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National College of Art & Design
Faculty of Design and Department of Visual Communications

FARGO: Method and Meaning

by

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and Complementary Studies in Candidacy
for the Degree of B. Design in Visual Communications 1999

Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

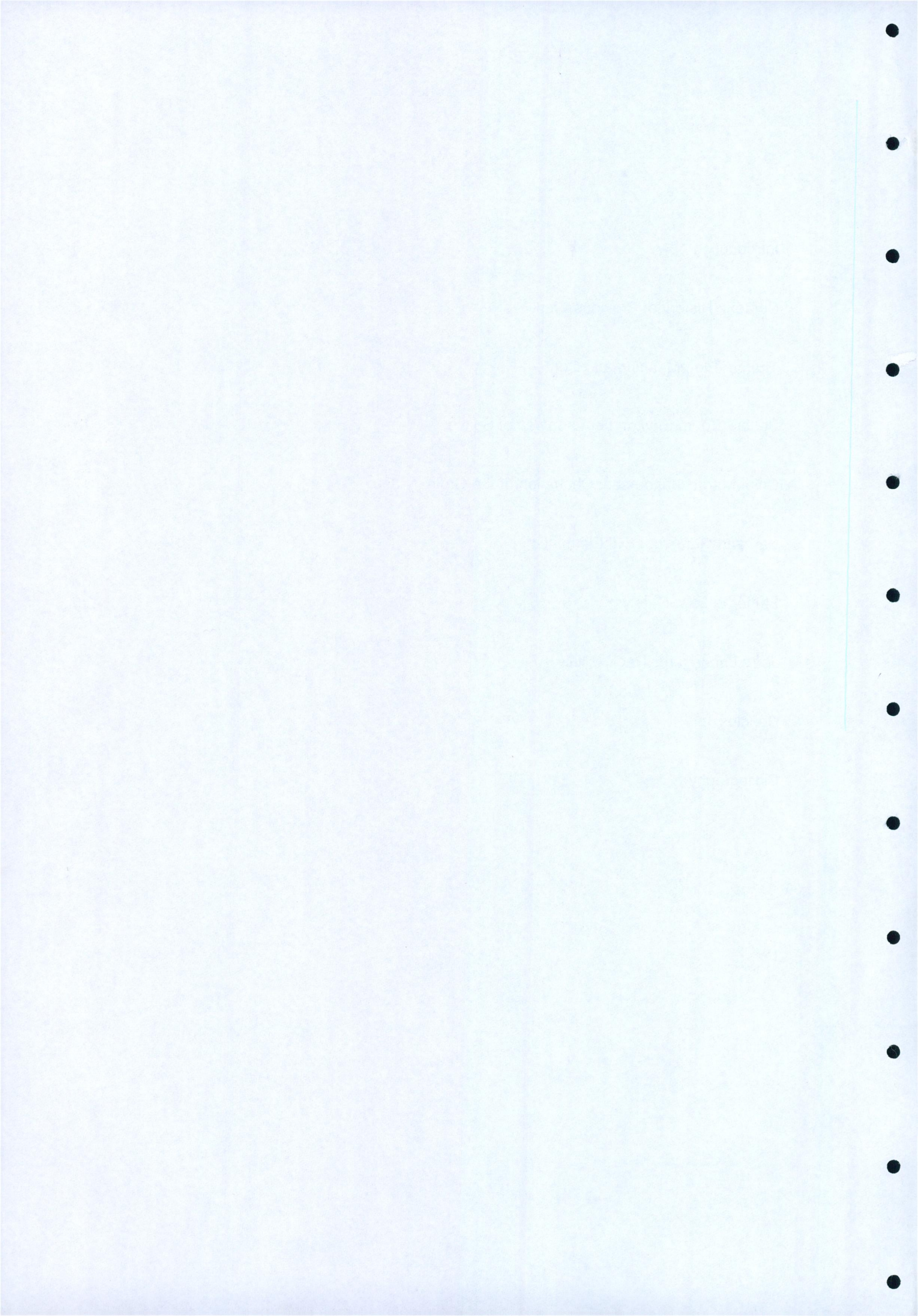
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

1990-1991

Division of Field Operations
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Introduction

In this thesis, I will try to make sense of the film, Fargo, honestly and sensibly. I will first establish a brief context, examining the collective works of Joel and Ethan Coen and extract the common factors and progressions/contrasts that give their work it's distinction. Following that, will be the detailed analysis of the film Fargo itself that aims to define the meaning and method that makes it's a quality work. This analysis is covered in six main chapters:

1. Theme - Introduction of corrupt evil element into an innocent, small town environment, the contrasts and conflicts, turning points.
2. Setting - The environment, use of space, indoors and outdoors.
3. Marge - Is examined , with an emphasis on her relationship with the Mid West and her role as a women and as protagonist.
4. Karl and Grimsrud - The evil element.
5. Wade - Is the catalyst for the catastrophe, that is Jerry.
6. Jerry - An examination of the Character's psychology, function within the narrative and the methods, in which those two elements are portrayed.

The reason why I have chosen the main Characters as the Emphasis is explained as follows.

In beginning of Fargo, it states, that it is based on a true story but at the end it has a disclaimer. This has been cause for some debate by critics. I have no doubt, this is a film based on a true story as the Coens themselves attest. Aside from the obvious kidnap plot that appeals to the Coens, the narrative structure and method is strikingly different to their previous work. I do not believe their previous films demonstrate them capable of writing a film as close to reality as Fargo. The viewer has a good idea of how the characters behave and can understand that chaos will ensue but is unable to anticipate how it will happen. The plot arranges to twist and surprise us while being honest and sincere in it's depiction of the characters. It does not sacrifice the consistency of the characters for dramatic surprise or plot development. It is this delicate consistency that makes Fargo so authentic, free from the constraints of genre, just as in real life, it is the characters that determine the plot. It is not a formalist theme or plot inhabited by characters, but the other way around, it is a real story that happens to have an intrinsic social theme.

Dear Mr. [Name]

I am writing to you

regarding the matter

of the [Subject]

which you mentioned

in your letter of

the [Date]

and I am pleased

to hear that you

are interested in

the [Subject]

and I am sure that

you will find the

information I am

able to provide

of interest to you.

I am sure that you

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Considering the story is a chance event that occurred from the interaction of real people and the characters are the key elements that define the story, I have placed the emphasis of the analysis upon them. Any apparent or deliberate theme is of direct consequence to the behaviour of the characters. It is under that premise that I will describe the mise-en-scene, shots, editing, etc, that define the characters themselves. Described under the same process is the Theme that results from their interaction and the Setting that helps define it.

The subjects of each chapter may overlap to maintain continuity and to prevent repetition resulting in chapters of varying length. A densely rich and unconventional narrative I have found it difficult to categorise the film in a conventional manner.

Since I will be going through the entire film in more detail. I will summarise the story of Fargo briefly. It is set in the harsh winter landscape of Minnesota and North Dakota. Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) is a loser car salesman in serious debt so he hires a couple of incompetent crooks, Grimsrud and Showalter (Peter Stormare and Steve Buscemi) to kidnap his wife(Kristin Rudrud). His father-in-law (Harve Presnell), who treats him terribly, is rich and Jerry and the crooks are going to split the \$80,000 ransom money that the father-in-law will pay. Of course it all goes wrong and Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), a seven month pregnant police chief from Brainerd, gets involved.

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Chapter 1.

Context: History of Previous Work

It will be worthwhile first to give a brief history of the Coen brothers. Born and raised in the suburbs of Minneapolis, Joel and Ethan Coen are the sons of two college professors. Ethan Coen, a philosophy major from Princeton, worked as a statistical typist at Macys' while his brother Joel started off working as an assistant film editor for horror guru Sam Raimi, after graduating from New York University Film School.

