bar that we attached to the bumper and set up a row of six of these lights in front of the grill. We could then either pan them further up the road to light into the foreground for shots looking out the windshield, or pan them to the left for angles looking out at the crashed car."

As Lundegaard's scheme to usurp his father-in-law's million-dollar ransom proceeds, the inevitable money-drop is arranged. The simple plan, however, is disrupted when the wealthy and domineering tycoon steps in, demanding to make the drop himself for his daughter's return.

For the pivotal exchange scene, the Coens elected to shoot on top of a snow-covered exterior parking garage. Joel offers, "We chose that location because there was a smokestack belching away on the roof of a nearby building, and we wanted to use that as a background for part of the scene. The special effects people had to snow that entire area because there was no snow. In fact, a lot of the snow in the movie was manufactured."

The scene was lit with harsh yellow-orange sodium-vapor streetlights that spilled warm pools of light on areas around the rooftop. Deakins augmented the look with an orange sodium-vapor effect from above, "which was a combination of ¼ CTO and CTS. I think it works quite well because it gives the scene a sort of eerie feeling."

O'Leary adds, "We boosted the streetlamp practicals that were there by building a carriage that sat over the top of the housings like a saddle and hanging a pair of two-light Fay bulbs on either side so that they were running right by the existing sodium-vapor lamps. On each streetlight we had eight extra Fay bulbs to boost the effect. We then just warmed them up a little with CTO and straw to match the warm sodium look."

"We lit the surrounding buildings," he continues, "the smokestack tower and the top of a heating plant's cooling stacks, by hiding 10K lamps right on the building's rooftops. We also had 12K HMIs down on the streets that were corrected halfway back."

Deakins offers, "I worked with a lot more colors on *Fargo* than I have on either of the Coens' other films. When street lighting started switching from mercury-vapor to sodium, I was a bit worried, because I loved the sort of cold-blue streetlight look. But now I've gotten to like the sodium look."

"I tend to gel lights," he elaborates. "I don't just print things to be a certain color. Some cinematographers print the frame to a particular color, a particular look. I like to use a lot of colors in one frame."

Observes Joel, "I think in a lot of cases Roger was trying to include a warm source and a cold source in the same frame. For example, in a scene in a garage with a mechanic working under a car, there's this warm cage light on him and then cold exterior light coming in." Outlining his approach to the above-mentioned scene, Deakins notes, "When [actor] William Macy goes to meet the mechanic back in the garage, I shot without a filter. I diffused the windows with 250 and lit them. Because the location was a working car lot, I also changed all of the fluorescent tubes to daylight tubes. I used a practical cage light with a 200-watt bulb on a dimmer that I put under the car the guy was working on. I wanted that light to be really rich and warm, so to get the color difference between the daylight look and the practical, I shot clean uncorrected daylight. Sometimes I like a slightly cold look and I won't correct it on the camera. I'll just pull it back a bit in the lab."

"Photographically," he adds, "I wouldn't say that I've been more bold on *Fargo*, but I did play around a bit more. It's actually one of my favorite projects, though I don't think anything shouts out, 'Wow, this is great photography!' If you've got a huge amount of money and great big sets, it's actually not hard to make it look good. It's often more of a challenge to try to give a film a coherent style from start to finish, one that remains interesting and feels real."

Working with Deakins has rewarded the Coens with a kindred collaborator and a close friend. "We're lucky we found Roger," says Joel. "He understands what we are after, and frequently comes up with stuff on the spot that reflects what we want to do in the scene – but perhaps in a much better realization of it, given the setup."

"However," Ethan cautions, "whenever we fret about some sort of detail in the frame, or start looking too closely at something, Roger simply says, 'Well, that could be my Gran in the shot and she's been dead for 20 years. Don't worry about it.'"

Joel adds wryly, "Actually, there's a lot of discussion about Roger's grandmother on the set. It's an important part of his work and it shouldn't be overlooked."

PHILIP BROPHY

9 Carter Burwell in Conversation

Music for the Films of Joel and Ethan Coen

The relationship between composer Carter Burwell and writer/directors Joel & Ethan Coen is rare. Burwell's music – chameleon-like, eclectic, unexpected – perfectly matches the many genre-betiding excursions of the Coens' projects. Often working at a meta-textual level, the Coens' films are acutely aware of an audience being conscious of the story-telling manipulations that drive contemporary cinema. To this end, the Coens' use of Burwell's music always seeks ways to sidestep conventional methods of "emotionally cueing" an audience with snippets of mood music. Burwell's prime eclecticism lies in a strange mismatching whereby his cues at first appear to "not fit" – but eventually reveal a depth that is rooted in the complex story-telling craft of the Coens' narratives.

THE PROCESS OF FILM COMPOSING

I've known Joel and Ethan Coen for a long time. Their first film was my first film. It's that simple. Their films are good for discussing the types of choices a film composer has to make, and they range over a wide variety of musical genres. For people who are not very familiar with film scoring, let me go through a little of the process involved.

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First, Joel and Ethan write a script and give it to me. We'll talk about what type of music might be appropriate, a conversation which continues through the shooting process. I usually go and watch some of the shoot – partly to see what visual environment is involved. I don't really start writing until they finish shooting. Prior to that, the most specific we'll get about the music is to consider the type of orchestra that might be involved, so that they can budget it properly. Once they have a rough edit of the film, we have a meeting called a 'spotting session' where we decide on the most elemental level where each piece of music begins and ends.

