

Fargo (1996)

“I just don’t understand it.”

Major Credits:

Director: Joel Coen

Screenplay: Ethan Coen, Joel Coen

Cinematography: Roger Deakins

Editor: Roderick Jaynes [Joel and Ethan Coen]

Music: Carter Burwell

Major Cast: Frances McDormand (Marge Gunderson), William H. Macy (Jerry Lundegaard), Steve Buscemi (Carl Showalter), Peter Stomare (Gaear Grimsrud), Harve Presnell (Wade Gustafson), John Carroll Lynch (Norm Gunderson), Steve Park (Mike Yanagita)

Background and Context:

Fargo is the Coen brothers’ sixth film—their breakthrough success following the dismal reviews of *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994). The film garnered the first of the brothers’ two Oscars for best film, and Frances McDormand won an Oscar for best actress in her now widely celebrated performance as Marge Gunderson. Like Woody Allen and Spike Lee, the Coens began their careers as low budget filmmakers—despite a large cast and location shooting, *Fargo* cost a mere \$7 million—working with friends (McDormand—Mrs. Joel Coen—starred in their first movie, *Blood Simple*) and frequent collaborators like Roger Deakins and Carter Burwell, both of whom are credited in nearly every Coen brothers film since *Fargo*.

Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Fargo* is a road movie that mixes a crime story with comedy, over-the-top violence, and domestic scenes that critique or uphold American “family values.” Characteristically for its creators, the film often shifts tones and plays with the audience’s expectations, as in the ironic title and preface or Jerry’s “rehearsal” of his urgent call to Wade. No critic to date has suggested the possible influence of Peter Falk’s mythic television detective, Columbo, on the conception of *Fargo*’s hero, Marge Gunderson.

Cinematic Qualities:

- Credit Sequence: The Coens deploy a white screen, music, fixed camera at low angle, and telephoto long shot to create an ominous entry into the diegesis that might be compared with Scorsese’s credit sequence in *Taxi Driver*
- Music: Carter Burwell’s theme, “The Lost Sheep,” recurs throughout the film to create a mournful contrast to Jerry’s hyper-kinetic mania while complementing the bleak landscape.
- Composition/Mise-en-scène: The placement of objects during the pan right to Marge and Norm in bed as their characters are introduced provides a lot of story-telling information without a word of dialogue. Similarly, the vertical blinds “imprison” Jerry as the camera slowly closes in on him during the first call from the district manager, Reilly Diefenbach.
- Camera Angles: low angle shots of the highway extend the road to the vanishing point on the horizon; the bird’s eye shot of Jerry in the parking lot after Wade and Stan reject his “deal” reflects his insignificance and looming fate.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The film begins (rather famously, now) with the spurious claim, “This is a true story,” which was only exposed as false, from a historical perspective, sometime after *Fargo* was released. (The brothers continue to insist on its origin in a 1987 incident.) What effect does this statement have on the audience’s reception of the narrative? In what sense is the claim true?

2. What is the effect of introducing the hero, Marge Gunderson, twenty-five minutes into the movie? How do the first two scenes in which she appears economically reveal her character?
3. The scene with Marge's old school friend, Mike Yanagita, seems a digression from the plot. What function does it serve in extending the film's tone, characterization, and, possibly, even the plot?
4. *Fargo* was criticized in some initial reviews for caricaturing or patronizing its Minnesotan characters. The bimbo hookers at the Blue Ox, for example, seem to serve only as comic relief. Are the eastern-educated Coen brothers guilty of a condescending tone in depicting their roots?
5. Granting that Gaear is simply a monster, can anything redemptive be said in behalf of the two other "bad guys," Carl and Jerry?
6. At least one dissenting reviewer considers *Fargo* "a fatuous piece of nonsense," and viewers today might reasonably ask whether the film's charms extend beyond what might be called "The Tarantino Effect": clever dialogue that becomes *argot*; ultra-violence rendered from an ironic distance, set pieces involving exotic characters. (Is the blood splattered on Jerry's face an allusion to *Pulp Fiction*?) Does the film offer anything about American life that can be taken *seriously*?