They write all their own scripts together and while it is maintained in the credits of all their films, that Joel is director and Ethan producer, it is in fact a collaborative process as the two brothers themselves will attest. Their work is probably best characterised or known for it's distinctive, quirky visuals and most of all, it's precisely engineered plots. Like a choreography between their characters and props, their films have a consistent cartoon-like quality to the movement or style of action.

Their best work is distinctive from the rest because it has meaning, but even then, it is often heavily layered under method. This is probably due to an original career in horror, both Joel and Ethan Coen pursued under the guidance of their friend and mentor, Sam Raimi. Their style, interesting as it is, tends to overpower, distract from the viewing pleasure or simply leave nothing to enjoy. The explanation for this appears to be obvious when their work falls under the definition of post-modern Hollywood:

“First, it is based on pastiche of traditional generic material. Second, much of this imitation is of images from the past offered as a nostalgic substitute for any real exploration of either the past or the present. Third, this referencing the past reflects another problem the artist faces today: not being able to say anything that has not already been said.”-(Belton, 1994)

While these points are applicable to many excellent contemporary films, they seem to be an outline of flaws in a Coen Film. Most spectators do not approve or enjoy a work that simply explores a plot over multiple genres without any inherent meaning or viewpoint. Many, including myself would not distinguish between the meaning/ message/ concept and the subject matter. Perhaps it was this lack that was the cause of inconsistency in their work. There seems to be a definite exploration of method and plot but not of subject. This is typical of post-modern Hollywood, that tends to emphasis a manipulation of conventions for it's sake alone.

Here is a brief History and overview of their work.

Chapter 1
General History of Previous Work

The first part of the book is devoted to a general history of the work done in this field. It begins with a survey of the early work of the pioneers in the field, and then proceeds to a more detailed account of the work of the more recent workers. The author discusses the various methods used in the study of the subject, and the progress that has been made in our knowledge of it. He also points out the limitations of the present state of our knowledge, and suggests some of the lines in which further work should be done.

The second part of the book is devoted to a detailed account of the work of the author himself. It begins with a description of the methods used in the study of the subject, and then proceeds to a detailed account of the results obtained. The author discusses the various factors which influence the results, and suggests some of the lines in which further work should be done.

The third part of the book is devoted to a detailed account of the work of other workers in the field. It begins with a description of the methods used in the study of the subject, and then proceeds to a detailed account of the results obtained. The author discusses the various factors which influence the results, and suggests some of the lines in which further work should be done.

Their first film was the film noir/drama/thriller *Blood Simple* (1984). This film was slightly more gruesome and hard-edged than their following work, probably due to the fact the makers, novices at the time, were eager to make an impact on the critical world. The film set in harsh, rural Texas, with standard characters and love/hate triangle story, is a showcase for the Coens' plot manipulating and action skills. Unlike many novice films, it is not too cleverly constructed, the construction only being slightly obvious. Although it is excellent, the film appears to be the result of a conflict of issues, a serious horror film? Despite that, it was a viciously exciting debut and superb thriller, made on a modest \$1.5 million budget. It immediately established their style as outlined above: a (murder) scheme gone wrong - causing a complex plot - causing quirky action. With this film, the Coen brothers made a substantial landmark in independent film-making.

Satisfied they had proved themselves able to deliver a serious and gruesome film, they collaborated with old time friend Sam Raimi to make *Crimewave* (1985) aka *Broken Hearts and Noses* aka *XYZ Murders*. Made as a comedy/crime/cartoon film it results during many moments in a very disturbing and surreal horror. This film seems more of a token homage to Sam Raimi (*Evil Dead* trilogy) than the work of the Coens. Told from the electric chair by a nerd framed for murder, it tells the story of a pair of cartoon-type contract-killer/ exterminators hired to kill the owner of a burglar-alarm company, of course it all goes wrong. An interesting and sometimes funny film, it demonstrates the hellish, nightmare world that's created when you apply cartoon physics and scenarios to a real world.

The next film *Raising Arizona* (1987), is both loved and despised by critics. Ironically it's also one of the most watchable films from the Coen brothers, achieving moderate, commercial success. The film is narrated by the main character H.I. (Nicolas Cage) who is a habitual, convenience store thief. He gets caught for, what he hopes, the last time and pledges to go straight. After getting out of prison he marries Ed (Holly Hunter), the officer who took his mug shots in the police station and they set up a home together. Things turn sour when they realise they can't have children. At the same time a furniture giant and his wife have five babies so Ed convinces H.I. to steal one. With humourous typical white-trash logic she rationalises that, with five babies, they shouldn't miss one. Meanwhile his ex-friends escape out of prison and a bounty hunter like a character from *Mad Max* comes to hunt him down. A typical Coen plot emerges and it all results in a very physical and wacky comedy. The main criticism made by some individuals such as Roger Ebert, is the film's inability to decide if it's fantasy or reality.



"It moves so uneasily from one level of reality to another that finally we're just baffled. Comedy often depends on frustrating the audience's expectations. But how can it work when we don't have a clue about what to expect - when the movie itself doesn't know what is possible and what is not?"

-(Ebert, 1996, Chicago Sun Times)

That is a very valid argument and the issue of fantasy Vs reality appears again in their later work and in the slightly different shape of formalism Vs realism. Realism and fantasy side by side, (actually occurring together in real time - dreams, delusions etc. excluded) do tend to cancel each other out and films where this occurs, tend have no meaning or content. The film Raising Arizona certainly lacks any meaning and oscillates annoyingly between genres, but it is a comedy and should be treated as such. Film theory is perhaps not the most suitable way to analyse a comedy and while it is the critic's job to express their opinion about what is funny and what is not, it is silly to argue one's opinion using mechanical theories such as: "Comedy often depends on frustrating the audiences' expectations"

In 1990, the Coens released Miller's Crossing. A genre that had been explored many times by a large number of outstanding films, the old-time gangster genre was certainly a step into the big kids' playground. The story is about a power struggle, a love-triangle and deception. Based on Irish gangsters in an unnamed town, Albert Finney is the crime boss with the mayor and chief of police under his thumb, his lieutenant and the main protagonist is Gabriel Byrne. A couple of crooks come to Albert requesting they whack a lowlife, bookie John Turturro. Finney refuses because Turturro happens to be the brother of Finney's love Marcia Gay Harden. What's more Harden and Byrne are having an affair. Then it gets complicated. With so many twists, it's been compared to Bogart's The Big Sleep.

It is still a typical Coen film, with characters that define the word character, cartoon - action and a plot that's complex even for a Coen brothers film. It is a good film in it's own right with excellent production design, rich dialogue and good action but compare it to a film like Once Upon A Time In America or Angels with Dirty Faces and it seems again to be another showcase for plot manipulation, lacking any underlying truth or authenticity. Without any real issues or meaning, it seems a little pointless and mediocre.

Perhaps two Jewish sons from a family of College Professors are not the most suitable candidates to write and direct a movie about Irish gangsters. This is a problem that tends to repeat itself in their work, writing about things they evidently don't have any experience of, whether it's about Irish gangsters or white trash from Texas or Arizona.

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During the making of Miller's Crossing, Joel and Ethan were plagued with script problems and suffered terribly from writer's block. The result was a script called "Barton Fink". Production began almost immediately after Miller's Crossing was complete and in 1991, the Coens had released their first truly inspired film. Finally the Coens were writing and directing something they knew about. Barton Fink is not about a crime plan gone wrong or a twisting plot. It is about writers block, something the Coens had had plenty of experience of. A post-modern Hollywood film it examined with great success the plight faced by films makers today. The film is a perfect expression of the frustration faced by post modern Hollywood, a post modern Hollywood picture about post modern Hollywood. A film made by the generation that have nothing meaningful to say, it's about the agony of having nothing meaningful to say.