Of course, more important than that is the question of what the music is actually supposed to say: what the point of it might be. One of the most enjoyable things about working with Joel and Ethan is that they don't have any preconceived answers to these questions. Occasionally they might have an idea about the scale of the music, but I don't think they've ever come to me and said, "Yes, this is the type of music that we need." In fact, that is more typical of situations in which a director is uncomfortable with some aspect of the movie. Such a director will say, "This scene really needs this because the chemistry between the actors didn't work" or "It really needs this because we couldn't get the camera shot I wanted." Conversely, Joel and Ethan are very thorough, so it is rarely the case that when the film is finished, something they wanted has not already been taken care of.

After the spotting session I go back and I do some writing. Initially, I try to think for myself what the music needs to do for the film: what it can contribute, and how I can translate that into melodies. I'm a bit of a sucker for melodies, so usually there are melodies involved – but at this early stage I'm also considering what 'sound palette' I'm going to use. I'll use synthesizers to put together a sketch of my ideas – partly for Joel and Ethan's sake, any director's sake, so they can come and hear what I want to do. This is because it's terrible to be at a recording session with an orchestra of a hundred musicians and have the director hear the music for the first time and say, "That's not what we're talking about." Also, using orchestras is very expensive on a minute-by-minute basis. I always produce synthesized versions of my

musical ideas – not only for the director, but also for myself. It's a great luxury to use synthesizers and samplers for orchestration. I can hear a version of what the score is going to sound like before conducting a real orchestra. Of course, most of the synthesizer and sampler sounds will be replaced by real humans playing real instruments, which will always be an improvement. As good as synth demos are, the real thing always sounds a lot better. So, finally after these periods of discussing, sketching, testing and orchestrating comes the recording session.

SOLVING PROBLEMS AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS

In order to discuss the choices a composer makes, I'm going to look at each of the Coens' films in terms of problems and how they might have been solved. Solving problems in film composing is part intuition and part intellect. For everyone who does something like this, it's mostly their intuition which tells them what is appropriate. I'm not in a position to theorize about what I do, nor would I want to. It would be inappropriate because there are people paid to do that, and it would distract from my real job, which is to be intuitive about composing.

When I see a film, I'm usually thinking about what I would like the music to do – what I would do to make it a richer experience for me, make it somehow more dramatic or emotional. But once I've decided what that should be, it becomes an intellectual problem. This is what I think the music should do in this scene, but how will I achieve that while faced with constraints like the film's budget and schedule, the actual piece of film I'm looking at, and my own abilities as a composer and conductor? So, intellect takes me through that maze to find a solution to the question that was really an intuitive one at first. The types of question that I answer in these situations are: what kind of melody is required? Or, should my composition even be melodic? Should it just be sound construction integrated with the film's sound design and editing? If melody is needed, then what would be its instrumentation?

To some extent instrumentation is dictated by budget, but as composers like Howard Shore and I now work on a lot of Hollywood films it is not difficult for us to get a symphony orchestra if we want. However, that does not necessarily mean it is appropriate. A symphony orchestra is a wonderful instrument, but I find it much more interesting and fulfilling to have smaller ensembles and choose quirky instrumentation: what Howard Shore did with *Crash* [1996] is a perfect example of that.

Another composing question I search to answer is: to what extent will my score either refer to the picture or live in a world of its own? Some of my scores seem to be in a world separate from the picture. I don't think they really are separate from the picture, but often they aren't referring to the action on screen. This is partly because I am personally not concerned with the incidents going on. I watch the film's plot, but it's one of the last things that interest me. If someone says tell me the story of a film, I vague-out after the first sentence: it's just not interesting. So the question for me as a film composer is: are there places where the music really needs to refer to the film? Of course I've worked on other Hollywood films where music is constantly referring to the action, the characters and the plot situations, but with Joel and Ethan I have the pleasure of not doing that. The work I've done for their films contains moments where music, having ignored most of what is happening in the film, suddenly begins to pay attention to the action on-screen. It has an interesting effect.

Yet another question I often grapple with is what should define the score's musical themes – to what should I attach them? Each character can have a theme. Certain situations can have themes. Parts of the storyline can have themes. Typically in Joel and Ethan's work, I do attach themes to characters because their writing is very character-oriented. Often their films will simply have one or two characters, and you see almost the entire film through their eyes. So most of my composing for their films will be based around a theme that attaches to character.

The Coens' central character is typically a relatively normal, average person, without any extraordinary qualities, who finds himself

caught up in extraordinary circumstances which are generally of a tragic and cruel nature. Pathos, then, is one of the theatrical effects that the music is required to deliver. And, at the same time, the Coens' movies are almost always comedies on some level, and by far the most interesting aspect of what I do is that it has to be both of those things.

On the subject of comedy, the Coens' films are often referred to as ironical. I don't think this is true for any intellectual or objective reason. The reason Joel and Ethan and I get along is simply because we view life that way. The first time I saw footage for *Blood Simple* [1984], I went home and wrote some melodies and brought them in the very next day. Joel and Ethan liked the music I composed, and ever since then it's been a seamless collaboration. We see life in a similar way, which is to say that the paradoxes in life make it so much fun, and the horrible things in life are what makes life really funny. So, the irony in the work is not there for any intellectual reason: it's just the way we see life.

But when this type of "irony" appears in music, it also has an additional effect, in that the music is telling you something different to what you are seeing on the screen. It tells you that something is happening which does not meet the eye. Yet because music is such an abstract art, it does not tell you what that "more" is. That's a little unsettling – which is another typical adjective that we ascribe to the music in Joel and Ethan's movies. . . .

