



Movie Club

Fargo (1996)

1. The film opens with this declaration:

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.

However, in reality the film is entirely fictional. It is, according to the Coen's at the time of the release, based on a real crime where "the basic events are the same as in the real case", but stated that they "weren't interested in that kind of fidelity." "The characterizations", the Coen's explained "are fully imagined", and that "if an audience believes that something's based on a real event, it gives you permission to do things they might otherwise not accept." (Heitmueller, Karl (2005-04-12). ["Rewind: What Part Of 'Based On' Don't You Understand?"](#). *MTV.com*) The Coen's statements regarding this fidelity have been modified over the years since the film's release, with the Coen's finally admitting in 2015 that "[the story was] completely made up. Or, as we like to say, the only thing true about it is that it's a story." (Roberts, Sam (2015-09-05). ["T. Eugene Thompson Dies at 88; Crime Stunned St. Paul"](#). *New York Times*) What do you make of their reasoning behind giving the film a "this is a true story" angle especially in the fashion of such a sincere sounding declaration? They could have simply stated that the film was "based on real events" that accompanies many films (both justly and falsely) but they went one step further, invoking the fictional survivors as well as the dubious events. Is it justified? What aspects of the film required the "permission to do things" that an audience "might otherwise not accept"? Is it enough that "the only thing true about it is that it's a story"? Does that not put it in the same class as any other fictional film? Is it perhaps asking us why we are so willing to believe things if they are considered real, even when, or especially when, they are absurd? Does this impact the rest of your viewing of the film, where the entire film becomes a parody of reality and our views on reality?

2. A great deal has been made about the local colour in the film, the intense "Minnesota nice" that pervades all of the main characters. With its minced oaths ("oh, for Pete's sake!"; "the heck do ya mean?"), its family friendly exclamations ("you're darn tootin'"), its "you betcha" and "don'tcha know". There is also the bashfulness of having to repeat curse words ("Oh I get it, so you think I'm some kinda crazy jerk for askin'!" only he doesn't use the word "jerk."; "I answered the darned... I'm cooperatin' here!"), and Jerry's reprimanding Scotty for his use of language. There is also the fact that everything is said with a smile, to avoid any

confrontation, best demonstrated in Jerry's confrontation with an aggrieved customer where after a back and forth the matter is resolved with a forced insult and a desire to simply resolve the issue ("One hundred... You lied to me, Mr. Lundegaard. You're a bald-faced liar. A... [strains to say the words] fucking liar. Where's my goddamn checkbook? Let's get this over with."). This both gives the film an otherworldly quality, but also adds to the comedic contrast between the intense niceness that is the norm in this world with the harsh words and actions that come from the main actions and characters of the film. Do you find the contrast between the niceness and the nastiness adds to the comedic effect? Do you find these characters to be caricatures or in some way realistic? Or is it teetering a fine line between reality and pantomime? Is this, like the Coen's opening declaration, another way for them to fracture reality, to leave you questioning how much of this *could* be real?