A deco-period film, it's main protagonist is Barton Fink (John Turturro), a young and talented writer, who is invited to Hollywood after a successful debut on Broadway. But Barton is pretentious and naive, he claims to his neighbour, in the hotel he stays, Charlie (John Goodman) to be in touch with the common man, yet he barely has time to listen to Charlie. Barton's room is a dump but a strangely interesting one at that and the more and more he tries to concentrate on completing his Hollywood assignment, the more he is distracted. An excellent piece of self-reference and studio versus the writer film, this work elevated the Coen brothers above many contemporaries.

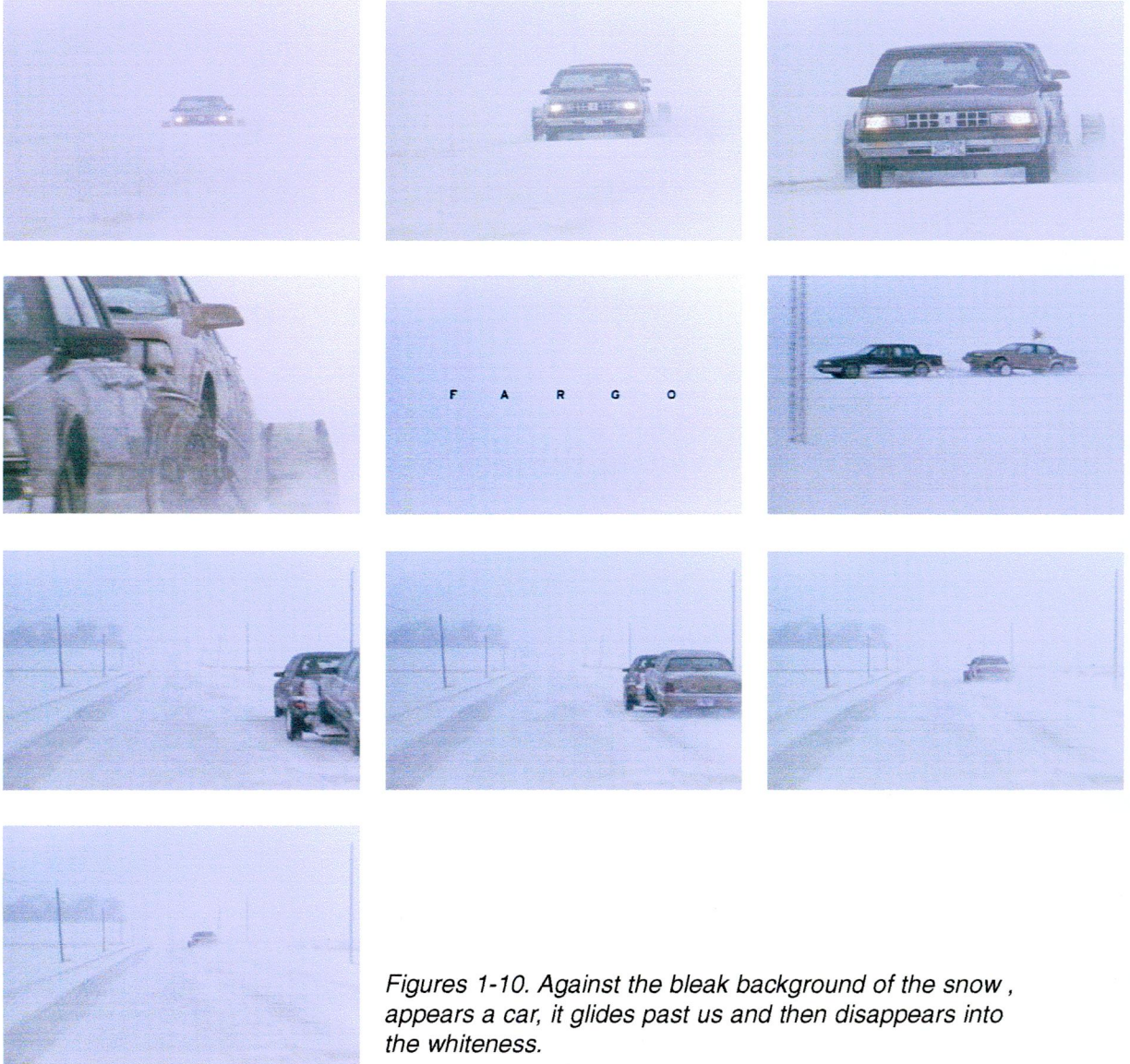
Following the critical acclaim the Coens acquired with Barton Fink, somebody decided to give them a considerable sum of money to do something special. \$25 million was spent on Hudsucker Proxy, which was released in 1994. It was both a major commercial and artistic disappointment. Based on a story the Coens had written with Sam Raimi, Hudsucker Proxy is set in 1958 but in a typical use of bricolage, you wouldn't know it from the decor which is 30's and 40's. Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) is a moron who unwillingly becomes the centre of a scam to lower the stock prices of a company so the board of managers, headed by Paul Newman, can buy the company. They put Norville in charge of the entire company in the hope he'll screw it up and scare the stockholders. But Norville is a huge success and the story kicks in. This film is beautiful to look at and has the trademark cartoon action of the Coen brothers film. The film's budget was lavished on the Coen's self indulgence. But there is no heart in this film and once you've seen it, there's no emotional pull to see it again. Unfortunately the Coens had, again, nothing interesting to say.

One can't help wonder if the Coens deliberately pick periods of time, they have no experience of, because most of their audience won't either, as though to avoid the question of authenticity. But it's futile and pointless when their work as no truth in it, abstract or real. It seemed the Coen brothers might always be some interesting oddity in the film business, known to film buffs and critics and appreciated only by purists. In 1996, Fargo was released, their seventh film in a career over a decade old.



Chapter 2.
Theme: Plot, Meaning and Content

Fargo begins as it ends in a contradictory, sombre but dreamlike road sequence. Amongst the bleak whiteness of the snow where the sky is indistinguishable from the ground, a car slowly cruises towards us in extreme depth of field, towing another car in slow motion. It's just an everyday car in a surreal, cruel environment. The car appears out of horizonless white background and disappears into the same featureless whiteness. This opening shot is a subtle indication of the extraordinary events that will take place in an ordinary small town world.



Figures 1-10. Against the bleak background of the snow , appears a car, it glides past us and then disappears into the whiteness.

Essentially, the theme of the film is a depiction of how the humble, laid back inhabitants of a small town world are invaded by the evil element of the outside world. Jerry is the local mediator between these two worlds, it is he who invites this outside evil.

Chapter 1
Introduction and Overview

The first part of the book discusses the history and development of the field. It covers the early days of research and the evolution of the discipline over time. The author provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of the field and identifies key areas for future research. The second part of the book focuses on the methodology and research design. It discusses the various methods used in the field and provides detailed instructions on how to conduct research. The author also discusses the importance of ethical considerations in research and provides guidelines for ensuring the integrity of the research process. The third part of the book covers the analysis and interpretation of data. It discusses the various statistical methods used in the field and provides detailed instructions on how to analyze and interpret data. The author also discusses the importance of reporting research results and provides guidelines for writing research papers. The final part of the book discusses the future of the field and the role of the researcher. It discusses the challenges facing the field and provides suggestions for how to overcome these challenges. The author also discusses the importance of staying current in the field and provides resources for finding the latest research.