FARGO

I think *Fargo* [1986] probably represents one of the more subtle and interesting musical choices I have made in my film scoring because it is an unlikely combination not only of comedy and tragedy, but also of dramatic writing based on a true story. None of the other Coen films do this. I was never distracted by whether it was true or not, but I was aware that the audience would need to believe that it was true. It would help the story to believe that and if you pushed the comedy too much people might stop believing it. If the filmmakers become too arch and go for comedy in the middle of killings and

other violence, I think the believability of the story then suffers. It was a fine line to walk in *Fargo*.

There were many roles for music in *Fargo* – so much so that I had to write them down because they constituted such a challenge. The music has to play the crime story. It has to be believable. It has to seem like it's representing an historical event and it has to simulate a "true crime story," which is a very melodramatic genre. But in this particular "true crime story," the two people who do the killing are played by Peter Stormare and Steve Buscemi as buffoons. They are ridiculous in almost every scene. So the music has to accommodate their comedy but you still have to believe that they are going to kill someone. The film takes place in Minnesota and North Dakota and there is a lot of local colour in those regional accents. As the characters are written in the script, the people have a desperate cheerfulness that comes out in the worst of situations. But there is loneliness and despair behind a lot of that cheerfulness. They live in a dark, cold climate, so hopefully that undercurrent to their cheerfulness can be played with the music.

My solution to this complex set of problems was to direct the music to always take itself seriously. In other words, the music is going to say, "Yes, I am a crime drama and I am going to take myself seriously." This allowed me to play the drama and make that believable, but, by the music taking itself too seriously, I was also able to push the comedy. Particularly as there is not much action in the film: when it does occur the music is often over the top with bombast, and hopefully that helps with the comedy. I organized and directed the orchestra very much in the tradition of Miklos Rosza: low winds, brass, percussion, and few strings. This is a much lower budget film than the one before it, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, but I also felt that a smaller orchestra was appropriate – the exact kind of orchestra that was often used for low budget crime movies like *The Killers* [1997].

Another element of the score is that there is a personal story going on. Bill Macy plays the male protagonist who sets the crime in motion and the character played by Frances McDormand is the female protagonist, who is the police chief on his trail. She also happens

to be pregnant. I wanted the music to play on intimate scales for these characters and especially for the pathos of Bill Macy. I think he defines the archetypal pathetic character.

I do some musical research for most of the films, and for *Fargo* I was listening to Scandinavian music. This was before they were even shooting the film, because all the characters have Scandinavian names and their accent is somehow derived from a Scandinavian accent – although why that is so remains a mystery to me. I thought it would be interesting to inject some Scandinavian feeling into it. There is a "coldness" in a lot of Scandinavian music, not so much with the melodies, but with the way instruments are played. Their folk music usually revolves around a fiddle called the hardanger fiddle, which has five or six strings that are played, but underneath them are a group of sympathetic strings that are not directly played but which vibrate in sympathy with the strings that are being played. It creates a glistening effect around the sound. It also tends to be played in a manner not unlike what we think of in the States as Appalachian "hillbilly" music. This approach to instrumentation seemed right for the coldness of the theme I composed for *Fargo*. The hardanger fiddle is also a solo instrument, played in the mid scale, so I used a small idiosyncratic ensemble for the personal scenes comprised of hardanger fiddle, harp and then just let it grow bigger from there. For example, in the very opening scene, we see a commonplace action: a guy driving a trailer with a car on it through the snow. But the music begins with this extremely delicate intimate melody, gets a little bigger, and then grows to a ridiculously large scale.

Fargo gave rise to the question of what *is* comedy and how exactly does one play it musically. For instance, how should the music play to the two bad guys? I would say that the killers are essentially buffoons, but they do ruthlessly kill people through the film. They can be played for comedy, but the question is how to do it. For the scene where the two killers relax in the hotel room watching *The Johnny Carson Show* in the dark, I composed a synthesizer sketch, which we eventually did not use. The music made a statement that the film knew it was a comedy. By not using this cue and instead having the

sound of *The Johnny Carson Show* theme play lightly, the impression is that the film takes itself seriously: it does not know it is a comedy. It is then left to the audience to decide if it is a comedy or not. Viewers reading this scene with knowledge of film context would probably get the joke of the overblown music, but the absence of that cue allows the bad guys their dignity. I played both options to Joel and Ethan. They laughed at the first one but they liked the second one. They wanted the movie to take itself more seriously.

QUESTIONS

How many times might you rewrite a cue, given that you had written two versions of that one? Does rewriting like that happen often?

The example from *Fargo* was not so much a question of rewriting a cue as it was of deciding the theme for these characters. I often just take a scene and test sonic thematic material against it: if it works in one place I'm pretty sure it is going to work somewhere else. And it raises key questions about what the theme should be, so I used that scene from *Fargo* to help me decide on things. Rewriting cues does not happen that often with Joel and Ethan. We are generally in agreement as to what type of film we are making, and at what level the humour exists, as in this last example from *Fargo*. But Joel and Ethan also place their faith in me because we have been through this so many times that, if we have a disagreement and I feel strongly that I am right, they will generally give me the benefit of the doubt.

You mentioned earlier using synthesizers and samplers for composing sketches and testing orchestration. Does it surprise you when you get the orchestral recording back? Is there a problem with the translation between something you might try out on a synth, and how you can get an orchestra/player to perform that?