3. As well as the local colour, the villains are also somewhat caricatured. Carl is a sweaty, nervous, ratty kind of sleaze, with an explosive, easily setoff temper and a foul mouth, something that especially puts him at odds with the reserved, meek Minnesotans. Gaear is the complete opposite, eerily calm, persistently silent, a constantly still even dazed brute who callously uses force with no hesitation or remorse. Carl is a talker, as we see when he tries to negotiate with the highway patrol officer, although not very effectively ("you're a smooth smoothie", jeers Gaear). Gaear, is not much for talking, but is explosive with brutal action ("Oh, daddy", remarks Carl when faced with Gaear's fearful ruthlessness). As with the Minnesotans, how realistic are these characters? Do we, by spending more time with these characters, identify them as being more realistic, or is there something about their character that makes them more identifiable? How realistic are they meant to be? Is this part of the parody of 'real events' type films we have been talking about so far?
4. Jerry is something of a mix of the folksiness of his fellow citizens and the cold criminals he hires. He is equally goofy (when he tries to call off the kidnapping he can't because he never bothered to get the phone number of his hired thugs), and callous to his wife, the person he supposedly loves, as well as indifferent to the distress he is causing his son. He also finds it all too easy to flee the scene ("Oh for Pete's sake, he's fleeing the interview! He's fleeing the interview!") and to run away, leaving Scotty essentially an orphan. Over the course of the events of the film, we see Jerry's plans fail and fail, and things spiral out of Jerry's control, and we get the sense that it has been the same with much of the rest of his life. He is the down and out of the middle class, not a complete failure, but not overly successful either. Life is a bland beige, or never-ending landscape of white upon white like the Minnesota winter. He isn't some hardened, evil criminal, but a man with dreams and desires, and he has taken it upon himself to realise those dreams. The actions are highly questionable, but we are left to wonder, was there any other way for Jerry? Do we feel any sympathy for Jerry at any point in the film? Does our sympathy for him wane or increase at different parts? Is he deserving of this sympathy? Can Jerry be seen as something of a parody of the blandness of middle class success in middle America, something the Coen's would have been faced with growing up, contrasted with the folksy, home-spun, honest-to-god darn goodness quality of others in the area?

5. What do you make of the comedy in the film? We have already mentioned the contrast between the folksiness of the Minnesota residents with the brutality and callousness of the crimes being committed, but what else strikes you about the comedy? For example, we watch as Jean, baffled by the masked man peering into her window, runs around like a headless chook to flee both in her home and near the cabin where they will keep her. But it is not presented as some horrid exercise in human cruelty, but as a slapstick routine, with Carl actively enjoying the show, and his infectious laugh even encouraging us to join in. Equally, we find the folksiness rather amusing, the clueless prostitutes, the slightly dim-witted Mr. Mohra who regales a confrontation with Carl to a police officer (“Mrs. Mohra heard about the homicides down here last week and she thought I should call it in. So... I called it in. End o' story.”). Are we meant to laugh at these characters? Are we meant to laugh at the misfortune that befalls many of them, such as Jean? What do you make of this? Is it the Coen’s (who grew up in St. Louis Park, a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota) way of making fun of their hometown, or gently poking fun, by way of exaggeration, at the qualities that make the place of their upbringing unique and special? How does this work with, or add to, the overall tone of the film? In short, do you find the film funny, and why?
6. At its heart, Fargo is a film where the intersection of dreams has fatal consequences. We have several characters who desire something that requires another to be harmed in some way. Jerry Lundegaard desperately wants to increase his prosperity, desperately needing money to make property investments. This leads him to hire the two professional criminals Gaear Grimsrud and Carl Showalter to kidnap his wife for an absurd ransom. Gaear and Carl likewise desire the money, with each trying to take it away from the other in the end (Carl buries a sizeable portion to hide it from Gaear, and Gaear ends up killing Carl over a dispute about dividing the money). In contrast to this we have Jerry’s father-in-law, Wade Gustafson, and his wife Jean and son Scotty, who are content with their life. This is revealed as something given, with Wade’s fortune meaning that “Jean and Scotty never have to worry.” And in contrast to both we are presented Margie and Norm Gunderson. They are content with the lives they lead, but that doesn’t mean they don’t still have ambitions, as demonstrated with Norm’s desire to have his painting selected for a stamp in a competition. This all comes to a head when Margie asks a deadpan Gaear:

So, that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there. And I guess that was your accomplice in the wood chipper. And those three people in Brainerd. And for what? For a little bit of money? There's more to life than a little money, you know. Don'tcha know that? And here ya are, and it's a beautiful day. Well. I just don't understand it.

Is there a divide between the dreamers and those who are content? What is Margie, a dreamer and someone who is content in life, or both? Do we blame the dreamers, especially Jerry, Carl, and Gaear? Is it only their actions of which we disapprove? Is it that maybe life never really gave them any other opportunities? Are Margie’s thoughts (or bemusements) at the end to Gaear too simple a solution, too much an invoking of common sense in order to be of any real use?