Chapter 2
Research Design and Methodology

This chapter discusses the various methods used in research and provides detailed instructions on how to conduct research. It covers both quantitative and qualitative methods and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each. The author also discusses the importance of choosing the right method for the research question and provides guidelines for selecting a method. The chapter also discusses the importance of pilot testing and provides instructions on how to conduct a pilot test. The author also discusses the importance of documenting the research process and provides guidelines for keeping accurate records. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the importance of ethical considerations in research and provides guidelines for ensuring the integrity of the research process.

The film explores an innocent culture's reaction and how their champion, a pregnant police chief from Brainerd defeats the intruders in her humble, laid back way.

While their previous and subsequent films have also dealt with murder/kidnap/crime schemes gone wrong and the elaborate plots that result, Fargo plot development is not tedious or overtly clever but honest and genuinely surprising. Many crime films begin with a relatively stable situation, a carefully worked out plan or scheme comes into play and as things go wrong and the situation deteriorates a plot emerges. But in Fargo, this half-assed crime of kidnap is falling apart from the start. In the very beginning there is confusion over the meeting-time to discuss the kidnap arrangements. There's even some confusion over Jerry's request and Karl proceeds to explain what he finds unsatisfactory about the situation then gives up, it doesn't really matter.

It is this genuine reality, that is brought across with the humble and sincere use of cinematography, the Coens pursuing a more straight forward approach that is less artificial than their previous work, emphasising the reality of the story. Joel Coen states:

“We wanted to try something based on a real story and tell it in a way that was pare down. That’s the reason for a lot less camera movement and the one-shot scenes to give it a more observational kind of style”

-(Premiere, March 1996, p. 78)

Built up around the characters, are an elaborate array of comparisons, the two worlds outside and in, contrasted consistently. The Characters validate themselves through the way the react themselves of different situations. The Authenticity of Fargo is very important and is quite an achievement in the narrative when it is considered how difficult it is to maintain a genuinely surprising plot within the realms of reality.

“The concept of reality is problematic in cinema...The concept is generally used in two different ways. First the extent to which a film attempts to mimic reality..Second, the film can establish it’s own world, and can by consistently using the same conventions establish it’s own world.”

-(Allan Rowe, An Introduction to Film Studies, p. 90)

Fargo simply relies on authenticity, written and directed by individuals who are natives to it’s setting, it is based on a true story that happens to be incredible, using superb actors many of which are also native.

The contrasts in Fargo generally occur separately becoming in the collective sense comparisons or in the case of single scenes, clashes that result in conflict.

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In one scene, Grimsrud and Karl are having functional sex with prostitutes in a motel room, this fades to the four people in bed watching the tonight show. This cuts to the kitchen in Jerry's home, it's morning and his wife Gene is busy as ever stirring vigorously in some pot while lecturing Scotty on his bad grades.

The first scene is just lowlife criminals fulfilling their basic and simple needs, It's night in a dingy motel. That is the limit of their existence, after sex they are brain dead. In the home scenario we see social issues and activities taking place, it's breakfast, a time most criminals miss.

The conflicts/ or events that occur when Karl and Grimsrud clash with the provincial locals are quite unpleasant and amusing, when Karl tries to bribe a police officer, the result is a triple homicide. But the absurdity of their presence, is no more better shown than in the kidnap. It is a beautifully conceived, there is no warning and yet no suddenness. It's surreal. Gene, Jerry's erratic house wife is busy as ever knitting away while watching T.V. She gets distracted by something outside and stares not so much in disbelief but in complete lack of understanding (it's too unfamiliar to her world) as Karl comes up to window outside casually dressed in a balaclava and matching crowbar. Marge stares at him, in curious fascination as he tries to see through the double glazing ,taking his time (Figure. 11).

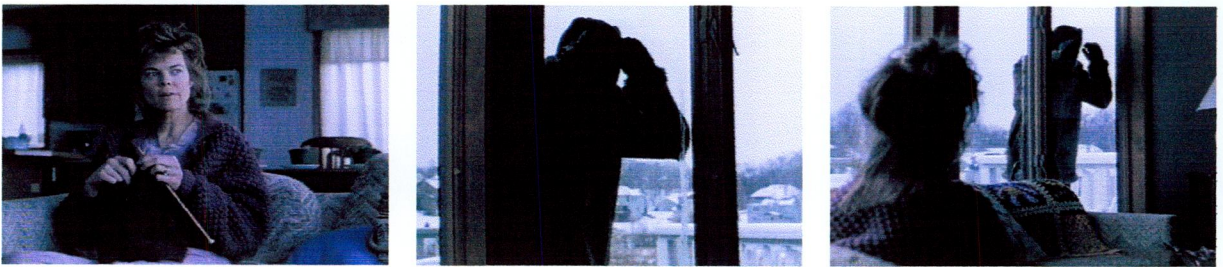


Figure 11. Gene stares curiously while a man in a balaclava and crowbar looks through her window

Only when he smashes the window, does she snap out of the trance and try to run. At the end of scene, she lies unconscious at the bottom of the stairs. Grimsrud is comical, crouching over and poking her like an ogre from grim fairy tale.

Of the many conflicts that occur the most interesting is when Wade meets Karl. It's a clever play on formalism Vs realism, formalism being something Post-modern Hollywood filmmakers enjoy manipulating and debunking. Karl's tan Cierra is parked on the roof of the multi-storey car park. Wade's big jet black car enters the frame confidently. Karl steps out, his attire in the same shabby colour as his car. Wade steps out, dressed almost completely in black, he is as severe looking as his car, like death itself. But this is not classic hollywood, this is real. It's Karl's world and it is he who



does not acknowledge Wade, shooting him without hesitation. Wade, like an old giant, collapses in slow motion, defeated.

While the most of the contrasts are separate, we are, however in one scene, given an undiluted comparison that occurs in a single scene. Two separate conversations that both end as brief monologues, are played out in succession. It is Jerry, himself the ideal mediator of contrasting values, who receives these two unpleasant phone calls, both of a serious and demanding nature. It is worthwhile here to outline the last uninterrupted lines of each of these phone calls.

The first is from Karl who screams and shouts into the phone:

"Don't ever interrupt me Jerry, just shut the fuck up!
I'm not going to debate with you, debate. We now want
the entire 80 thousand"

The second is from General Motors speaking in a relaxed but firm monotone voice:

"I must inform you however that absent the receipt of
those numbers tomorrow afternoon, I will have to refer the
matter to our legal department. My patience is at an
end. Good day sir"

As a contrast, it is too successful, too obvious for the viewer to extract much pleasure and serves mainly to assault Jerry on both sides emphasising his own personal conflict and entrapment. In the following scene he is suitably framed in wide shot, raging in his tiny isolated office.

A character orientated plot, it is the dialogue that takes precedence. The dual styles of dialogue highlight contrasting elements and reinforce a sense of fond empathy with the local inhabitants whose pleasant character treatment is understated enough to be short of excess.

The inhabitants of Minnesota and North Dakota may be portrayed with a dim innocence but the film progressively demonstrates there is a slow methodical relentlessness to their society and effective responsibility that results from their Naivete. The outsider of the criminal element has a contempt for such wholesomeness and has advantages that being uncomformist provides but it is no match against the collective duty of a close knit community.

One of the locals calls a police man out to describe in a typically banal and amusing manner, his chance meeting and brief interaction with a man fitting Karl's description, the profundity of it compelling him to contact the police, although, as the Police man agrees, it was probably nothing. This is followed by an equally laid back discussion of the weather.

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Such dialogues richly layered under scandinavian accents, the amusing and very ethnic dialect of the inhabitants, consistently strengthen the stability of this invaded culture giving the outside criminal element a comical futility. It should be absurd, but even the prostitutes who serviced Karl and Grimsrud are convincingly portrayed as cooperative and friendly when Marge interviews them. There doesn't seem to be any locals apart from Jerry who are unpleasant. This create an urgency in the plot and before long we want them to win, we want Marge to catch the criminals, get the villain while the viewer sits back to enjoy a good Vs evil movie set in the real world.