Not really – partly because I have in my mind what is going to happen as we move from a sketch to the finished thing. I know pretty much what those changes will be – of which there definitely are many – though I cannot really think of too many surprises. It has

generally been a favourable surprise. A typical difference between a synthesized recording and an orchestral one is in the greater dynamic range of the orchestral recording which you do not achieve with synthesizers generally. For the opening title theme of *Fargo*, I wrote or suggested performance ornaments for the violin part on the score, but I was well aware that by getting the right fiddle player, he was going to do a lot better than anything I could write. So recordings are almost always a series of wonderful surprises. The reverse does happen sometimes. If you write for special instruments like, say, the theremin as Howard Shore did for *Ed Wood*, you can have a wonderful idea of what it should sound like in your mind but then discover that it is extremely hard to find people who can play it.

I wrote a piece for a musical saw a couple of years ago just hoping there was a great musical saw player out there somewhere and, in fact, there is. He's a classical violinist who lives in New York and who doubles on musical saw. So I lucked out, but it will often be true that if you write for strange instruments and you do not already know exactly who will play them, it can be a challenge to get a decent performance and recording. Especially folk instruments: finding someone who reads but can also play folk material. But when you do find someone, it is usually a pleasant surprise. . . .

THOMAS DOHERTY

10 Review of *Fargo*

White-out conditions bracket the outskirts at *Fargo*, a warmhearted tale of cold-blooded murder from the brothers Coen, director Joel and producer Ethan. The opening shot sketches the color scheme: barely discernible through overcast skies and blowing snow, a lone vehicle tows a tan Cutlass Ciera along a God-forsaken strip of highway, a tableau echoed at the end of the film when another car carries its cargo, a sullen murderer, to justice. Front, back, and in between, snow is the dominant visual motif, subzero temperatures the environmental wraparound, a blizzard of white stuff that layers the landscape and fills the frames of pre-cable television screens. *Fargo* mixes a *film noir* ethos with *film blanc* visuals.

Set in rural Minnesota in the dead of winter (the place name "Fargo" is the least of the calculated misdirections), when the Siberian Express comes sweeping down from Canada, gathering velocity and ferocity, to settle in with bone-numbing, mind-twisting cold, the film luxuriates in seasonal and regional atmosphere. Though a goodly chunk of the nation regularly withstands such polar conditions, the culture of life-threatening winter is seldom glimpsed in American films, perhaps because the rituals of scraping ice off the windshield, praying for the ignition to turn over, wearing headgear for protection (not style) and fur as a survival (not fashion) statement

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are alien to sun-drenched Hollywood honchos who can wait all day for the light but run like rabbits from frozen precipitation. Given the oppressive force of the elements and the blank existential horizon, it's no surprise that the harsh, protracted weather engenders murderous impulses in borderline personality types, or that monochromatic vistas and cabin fever push rugged individuals over the edge into dementia with alarming regularity. It's the terrain of Wisconsin death trips and home turf to Ed Gein, the original serial killer, and father to screen psychos from Norman Bates to Hannibal Lecter.

Against this lineage, the hapless car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) is an underachiever. The oppressed son-in-law of wealthy but very mean Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell), Jerry decides to alleviate a severe cash flow problem by arranging to have his wife kidnapped and charging his father-in-law a million dollars in ransom. Jerry's trepidation around the old man is understandable. As Wade, Harve Presnell leaves a severe wind chill factor in his wake. Flinty and frigid, he is a ruthless Nordic capitalist who nonetheless fatally misjudges the despicability quotient of his son-in-law, and the capacity of desperate men to screw up a straightforward business transaction.

With the tan Cutlass Ciera as down payment, Jerry subcontracts the kidnapping to a pair of thugs, the funnier looking than usual Carl (Steve Buscemi) and the sinister and silent Gaear (Peter Stormare). From their first meeting in a neon-lit barroom, the conspirators have already crossed signals on the meeting time, a portent of mutual incompetence and a preview of Jerry's nervous stumbling as the scheme snowballs and comes crashing down around him. Steve Buscemi, who is to weasely punks in Nineties neo-noirs what Strother Martin was to prairie scum in Sixties Westerns, plays the excitable side of the kidnappers, the "funny looking" little guy whose character-actor energy enlivens the film.

When the kidnappers commit three roadside murders ("Blood has been shed, Jerry!") in the jurisdiction of Brainerd ("Home of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox"), enter Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), the town's clodhopper police chief. Outfitted in floppy

hat and ballooning parka, she also happens to be seven months pregnant and vomits, therefore, not because of a grisly crime scene but from morning sickness. Throughout the investigation, she maintains both equilibrium (waddling slightly) and a promethean appetite (eating for two). As the detective ratiocinator, Marge pretty much defies every Raymond Chandler cliché – no cynicism, no witticisms, no eroticism. The closest she comes to gruff retort is, "You have no call to get snippy with me." This being her first homicide, she lacks the studied nonchalance of the big city professional. "He's fleeing the interview!" she blurts out breathlessly when Jerry takes a powder.

The Minneapolis-bred Coens have a lot of good-natured fun at the expense of their fellow Minnesotans. The F-word is uttered only by villains; the minimum wage workers are chirpy and solicitous, and a pregnant sheriff seems as natural as a paper bag full of night crawlers. Most amusing is the patter of dialog, a musical *Fargo*-speak that is an exaggerated approximation of the regional accent. The ensemble cast deftly mimics the native tongue, with its lilting Scandinavian inflections punctuated by contagious verbal tics ("For Pete's sake," "You betcha," "Geez," and a languid "Yaah"). Not unlike the unhurried residents of Brainerd, in fact, the Coens take time out for the niceties of life (salutations, coffee, buffets) and the random detour into shaggy dog territory.

