

FARGO (1996)

by

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*Fargo. Directed by Joel Coen. Written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen. Photography by Roger Deakins.
Distributed by Gramercy Films, 1996.*

Minnesotan Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) sells some cars on credit, pockets the money and promptly loses it on a bad land deal. He goes to North Dakota, where he hires talky, sleazy Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and silent, brutal Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare) to kidnap his wife, Jean (Kristin Rudrud). Jerry wants to do his wealthy and condescending father-in-law, Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell), out of a million bucks. Unfortunately, little goes as planned. On the way back from the kidnapping, Gaear kills a state policeman, which draws pregnant-but-dogged rural Police Chief Marge

Gunderson (Frances McDormand) into the stew. Carl, picking up the million, rather than Jerry, finds Wade brandishing a gun and promptly kills him. And from here things go really downhill – Marge investigates while the low-budget criminals get progressively bloodier and more bloodied. (Rated R)

The key to *Fargo* comes at the very end, after the criminals are either dead or safely under lock and key. Marge goes home and comfortably slips into bed with Norm, her artist/painter househusband. He proudly announces that his design has been accepted for a 3-cent stamp. While he is happy to have one of his paintings circulated throughout the country, he would prefer regular postage. He feels no one will see his stamp, for who uses 3-cent stamps? Marge chimes in supportively that he need just wait until the postal rates change and everyone stuck with the old stamps will have to use his mid-Western stamp to bring them up to date. As with most of the Coen brothers' films, we have here a metaphor both obvious and well-hidden.

This seemingly innocent incident, on reflection, becomes an allegorical explanation of what happens throughout *Fargo*. Like postal rates, cultures change. People suddenly find themselves in need of some value or ethic they previously considered unimportant (the psycho/social equivalent to a 3-cent stamp). And when they mail a letter – communicate, express themselves (that is, live their lives) – the driving force, the postage, to be successful must be a

combination of the new and the old, the obvious and the obscure, the popular and the unknown, and, in *Fargo*, what must be combined are the dominant culture we egocentrically associate with the coasts and the seemingly isolated values of Midwestern Minnesota.

With this in mind, let us go back and identify the various driving forces in *Fargo* and follow some of their complex interactions.

As with most of the Coens' films (*Blood Simple* [1984], *Raising Arizona* [1987], *Miller's Crossing* [1990]), it is the interactions between the characters that are really important, not the characters themselves. (Indeed, the Coens often seem to define their characters superficially and then condemn them for being superficial. On the other hand, our culture defines people mostly by what they do rather than what they "are.") This does not mean, however, that the characters are unimportant or uninteresting. While on a larger scale, Coens' films are populated, within the context of the film, with nobodies. Yet the people are fascinating, if for nothing else, for their shallowness. Yet despite ourselves, we often find ourselves caring about them, all of them. Sometimes the more corrupt the character in a Coen film, the more we care about them. Perhaps they, better than the more three-dimensional characters in other films, reflect our own deeply feared shallowness and superficiality. We care about them because, while flawed, they are still the heroes (male and

female) of the story and exhibit a clear tendency toward growth, health, and personal satisfaction on a scale that is, in reality, easier to identify with than the superheroics of a James Bond or a Batman.

Not only are the individuals, heroic and criminal, charmingly flawed, but in a Coen film the culture itself is likewise tainted. What has invaded the Midwest like a virus is the curse of modernity. Contemporary values imported from the sinful East and West Coasts, both good and bad (greed and feminist ideology, for example, good or bad depending on your political position) have subverted the "true American values" preserved in America's heartland. Yet, what we might expect from this sort of party line – universal corruption and loss of values destroying "America" – does not happen in *Fargo*. Rather, social (though not political) modernity is absorbed and integrated so fully into the indigenous culture that it becomes totally subsumed. As a result, it is wholly unremarkable to those living it. We have, for instance, a Chief of Police who is seven months pregnant and investigating a triple homicide. And no one even bats an eyelash. A feminist's dream come true in a place where no feminist would dare tread. And her husband stays at home, takes care of the house (and cooks her breakfast at three o'clock in the morning when she must get up to investigate said murders), and, in his spare time, paints pictures of waterfowl! Were this scenario played out in Los Angeles or New York City, it would be front-page news in the liberal press; in the Minnesota of

Fargo it is even more amazing because it is so unremarkable to those playing it out.

Just as lofty political agendas become pedestrian when filtered into the Midwest (at least the Midwest as visualized by the Coens, Minnesota natives themselves, by the way), so does the corruption. We have small time hoods with small time ideas trying, more than anything else, to imitate what they see on television and in the movies – more coastal introjects into the heartland culture. In fact, all the locals seem wedded to a cycle of work-dinner-TV (and small talk invariably full of inanities).

And it is here that the nature of the Coens' black comedy resides: the Midwestern dwarfs trying to imitate the Coastal giants, like the little people we see in the film driving past the statue of Paul Bunyan that dominates the town in which Marge is the police chief. Yet, it is not quite that simple. They acquit themselves quite well in dealing with the criminals. Marge functions as a detective on a par with the best. Truly, were a Harry Callahan or a Popeye Doyle placed in the middle of this crime, they probably would not have done as well, as coolly, or as smoothly. Marge's broad face is a mask which hides a native intelligence that peeks through for short (and stunningly delightful) moments in the film. And it is here that the Coens' turn the tables on us.

The Minnesotans are not the brunt of this wicked little joke, we are. We are forced to question our smugness, our complacency, and our superiority. When we gasp at the layer upon layer of red meat Marge piles on her plate at a buffet, it is we, not her, that the film points its finger at. When we titter at a one-word conversation, consisting of nothing but a Scandinavian "Yaaa" bouncing back and forth, it is our own sophisticated yet unable-to-communicate language that is questioned, not the simple but true communication between these rubes. The Coens warn us over and over again not to be taken in by the flat faces, broad smiles, and empty eyes. Marge seems to turn on the Minnesota lilt when it is to her benefit to hide behind it, to lull the other party, its rhythm inducing psychic sleep. Dangerous!

Admirably, *Fargo* goes further than simply showing "them" to be more successful at our own game than "us." The Coens warn us that values everywhere are not monolithic. There is a complex intertwining of good and evil – in the Midwest and everywhere else. And, as they have done before in *Blood Simple* and *Miller's Crossing*, they post warnings about jumping to conclusions. They do not claim to have answers; but with a remarkable humor, they lay open the questions. In many ways, the form of *Fargo* follows its function. It is just as deadpan and the denizens of the frozen wasteland it so mercilessly portrays.

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