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Chapter 3. Setting: Tone, Environment and use of Space

Right from the very beginning, the Coens knew they were going to be using the flat midwestern landscape to establish the atmosphere of the film. Joel Coen himself says:

“Everything is white, just an empty field of vision. One of the things we (Joel and Ethan) talked about with Roger Deakin, the director of photography, was the idea of not being able to see where the horizon line is, where the land ends and the sky begins. Originally we were talking about doing shots that looked down from a high place that appeared to be almost the same as shots that looked up”

-(Premiere, March 1996, P:78)

The cold white world of Minnesota couldn't be more suitable for a Coen brothers film, their work having that cold and uncompromising method that is as relentless and absolute as the white landscape of Minnesota. It is no surprise then, as the authenticity of this film will show, that the two brother are natives to the midwest land, their style perhaps a product of living there.

Many of the snow covered scenes have a surreal abstract quality, in one instance the road appearing to float in whiteness, and throughout the film there is a profound sense of isolation in which every out door location is surrounded by an bleak emptiness whether it be against the night sky on top of a multi-storey car park or the cold endless highway. Also disturbing is a subtle sense of discontinuity not in the narrative but in the unconventional setups and use of indoor locations. With the exception of the hideout location, the meeting point at the beginning in Fargo and the almost extraneous Blue Ox restaurant shot (there so we would understand Marge's first lead), there are no establishing shots.

Jerry's home, Wade's office, Marge's home, the police station, even the Rattison where Marge meets an old school chum, all lack apparent location. Of coarse they exist as locations within the plot but without the concrete evidence or presence of their exteriors against a setting, it is difficult to maintain a tangible, physical relationship between these locations.

All we are presented with is indoors and outdoors, without a halfway point, both contrast dramatically in terms of space. It is this use of space that creates a surreal undertone to the film. Rather than crystallise the relationship between plot and characters, it creates an effective, almost emotional claustrophobia that won't allow us to simply observe and establish our response. It draws us deeper into the character driven plot, the constant pace of development, transforming it into a euphoric blur.

Section 1: Introduction

The first part of the document discusses the background and objectives of the study.

The second part of the document describes the methodology used in the research, including data collection and analysis techniques.

The third part of the document presents the results of the study, showing the data and statistical analysis.

The fourth part of the document discusses the implications of the findings and provides conclusions based on the research.

The fifth part of the document includes a summary of the key points and a final conclusion.

The sixth part of the document provides a list of references used in the study.

The seventh part of the document contains a list of appendices and additional information.

The eighth part of the document includes a list of figures and tables used in the study.

The ninth part of the document contains a list of footnotes and additional notes.



Figure 12. Karl looks left and right to make sure no one's watching.

It's even used for comical effect as Karl burying the ransom money by an endless fence which is surrounded by miles of whiteness, looks around to see if anybody is looking and then realises he'd never find his loot if he didn't mark it (see figure .12).

But where this use of isolation and lack of transition between exterior and interior becomes very effective is in reminding us of the fear of the unknown making the invasion of evil more real, unsettling, they could be anywhere at any time. One scene, in extreme wide angle, is a tracking shot of a tiny parasite like car speeding along the highway. If the image was blurred, it could be perceived as an insect flying under an

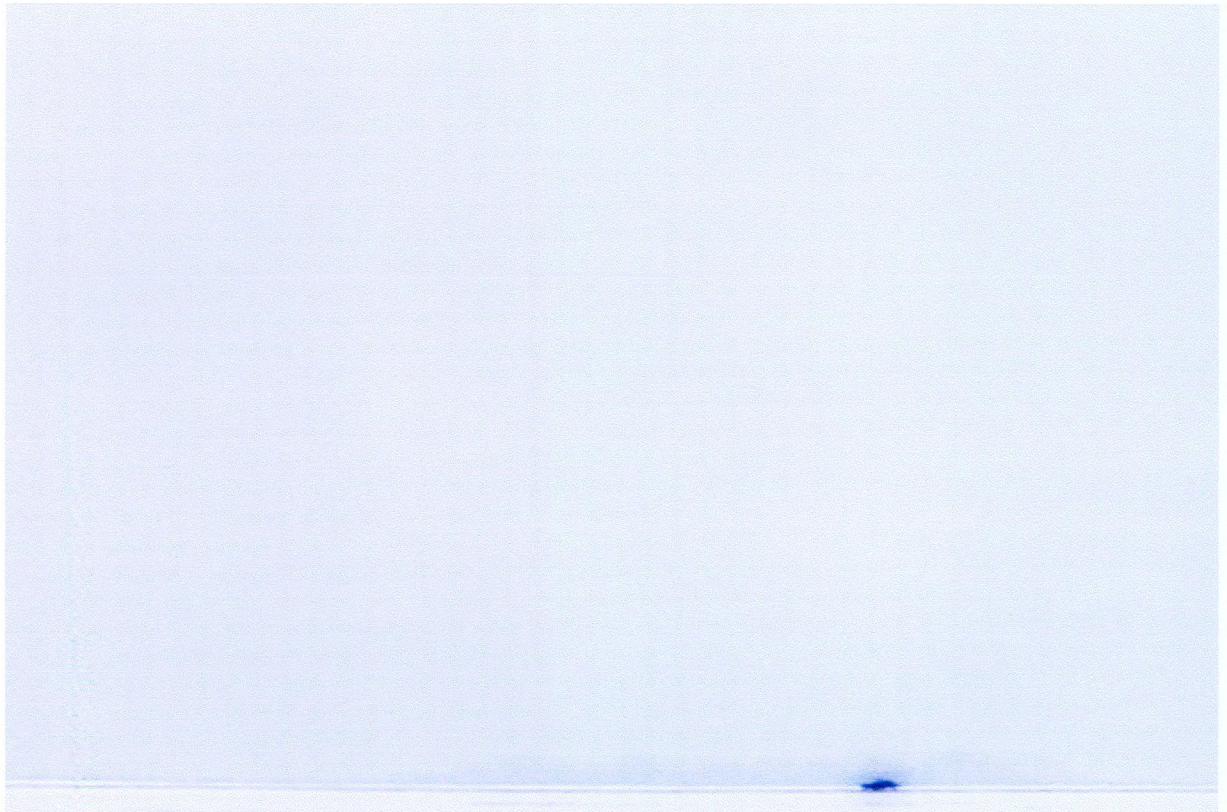


Figure 13. The car flying under the oppressive mass of white emptiness.



oppressive mass of white emptiness, the horizon line off the ground almost impercievable (see figure. 13). Establishing the loneliness we are cut straight into the interior enhancing the unpleasantness with a mild shock of claustrophobia.

The fear established, the horror of isolation and the endless environment that the flat minnesota landscape suggests, quickly emerges in the first three brutal killings. After the surprise killing of the cop, Karl is dragging the corpse onto the side of the freeway. As he does this, two unfortunate locals cruise by, staring in dismay at the morbid scene. They quickly accelerate and Grimsrud leaps into pursuit. Even in their car and with a head start they cannot escape death. The night-time road is infinite providing no escape, it's limitless expanse guaranteeing their death (see figure. 14). It is also this cruel environment that captures Grimsrud himself in the final parts of the film, when he chooses to flee out onto the endless expanse of a frozen lake (see figure. 15).