After Marge gets a late night phone call from an old friend, they meet at the lounge of the Raddisson in the Twin Cities. Some long-time-no-see chitchat ("So, you went and married old Norm Son-of-Gunderson?") erupts into a manic depressive crisis when the guy bursts into tears – not a red herring, just a moment in time, underscoring Marge's fidelity to husband and friends and the weirdness in everyday life, homicides aside. Throughout, the character bits are uniformly well-etched and well-played: the two dim bulb barflies bopping in time as Marge tries to pry information from them about their night with Carl and Gaear (trying to be helpful, one volunteers, "He was circumcised"), the bored hooker from the escort service whom Carl takes to the celebrity room of the ever fashionable Raddisson ("With José Feliciano, you got no complaints!"), and the

inscrutable Indian mechanic Shep Proudfoot (Steven Reevis), who would be very out of place in a Kevin Costner film.

Not that the Coens have gone all Capra. After two highly stylized excursions into dark surrealism *(Barton Fink* [1991] and *The Hudsucker Proxy* [1994]), the brothers have gone back to their roots not only geographically but generically, to the criminal ground of *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Miller's Crossing* (1990), with a bit of *Raising Arizona* (1987) thrown in. They specialize in the points of convergence between the banal and the brutal, where Jerry's wife – the quintessential housewife – watches the happy talk of early morning television as the masked home kidnappers brandish crowbars outside her window. Emerging from the mundane details of life, shifting from whimsy to terror and back, the ambiance is complacent yet edgy. Nor do the Coens limit the experimental disconnect to the extremes. Flashing images of hot sex cut quickly to a still life of two couples lying affectless in bed watching *The Tonight Show.* Like the creepy Paul Bunyan statue that stands sentinel over the town of Brainerd, *Fargo* trafficks in a double vision of American folk culture – heroic lumberjack or ax-wielding psycho?

The cinematic style undergirds the tonal shifts. The Coens maneuver smoothly from mundane slice of life encounters (long takes and shot/reverse shots) to intense action sequences (fast cuts and hallucinatory POVs). The most gripping set piece is the extemporaneous triple homicide on a deserted patch of highway outside Brainerd. Stopped by a patrolman for a minor traffic violation, Carl fails in his attempt to bribe the cop (this is Minnesota) and his partner improvises with predatory speed, shooting the cop square on the crown of the head, splattering blood over a chagrined Carl. A random passerby drives past, an unwitting witness glimpsed by Gaear in slow speed. From the killer's perspective behind the wheel, he is run to ground and killed.

Fargo opens with an inscription avowing veracity (the tale is allegedly based on a true story) and respect for the dead (hence, the names have been changed). Since this is a Coen brothers movie, the first reading is ironic, as trustworthy a guidepost as one of those

"Inspired by actual events!" taglines accompanying movies of the week. But when blood is shed, the film finds nothing whimsical in the body count. (The same sensibility informs Gus Van Sant and Buck Henry's *To Die For*, another snow-scaped movie that initially plays a murder for hire for laughs but which drops its smirk once the deed is done.) In the end, *Fargo* affirms a Production Code universe and a moral lesson uttered – straight – by the forces of established order. "There's more to life than a little money, you know," Marge lectures her prisoner, authentically perplexed. "Don't you know that?" Despite all Marge has seen – a dead cop, a murdered child, and innovative uses for a wood chipper – her imagination can't extend to understanding the evil that men do.

After having invited spectators to mock the Minnesotans, the Coens close by forcing a reconsideration of who's really funny looking. In a coda, Marge's supportive husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch), an aspiring painter of wildlife, gets an award from the U.S. Postal Service for his portrait of a mallard. Norm is crestfallen he didn't win the commission for the high frequency twenty-nine-cent stamp. Marge consolingly (and prophetically) points out the three-cent stamp will be used when the postage rates increase. In *Fargo* stone-cold evil in forbidding environs melts away, if somewhat uneasily, under a sunny disposition.

HARVEY ROY GREENBERG

11 Prairie Home Death Trip

Our politicians perennially laud small town values as a wellspring of the republic's vigor. But American authors have also persistently dwelt upon the penchant for suicidal despair, lunacy, and criminality lurking beneath the placid façade of provincial life. Explosions of aggression in tranquil backwater locales have been variously attributed to social isolation, puritanical pressure for conformity, or frontier individualism gone daft. Notable past and contemporary descriptions of the dire results attendant upon blowing the lid off the provincial pressure cooker are found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, William Faulkner's *Barn Burner*, Edward Arlington Robinson's *Spoon River Anthology*, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," and virtually every Stephen King novel. Hollywood mediations on the subject include *East of Eden* (1954), *Peyton Place* (1957), *Psycho* (1961), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and virtually every picture based on every Stephen King novel.

One's favorite non-fiction chronicle in this morbid vein is *Wisconsin Death Trip*, social historian Michael Lesy's doctoral thesis. Overviewing regional gazettes from the closing decades of the last century, Lesy found that homely descriptions of church picnics and visiting relatives regularly rubbed elbows with accounts of appalling murders, grisly suicides, and attacks of gibbering madness one would

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have thought more likely fodder for the urban yellow press of that and our own day.

For instance, it was not unusual for the spring thaw to reveal that members of a shack-wacky farm family had slaughtered each other during the endless harsh winter. In retrospect, deep melancholy brought on by a surfeit of external gloom – the entity known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD) – perhaps meshed with latent depressive or manic-depressive illness to detonate ordinarily phlegmatic temperaments, precipitating such extravagant psychiatric catastrophes.

The surplus of Nordic surnames in those bygone accounts of the lunatic or violently deceased not may only have reflected the preponderance of Scandinavian immigrants in the prairie population (a majority of them Swedish), but could also have signified that a disproportionate number possessed the genetic predisposition for major affective disease. Beyond season or ethnicity or innate psychopathology, wine was a mocker and strong drink raged in the Midwestern hinterlands, providing further fuel for the latent spirit of misrule.

Joel and Ethan Coen's loopy riffs on genre (Joel directs, Ethan produces, both write their screenplays) are often set in small towns or heartland urban locales inflected by backwater mores (e.g., *Blood Simple* [1985] *Raising Arizona* [1987], *Miller's Crossing* [1990]). *Fargo*, the latest product of the Coens' idiosyncratic talents, mines *Wisconsin Death Trip*'s lurid territory from the brothers' customarily quirky perspective, construing both its Minneapolis and surrounding small-town settings as resolutely provincial. But the Coens' usual scabrous wit and cool detachment are here leavened by unexpected sympathy, stemming from their evident abiding affection for Midwestern folkways (they hail from the Twin Cities area).

In a Coen picture, intelligence let alone common sense is regularly in short supply, and ethics tend to be situational at best. Most characters are impulse-driven, exceptionally ornery numskulls or naifs, who routinely pursue some crooked or cracked scheme with incomprehension of its disastrous consequences (e.g., in *Raising Arizona*, a petty career criminal kidnaps a Phoenix used-car magnate's sextuplet

in aid of redressing his ex-cop wife's barrenness, assuming that the magnate and his wife won't miss one kid more or less. They do, and hire a vicious bounty hunter to hunt down the jerry-rigged family).

When a Coen protagonist's harebrained plan thus turns awry, the resultant violence is likely to partake equally of low comedy and Grand Guignol horror. In a signature Coen device, the camera rushes headlong towards some terrifying act, then the screen goes abruptly black. It's as if one had descended into an American gothic nightmare.

Coen films are elsewhere potently informed by the dream's uncanny alterity, the unsettling sense of Freud's "other locale." The mise-en-scene is dark with menance or garish with comic-book color. Images are surreal or hyper-real, dense with overdetermined significations (one critic noted an abundance of weird haircuts and screaming fat men). Dialogue is correspondingly gnomic. "No one is so pitiful as a man who's lost his hat," avows the gangster hero of *Miller's Crossing*, as if the cockeyed contention were received truth (hats are another Coen obsession, for reasons known only to them).

The opening title asserts that *Fargo* is based on actual 1987 events. No one to date has been able to verify this, and the announcement that all names have been changed "out of respect for the dead" immediately manages to strike the apposite note of Coen weirdness. An oneiric milieu is then constructed out of the glacial essence of the unrelenting Midwestern midwinter, using a palette weighted toward dank grays and blinding whites. A rime of chill seeps into the skull, as one apprehends the numbing expanse of prairie emptiness, or encounters characters who seem emotionally congealed within their own skins. Their *lingua franca* is a surreal distillation of chipper heartlandspeak, with an odd, laconic Swedish lilt: "Oh, yah . . . pretty good . . . you betcha . . . okey dokey . . . thanks a bunch . . . send it right over in a jiff . . . end of story." In the stunning establishing sequence, a car materializes out of a primeval storm, the eeriness of its stately progress accentuated by foreshortened lensing, as it rolls towards a rendezvous in a sleazy Fargo roadhouse, where glowing men in

mackinaws toss back shots of cheap booze and the juke box wails "Big city, turn me loose and set me free."

To this badland ambiance, reeking with intimations of disinhibition, comes Jerry Lundegaard, a Minneapolis car salesman in vast financial trouble, in hope of hiring two thugs for a painless kidnap of his unsuspecting wife, Jean. Jerry hopes to redeem his tattered fortunes by having Jean ransomed by her rock stolid wealthy father, Wade Gustafson. The emotional toll the abduction might take on his wife (whose brittle chatter could drive one to drink), on his immensely tender-hearted teen-aged son, or indeed on himself, seems to have registered not one whit upon his desperate and utterly feckless soul.

The unwholesome conspirators are classic Coen no-brainers, ranging across the repellent psychopathic spectrum. In William H. Macy's keen impersonation, Jerry is a cornered ferret, oozing unreliable charm. This face is curiously split: haunted eyes dart wildly above his spurious smile and wagging tongue, as he tries to finagle his way out of an advance on the $80,000 ransom he proposes splitting with the goons. Slimy Carl Showalter (another of Steve Buscemi's hyperactive malefactors), clearly a mercenary legend in his own mediocre mind, speaks pompously of "tasking the mission." Gaear Grimsrud, a huge blond Caliban, takes in the chatter with ominous stony disapproval (noted Swedish actor/direct Peter Stormare plays this monster from the id with nearly wordless, ferocious intensity).

After the fashion of earlier Coen screenplays, Jerry's plan goes horridly awry. Jean nearly escapes from the clumsy yobbos before being trussed and tossed into their car. She will remain hooded and mute for the rest of the film, a familiar Coen figure ambivalently exciting both our pity and risibility.

On the way to their hideout, her captors are stopped near the hamlet of Brainerd by a local trooper, because Showalter forgot to put registration tags on the plates of the car Jerry witlessly lent him from his showroom. Brainerd proclaims itself "the home of Paul Bunyan." At the town outskirts a bizarre statue of the giant woodsman with

a toothy, obscene grin rears up in a passerby's headlights. It recurs throughout the film as a hallucinatory icon of companionable prairie home menace. Grimsrud could be its horrific double.