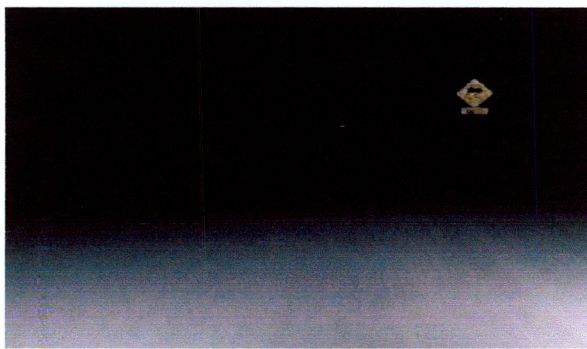


Figure 14- 15. The infinite emptiness provides no escape or refuge.

But space and colour are not the only elements that define the tone, throughout the film, a bitter cold seems to permeate everything .Before we are cut to Marge and Norm's lovely warm luxuriant bed, there is a scene in the Cabin where Karl is trying to get the T.V. going. Gene the kidnap victim, is covered in a woolly hood and tied to a chair. She is motionless except for her breathing which condenses outside the hood. It is very impacting scene reminding us that behind the hood is delicate, warm life, a mind. And as the camera cuts between zooming in slowly on the Victim and the T.V. Karl is banging on, the noise of the banging intensifies, becoming almost non-diegetic, dreamlike. This intense scene reminds us of the urgency of situation, Gene needs help. Then, there is a cut of course to Marge in bed.



Chapter 4 Chief Marge Gunderson: Champion of the Ordinary Joe

Frances McDormand's performance is excellent for a role in a realistic film that deliberately slides along the edge of surreal. Her performance is best described by Roger Ebert who stated her performance:

“is true in every individual moment, and yet slyly, quietly over the top in it's cumulative effect”

-(Ebert, Chicago Sun Times, March 1996)

Marge Gunderson, the pregnant police chief of Brainerd is the perfect champion of small town community. Here is a woman who does not let her pregnancy compromise or separate her from her dangerous career. But she's not out to prove herself, she just gets on with her job. She has no hesitation asking for help giving her Prowler a jump start. She is a good authority figure commanding situations with common sense and good wits. Marge has excellent people skills. When Lou makes an error calling resources on a false presumption, Marge is gentle in correcting his flawed police work. Always practical she takes time out after talking to the Minneapolis Police Chief on the phone concerning the case to ask him where's a nice place to eat and then with hand on hip: “Oh yah, is it reasonable?”

She can analysis the scene of brutal executions with a charming banality that's familiar with all the locals, only pausing momentarily when morning sickness briefly passes and then practicality pervading, announcing, she's hungry, it's time to eat. Food plays an essential part of Marge's scenes and despite the obvious necessity for a pregnant woman to eat the food, it emphasises a very cultural traditional homeliness that is associated with generous amounts of food. As Joel Coen put it:

“In Minnesota you have all these smorgasbords. These Swedish -style eat all-you-can deals were very much part of our childhood. Marge is pregnant, so she's eating for a reason, but it is also that peculiarly Middle-American thing about mounds of food. She wants to catch the killer but nothing gets in the way of lunch”

-(Sight and Sound, P:26, Lizzie Francke, May 1996)

She is always eating with Norm and there is a pleasant almost obesity to the scenes in which Marge and Norm are in, not just in the characters but in the situations. In the buffet scene, they walk past an excessive amount of food on display and together with the hypnotic elevator music it's almost intoxicating. Marge and Norm really enjoy their food, eating slowly and trance like. When Norm enters the kitchen scene, he



seems to expand, the tiny chairs and table area in the kitchen emphasising his size. Even the their bed covers seem excessively cosy and comfortable, bringing out feelings of languidness that make going out into the outside all the less desirable. Joel Coen :

“Everyone is bulked up, moving in a particular way, bouncing off people. That sponginess is part of the regional flavour. Marge’s pregnancy means she’s doubly bulked-up. She’s of the region, but is capable, which other characters aren’t. She wears a funny hat and walks funny, but is not a clown.”

-(Sight and Sound, P:26, Lizzie Francke, May 1996)

In fact her demeanour is deceptively laid back, while her second in command stands on the road in a redundant manner, she successfully analysis and figures out exactly how the brutal killings took place. And she does this with scientific objectivity while maintaining a banal charm. After completing an examination of the dead state troopers body and making her assessments, she sincerely comments in the same breath: “He looks like a nice enough guy, it’s a real shame”

Despite her responsibilities, Marge always has time to listen to the emotional needs of Norm, which are trivial compared to the demands and dangers of her profession. Their relationship is more than a role reversal, she’s like a mother to him, his behaviour and emotional dependence on her similar to a child’s. Even the way he addresses her is more like that of a child rather than that of a doting adult. When he announces the Haltmans, rival stamp painters, are entering the competition, he needs Marge’s assurance that he is good enough to compete. She assures him in an authoritative manner that is more correcting than reasoning. She even remembers, after examining a triple homicide to pick up nightcrawlers for his fishing trip.

Unlike the ‘role reversal’ characters of such films, such as in ‘Alien’ and ‘Thelma and Louise’, Marge does not have to be masculine to get results. The questioning scene of Shep is a good example.

A seven month pregnant woman confronted with the unresponsive bulk of Shep, she quickly destroys his silence, manipulating him through unwavering politeness, her eyes wide constantly smiling in expectation she forces him to respond.

But behind the overtly polite confidence, there is an innocence in Marge that is exercised in an interval between her police work and Norm. An old school chum calls her and they arrange to meet in a bar. Entering, it is very evident, she is looking forward to this meeting, she is conscious of her appearance touching up her hair. When she meets Mike, he is overjoyed and a little too enthusiastic in hugging her. He attempts to make an advance on her, which she expertly deflects and diffuses with perfect politeness. Mike then tells her how his wife died of cancer and proceeds to break down,

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telling her how wonderful she is. It is only later that she learns it was all a lie, that he never got married and how he is in fact mentally ill. This is a disturbing revelation and sign of the times for Marge, things aren't always what they seem and the horrors of the outside world are starting to enter her one.

Afterwards we see her cruising, slow and pensive. but she soon gets back on with it. It is Marge who finally destroys Jerry her polite patient perseverance breaking him in the end. At the very end of the film, after solving the case and the apprehension of Grimsrud, when Marge climbs into bed next to Norm, it is Norm's stamp painting competition that takes precedence in the conversation. Norm in a sulken manner announces the Haltmans got the 29p stamp while his mallard only got the 3p stamp. But Marge instantly responds convincing him with a logic based on optimism how the 3p stamp is a significantly important achievement. Then cuddling up to him she announces: "Heck Norm, we're doing pretty good"



Chapter 5. Karl and Grimsrud: Evil Element

Karl and Grimsrud are the dangerous outside element introduced into the humble innocence of small town life. Like the twin aspects of evil in some mythological fable, each are uniquely unpleasant. Steve Buscemi is superbly cast as Karl Showalter. The smallest and strangest looking of the two, he constantly talks. His eyes bulge like an overgrown bug and with a mouth full of vicious teeth, he can easily explode into a flurry of insults or timidly try a bribe. His partner Gear Grimsrud, roughly defined like a big stray dog, spends the duration of the film in a half-dead trance, a cigarette resting limply between his lips. In any other profession, his absence of expression would simply be funny but as a criminal, the lack of insight we have into his personality means impending unknown horrors giving the humour a nervous edge.

Karl is nasty, loud and reactive like the common face of crime. The conflict he causes is the result of his explosive temperament. He is petty and ignorant, he has complete contempt for the locals, being abusive about the most trivial matters. But Grimsrud is both passive and impulsive, saying and doing almost nothing until he has to. Like a child, he is selfish and appears to have simple needs, he is unwilling to compromise, when he wants pancakes he gets pancakes. He leaves Karl to take care of most of the unpleasant proceedings while he spends his time fixated with a cheap T.V. soap.