He mercilessly guns down the cop, then pursues a couple who inadvertently witnessed the murder and slaughters them as well. Showalter demands a larger cut of profits from Jerry, obtusely reasoning that the body count warrants increased compensation. He doesn't know he's been working for chump change all along: from the first, Jerry planned to extort a million dollar payoff from his father-in-law, throwing its scraps to his cretinous confederates.

Amidst this bloody bumbling and conniving, the Coens introduce *Fargo*'s marvelously unlikely heroine, Marge Gunderson, Brainerd's police chief, in the seventh month of pregnancy. Frances McDormand's performance as Marge deserves that tritest of cinema accolades: the actress (Joel Coen's wife) actually seems to light up the screen. McDormand's unusual, strongly dimpled face glows with serene intelligence and a fecund hormonal blush.

Rung awake by report of the multiple murders, Marge is instantly on the cases, asking all the right questions as she struggles out of her nightclothes and into her uniform with fetching awkwardness (her outfit includes a standard piece of Coen haberdashery – a goofily flapped, furry police hat). Her gruff househusband Norm – he carves bird decoys in his home studio – solicitously prepares a big breakfast (*Fargo* keeps piquantly reminding one of Marge's gargantuan appetite for two). Neither Marge nor Norm has many words at this or any hour, but their deep companionability is palpable, notably counterpoised against the glimpses of grating disharmony between the Lundegaards.

At the scene of the double shooting, Marge stifles an urge to upchuck: It's evident she's afflicted by morning sickness rather than horror ("Well, that passed!" she exclaims equably), and owns considerable experience of similar gruesome death trips. She shrewdly guesses the first murder is linked to the homicides down the road ("It's an execution type thing . . ."). Commencing with the slain cop's

description of the car plates, she meticulously begins to develop a damning trail of evidence that will lead straight to Jerry.

Her men, dogged but dumb, stand quietly in awe of her deductive powers. Marge's hilarious deadpan rebuke of the dullard who thinks "DLR" is part of the plate number – missing its crucial connection to an auto dealership – is compassionately corrective. A considerate toughmindedness is Marge's trademark on and off the job, typified by her treatment of the college friend who heard about the crime, and wants to meet her in Minneapolis while she's investigating the killings. When he tries to seduce her with a tearful lament about his wife's death from leukemia, she tactfully backs him off and offers gentle consolation. Later she discovers that he's been institutionalized, lives with his parents, and has never married – an exemplar of the crazed masculine duplicity pervading the film.

Bloodshed escalates as Jerry's scheme continues unraveling. Wade Gustafson, bearing no high opinion either of his son-in-law's brains or courage, agrees to the payoff on condition that he deliver it himself, utterly dashing Jerry's hopes. Showalter kills Wade, buries the loot in a frozen field a galaxy from nowhere (one surmises it will never be found), only to be axed to death by Grimsrud, who has just murdered and raped Jean offscreen. A sideways glimpse of her sprawled body, pitifully clad in her comfy housedress, instantly sours the jokiness of the botched abduction.

In this climate of unbridled male aggression, one's attentiveness is increasingly compelled by fear for Marge's ungainly vulnerability, as she totters like a fertile Humpty Dumpty towards an inevitable confrontation with Grimsrud's depraved malevolence. Showalter has been chopped down to size at this point, and Jerry represents no threat, although his shallow narcissism and Swiss cheese superego indubitably constitute the prime movers for *Fargo*'s chain of evil.

Cornered in his office, Jerry attempts to throw more dust in Marge's eyes with a puny tantrum. "Now there's no need to get snippy," she snaps, as angry as she will ever get, precipitating his flight from her inexorable justice. He's eventually arrested where the mischief

began, at first shamelessly attempting to flee a Bismarck, North Dakota motel, his motives as inexplicable to the viewer as perhaps to himself. Marge's final encounter with Grimsrud, while he's preoccupied with loathsomely disposing of Showalter's dismembered corpse in a roaring wood-shredder, is both frightening and mordantly witty. The scene generates an intense moral thrust never encountered in the Coens' work. It derives from Marge's reflexive goodness, her profound commitment to mindful law over raw blood-simpleness, exemplified by her carefully bringing Grimsrud down with a leg shot after a by-the-books warning. The conclusion of Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1959) springs to mind – *Fargo* seems otherwise curiously informed by that film's cold Nordic spareness – sans the "justified" carnage wrought by its avenging father upon the outlaws who raped and killed his daughter. For Grimsrud survives with the dim chance of being tutored into a semblance of humanity by Marge's mercy.

While it's likely his soul is too submerged in iniquity to seize the opportunity, this does not vitiate the impact of the policewoman's oddball grace, of her redemptive and civilizing force. Her calm rebuke after wounding when she could have killed – "All this, just for a little money . . . Oh, my" – speaks volumes against Grimsrud's insensate cruelty, as her staunch refusal to execute him speaks pointedly against the mindless vigilantism so widely recommended by American cinema today.

Later that evening, Marge comforts her husband when Norm glumly announces that one of his duck paintings has been selected for a three-cent stamp, rather than for the prized larger denomination. With the stoic cheerfulness, endearing wackiness, and inherent decency deemed by the Coens to embody the best of the Midwestern spirit, she assures Norm that every time the price of postage goes up a bit, his work is sure to be seen – at least until the regular issue comes out.

Comfortably nested in bed, they murmur, "Love ya . . . only two more months . . ." The moment is all the more touching, inutterably precious because one is aware of its fragility, spurred by having

witnessed the prior slaughter of so many of *Fargo*'s hapless innocents. With a thoughtful poignancy one would never have anticipated from their previous disengaged stance, the Coens intimate how vulnerable our small purposes are before the baleful forces inhuman nature and nature at large – those harbingers of chaos stirring beyond the threshold throughout the long, bleak nights.

Filmography of Joel and Ethan Coen

(Throughout their career, the Coen brothers have consistently said that, in practice, they work as a team on their films, paying little attention to traditional distinctions separating the roles of director, writer, or producer. The films in this filmography credit Joel as director, Ethan and Joel as co-writers, and Ethan as producer. *The Hudsucker Proxy* lists Sam Raimi as a third co-writer, and numerous films have co-producers. The Coens also received co-writing credit, with Sam Raimi, for the 1985 *Crimewave*, directed by Raimi, and Ethan Coen receives co-writing credit with J. Todd Anderson, the film's director, for the 1998 *The Naked Man*. At this writing, the Coens have announced their next film, *Intolerable Cruelty*, co-written with Barbara Benedek, and starring George Clooney, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Geoffrey Rush, and Billy Bob Thornton, for 2003. They plan to follow *Intolerable Cruelty* with a remake of the 1955 British film *The Ladykillers*, to star Tom Hanks. A possible future project is a musical, *Romance and Cigarettes*, written by John Turturro and starring James Gandolfini.

FEATURE FILMS

1985

Blood Simple

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Joel Coen and Ethan Coen

Cinematographer: Barry Sonnenfeld

Editing: Roderick Jaynes, Don Wiegmann

Production Company/Distributor: River Road Productions, Foxton Entertainment, Circle Films, 97 minutes

Cast: John Getz, Frances McDormand, Dan Hedaya, M. Emmet Walsh, Samm-Art Williams, Deborah Neumann

A 97-minute, "newly restored and re-edited" version was released in July 2000 by USA Films, which deleted approximately five minutes from the original film but added a prologue of roughly the same length in which an unaccredited actor playing "film preservationist" Mortimer Young parodies film commentators.

1987

Raising Arizona

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Ethan Coen and Joel Coen

Cinematographer: Barry Sonnenfeld

Editing: Michael R. Miller

Production Company/Distributor: Circle Films, Twentieth Century Fox, 94 minutes

Cast: Nicholas Cage, Holly Hunter, Trey Wilson, John Goodman, William Forsythe, Sam McMurray, Frances McDormand, Randall "Tex" Cobb, T. J. Kuhn

1990

Miller's Crossing

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Joel Coen and Ethan Coen

Cinematographer: Barry Sonnenfeld

Editing: Michael R. Miller

Production Company/Distributor: Circle Films, Twentieth Century Fox, 115 minutes

Cast: Gabriel Byrne, Marcia Gay Harden, John Turturro, Jon Polito, J. E. Freeman, Albert Finney, Mike Starr, Al Mancini, Richard Woods, Thomas Toner, Steve Buscemi

1991

Barton Fink

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Ethan Coen and Joen Coen

Cinematography: Roger Deakins

Editing: Roderick Jaynes, Michael Barenbaum

Production Company/Distributor: Circle Films, Inc., Twentieth Century Fox, 116 minutes

Cast: John Turturro, John Goodman, Judy Davis, Michael Lerner, John Mahoney, Tony Shalhoub, Jon Polito, Steve Buscemi

1994

The Hudsucker Proxy

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, Sam Raime

Cinematographer: Roger Deakins

Production Company/Distributor: Silver Pictures, in association with Working Title Films, Warner Brothers, 111 minutes

Cast: Tim Robbins, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Paul Newman, Charles Durning, John Mahoney, Jim True, William Cobbs, Bruce Campbell, Joe Grifasi, Steve Buscemi

1996

Fargo

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Ethan Coen and Joel Coen

Cinematographer: Roger Deakins

Editing: Roderick Jaynes, Tricia Cooke

Production Company/Distributor: Working Title Films, Polygram, Gramercy Pictures, 97 minutes

Cast: Frances McDormand, Steve Buscemi, William H. Macy, Peter Stormare, Harve Presnell, John Carroll Lynch, Kristin Rudrüd, Steven Reeves, Steve Park, Tony Denman

1998

The Big Lebowski

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Ethan Coen and Joel Coen

Cinematographer: Roger Deakins

Editing: Roderick Jaynes, Tricia Cooke

Production Company/Distributor: Working Title Films, Polygram, Gramercy Pictures, 127 minutes

Cast: Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, Julianne Moore, Steve Buscemi, David Huddleston, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Tara Reid, Philip Moon, Mark Pellegrino, Peter Stormare, John Turturro, Sam Elliott, Ben Gazzara, Jon Polito

2000

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, based on *The Odyssey* by Homer

Cinematographer: Roger Deakins

Editing: Roderick Jaynes

Production Company/Distributor: Working Title Films, in association with Buena Vista, 106 minutes

Cast: George Clooney, Tim Blake Nelson, John Turturro, John Goodman, Michael Badalucco, Charles Durning, Jerry Douglas, Wayne Duvall, Holly Hunter

2001

The Man Who Wasn't There

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Joel Coen and Ethan Coen

Cinematographer: Roger Deakins

Editing: Roderick Jaynes, Tricia Cooke

Production Company/Distributor: Working Title Films, in association with USA Films, 116 minutes

Cast: Billy Bob Thornton, Frances McDormand, Michael Badalucco, Tony Shalhoub, Jon Polito, James Gandolfini, Katherine Borowitz, Scarlett Johansson, Richard Jenkins

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