Despite this apparent apathy he can take control of a situation instantly, methodically killing without any emotion or expression. But Grimsrud is far more sinister than that, almost like the underling essence of evil, like fear itself, he seems to get results with the minimum amount of effort, by his presence alone. Just with his stare he can cause Karl to regret or shrink away from any questioning of Grimsrud's requests. When injured in the kidnap sequence he stops participating, like a child and as though in a trance, he mumbles incoherently about ointment leaving Karl to continue the pursuit while he searches for some medicine. Searching the medicine cabinet he unwittingly realises that Gene, the kidnap victim is hiding behind the shower curtain, behind him. But before he reacts, she comes shrieking out, wrapped in shower curtain. In her panic, she does not remove the shower curtain but stumbles around blindly until she falls down the stairs and is knocked unconscious. Grimsrud casually follows down the stairs. Without making any effort, he's captured and disabled the woman and even had time to get some rope.

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Chapter 6. Father in Law: Catalyst

It is Wade who's presence characterises and defines Jerry's stunted personality and plight very early on in the film. Wade, Jerry's father in law is an oppressive and authoritative man, a typical self-made millionaire, he is strong and self assured. The first time we see him, he's shot from a worm's eye view, almost in his lap, emphasising he is the father and authority figure. He sits tense in his chair like a throne, watching a hockey match with one hand clenched and the other holding a glass of spirits like a sceptre (Figure. 16). Jerry greets him. Like a general, Wade growls a reply at Jerry without even attempting to turn and look at him (Figure. 17).

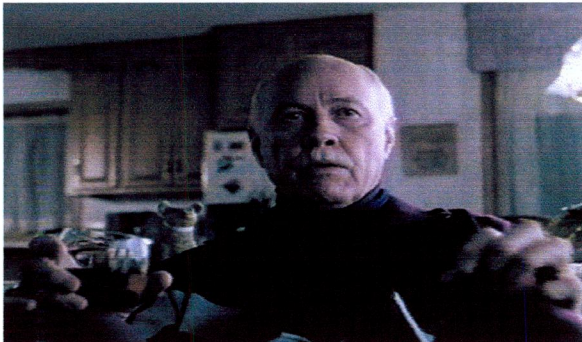


Figure 16 - 17. A man of power and authority Wade dwarfs Jerry.

During dinner Jerry patiently asks Wade about a proposal he wanted the older man to consider. Wade dismisses him and Jerry continues:

"This could work out really well for me, Gene and Scotty"

Wade looking at him out of the corner of his eye, replies:

"Gene and Scotty never have to worry"

Straight after that bombshell of a statement there is a violent cut to a car roaring past the camera along the icy road. We now understand Jerry's predicament. Jerry is controlled by Wade, always given enough to survive on but nothing to help him get his independence. Wade consistently refuses to acknowledge Jerry as anything more than a loser. It is this lack of understanding that leads him to be so easily deceived by Jerry's kidnap plot and ultimately his over-estimation of himself that kills him.

Jerry meets Wade and Stan to inform of them of the kidnap and ransom. Wade cannot put aside his business mentality and immediately proposes they haggle. It is Stan who insists they pay in full. Just in case we sympathise too much with Jerry we have



the reasonably nice Stan who is completely convinced by the ruse. If everybody ignored Jerry then we may possibly feel overly sorry for him, this way he is sly and deceptive. This is reinforced by the next scene where his distraught son makes him look emotionally retarded and dangerous.

Early in the film, Jerry has only one possibility to redeem himself, that would no longer necessitate the kidnap of his wife. Wade had looked at the deal Jerry proposed and asks to meet him but rather than help Jerry finance it and so gain his independence, Wade announces that Jerry won't mind if Wade pursues the proposal himself, "independently". Wade and his assistant Stan speak to him in an unconsciously subtle and derogatory manner, looking at each other and repeating his name while Jerry has to sit awkwardly on the edge of a chair.

Wade consistently refuses to acknowledge Jerry as anything more than a loser and it is this lack of understanding that leads him to be deceived easily by Jerry's kidnap plot and ultimately his own self over-estimation that kills him.



Chapter 7. Jerry Lundegaard: Tragic Villain

Jerry is the most important and interesting character in this film. He is the centre of chaos, a juxtaposition between two worlds, unable to redeem himself in either. He is a local who cannot to interact with any of the locals around him, even his subordinates refuse to interact with him except to respond to his flaws. Adopting a mode of polite behaviour negating the responsibility of simply being himself he is a fake in the guise of a car salesman. He depends on his car dealer mentality to survive he is not intelligent or sensible enough to depend on himself (see figures. 18 -19).

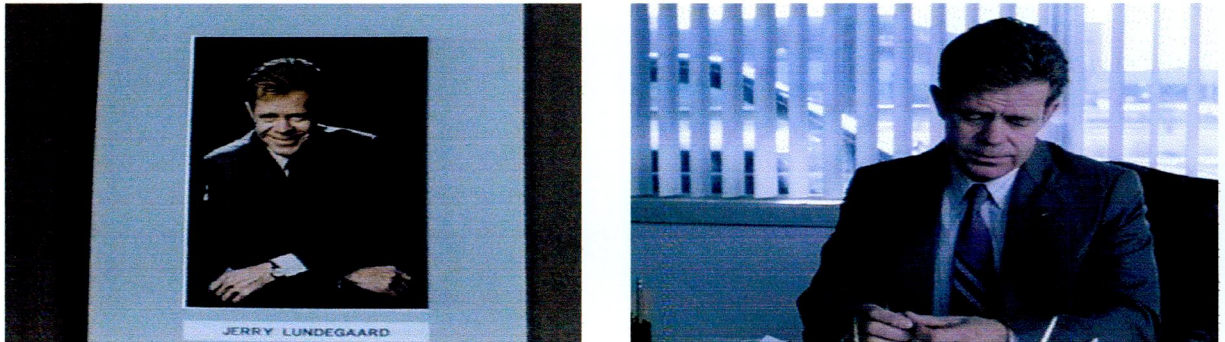


Figure.18-19 Jerry, a fake in the guise of a salesman

Almost like an indirect, subconscious awareness of Jerry's falsehood, people unconsciously assault him, constantly refusing to acknowledge him, even in casual conversation. Jerry attempts to make polite exchange with an employee who's watching a hockey game. The employee barely grunts a reply except when Jerry asks about any spare tickets for the game. Only then does the employee respond, turning to confront the camera (Jerry's point of view) with a pained expression, to say "Are you Kidding?".

When he first meets with Grimsrud and Karl, his temporary employees, they treat him with contempt, interrupting him with interrogatives while he patiently tries to explain himself. Incompetent enough not to have a contact number, he needs to call off the kidnap. When he patiently explains this to Shep, the employee who put him in touch with the kidnappers, Shep doesn't even stop working to address him. Jerry casually walks off, the only indication of his hysteria, a subtle pained rub to his head.

Throughout the film Jerry maintains this comical lack of emotional responsiveness. He has a dim, growing awareness of the severity of his actions but lacks the wit or mental stability to both assimilate the events that occur around him or anticipate and control the crises that result. Jerry is unable to express himself with any clarity. He has no opportunities to release the confusion in his head. The rare moments he does get angry it is brief, lonely and frustrated.

Chapter 1
Introduction

The first part of the book discusses the history of the field and the current state of research. It also introduces the main concepts and terminology used throughout the text.



The second part of the book focuses on the methodology and data analysis. It provides a detailed description of the experimental procedures and the statistical methods used to analyze the data.

The final part of the book discusses the results of the study and the implications for the field. It also includes a conclusion and a list of references.



Figure 20. Jerry: small, lonely and powerless

After Wade's cruel refusal to back a financial scheme Jerry devised and then declaration that he himself would go ahead with the scheme, Jerry is shown in an extreme wide shot walking out to his solitary car in a huge parking lot covered in snow (see figure. 20). He resembles a tiny insect, pathetic and lonely. He can't even be angry or upset with character, he sits into his car and has to get out again to scrape the ice of his windshield. The scraping motion is violent, undignified and awkward and it quickly accelerates into a brief fury. He cries out but quickly looks up (at the building with Wade (God - tyrant figure)) and quietens to carry on scraping the windscreen. He's trapped and cannot find release. It is these rare moments that very subtly clarify his lack of response as more of a form of numbness that is sad and disturbing.

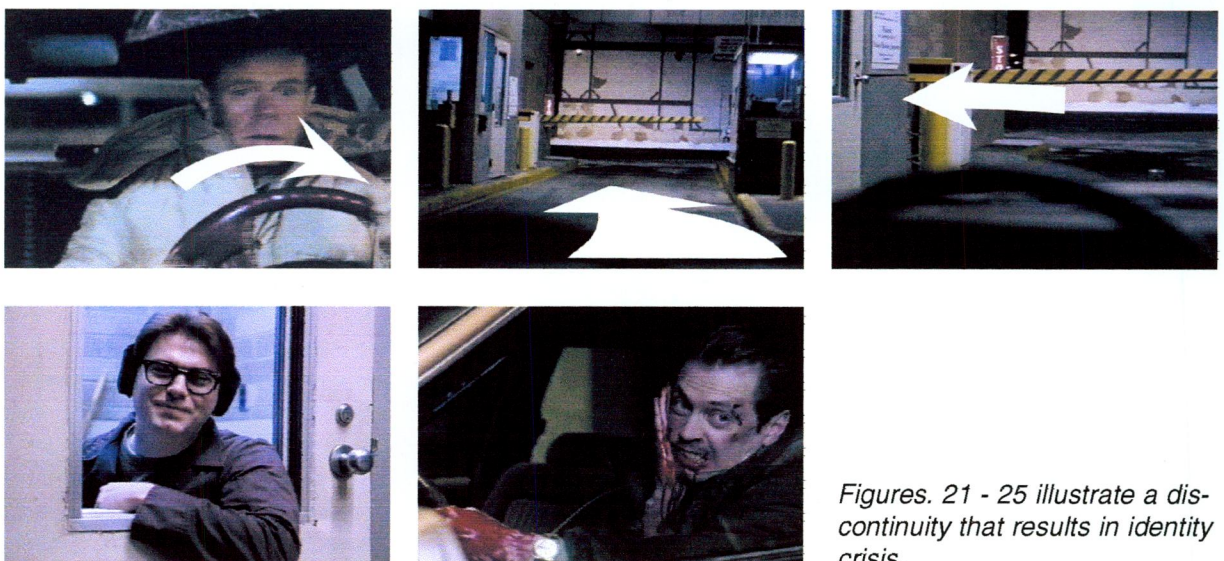
The film manages to achieve a delicate balance between what is both horrible and humorous about Jerry's mentality. In one instance Jerry arrives on the scene where Wade lies dead at the exchange point. In a single shot, he stops the car and remains seated in profile, with his back to us. He is frozen for a moment then he moves slightly (to press the button) and the boot opens. His only response is banal and practical. In the following scene, he cruises, without stopping, by the dead man in the bloodied ticket booth and all he can say is: "Ah Jeez", as though he'd found a scratch on his car. Both scenes display Jerry's dispassionate lack of comprehension in a valid and realistic manner. The first illustrating the man's lonely despair and numb realisation of how



futile his actions are while the second scene shows us how ridiculously funny this is. Both scenes run seamlessly together.

After the kidnap Jerry arrives home to an empty house. The scene is sad and ironic. He walks into the house carrying the groceries amongst all the signs of brutality yet shows no sign of the horror he should. This isn't a twisted scene but a comical tragedy, this man is pathetic, he's just lost his lovely wife and he doesn't bat an eyelid. Answering any question about the appropriate response to the scene, the music gets a little sad and pensive. Following that there is a wickedly funny joke that dispels any sympathy for Jerry. The camera pans up to the television, it's static and Jerry's sobbing can be heard off camera. Perhaps is briefly proposed to the viewer, Jerry understands the magnitude of the catastrophe he's engineered. Then we cut to Jerry by the phone rehearsing his distraught phone call to Wade. Jerry is just borderline intelligent enough to be a valid villain, if only in the comical sense.

It is this issue of whether Jerry is a villain or not, that is hinted at with a clever bit of editing and deliberate discontinuity (see figures. 21-25). In the multi-storey car park, on top of which Karl executed Wade, Karl is fleeing the scene, speeding past Jerry who is on his way up. A medium close up of Jerry in the car shows him continuing on then turning the steering wheel to his left. This is followed by the driver's point of view as they finish a turn to the left and come up to the ticket booth. A continuation of the previous shot, the car stops and the camera (Driver's point of view) turns to the left, looking out the side window to face the ticket vender. The Ticket Vender responds cheerfully but his expression changes to surprise when he sees the driver. It's Karl holding his jaw growling an order behind a mass of blood drenched teeth!



Figures. 21 - 25 illustrate a discontinuity that results in identity crisis.

This smart manipulation of continuity conventions results in a very amusing scene mainly because of both ours and the ticket vendor's surprise, Karl's predicament (he



finally go shot in that motormouth) and the contrast of the ticket vendor's politeness with Karl's response. But it also forces us to compare Karl and Jerry, who is the real villain, who is responsible ultimately for all the deaths that pile up? Only one character can be the master villain and it certainly isn't Karl.

Everyday interaction is a tedious test of Jerry's communication skills but it is when even casually interviewed that he is confronted and tasked well in excess of his abilities. Jerry cannot maintain his own lucidity internally let alone externally. When Marge begins her enquiries, he is unable to quickly fabricate the appropriate response, he starts rocking back and forth, a pained trance coming across his face as though the panic and fear that is frustrated in his numb brain is trying a physical outlet.

It is in the second interview that the hypocrisy of Jerry's persona can longer be concealed. Unable to contain his panic anymore and oscillates wildly from a pained wide smile to an outburst back to his car dealer smile while wobbling his head repeating like it was his life's mantra, a plea:

"I'm co-operating here"

Fargo is about the meeting of good and evil then Jerry is the gateway and the film is the clash. He is the traitor, the coward of this story. More than Karl and Grimsrud he is unwittingly the personification or tragedy of evil. Almost like an afterthought in the editing, this villain meets a derogatory end, documentary style. Finally, Jerry is shown as he truly is, exposed and naked from the guise of the cardealer as he is wrestled into handcuffs in his underware.

More funny than any otherjoke in the film, it is the profound grim irony, that the man, ultimately responsible for all the death, is a moron.



Conclusion

It defies all conventions of genre but remains true to the conventions of meaning to emerge as one of the best comedy, thriller and horror films ever made. Authentic, beautiful and unextraneous, it demands to be seen again and again. While other post-modern Hollywood film makers get bogged down in trying to outsmart the conventions of method, the Coens do it, in their sleep, choosing to spend their time on the much needed meaning and function.

It was suddenly apparent what they were trying to achieve in their previous films but with limited success. They had succeeded with Fargo in creating an original and genuinely meaningful film with the characteristics of a post-modern Hollywood. The method is not too distracting or self-conscious, it's honest and perfectly balanced, in fact to call it post-modern Hollywood would not be entirely correct. It is a "Coen Brothers" film.

Unfortunately, after the making of Fargo they made The Big Lebowski, although an entertaining film in its own right, it seems to signal a reversion their old ways. Let's hope the next film is as progressive as the Fargo.

Conclusion

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