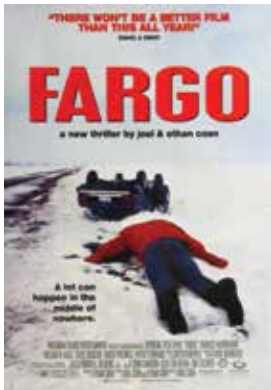


Fargo: How Far Will You Go?

Major themes in Fargo: the movie and TV series

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The film “Fargo,” released in 1996, was written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. “Fargo” is considered one of the most important movies of modern American cinema.

Joel and Ethan Coen’s classic film “Fargo” is considered one of the most important movies of modern American Cinema. The film, a neo-noir crime thriller, won 17 major film awards, including two Academy Awards. In 2006, it was selected for inclusion on the National Film Registry, which was established by Congress to preserve culturally significant films such as “Citizen Kane” and “The Wizard of Oz.” It is also one of my favorite films and so I was extremely dubious when, in 2012, FX Networks announced plans to develop a TV series based on the film.

The first season, called “Fargo” like the film, stars Martin Freeman (who played Bilbo Baggins in Peter Jackson’s “The Hobbit” film trilogy) and Billy Bob Thornton (who was nominated twice for an Academy Award). This “Fargo” received much critical acclaim and won Emmy Awards in 2014 for Outstanding Miniseries, Directing and Cast, as well as Golden Globes in 2015 for Best Miniseries and Best Actor (Thornton) in a Miniseries. The second season won numerous awards, although fewer than the first season.

Why Fargo?

“Fargo” is not a typical crime drama. Staying true to the film, each episode of the TV series begins with a version of this statement: “This is a true story. The events depicted took place in Minnesota in (year). 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.” The stories, however, are not literally true. The “true story” statement is a narrative device inviting the audience to enter into the story at a deeper level.

The TV series features new characters and plotlines, but continues the film’s themes and stylistic elements, such as the trademark Midwestern



accent and the dialogue's dry, dark wit. This is partly because the series creator and writer Noah Hawley managed to secure Ethan and Joel Coen, who wrote and directed the movie, as executive producers of the TV series, ensuring that the legacy of "Fargo" would be maintained. Looking (metaphorically) through a wide angle lens, every iteration of "Fargo" focuses on the effects of relativism on modern American society and shows characters going to extremes to achieve their goals.

Simply put, "Fargo" asks "How far will you go?"

The film and both TV seasons feature narcissistic antagonists who go to great lengths to satisfy a disordered desire. In the film, we meet Jerry Lundegaard, a car salesman from Minneapolis, whose mysterious money problems take him to Fargo with a convoluted plan involving the kidnapping of his wife to obtain a huge ransom from his wealthy father-in-law. Although the film doesn't return to Fargo, the place, the "how far will you go?" theme unfolds in two directions: Jerry and the criminals he hires forge bizarre, bloody paths—as nothing goes as planned—towards their conflicting destinations, while a sheriff, who happens to be seven months pregnant, tenaciously unravels the crimes and tracks the bad guys.

The long-form, episodic storytelling format of the TV series allows for a deeper exegesis on the theme of "how far will you go?" Season One, set in January 2006, features Lester Nygaard, a classic "97-pound weakling" who

Martin Freeman plays Lester Nygaard, a physical and moral weakling, in the first season of the "Fargo" TV series.

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Kirsten Dunst plays Peggy Bloomquist, an unfulfilled hairdresser, who dreams of “self-actualization,” in the second season of the “Fargo” TV series.

is the spineless, emasculated facade of a man in Bemidji, Minnesota. He is caught in a dead-end job and a loveless marriage. Lester has no core principles and so is the perfect target for Lorne Malvo, a mysterious drifter whose ability to lie and deceive clearly reminds the viewer of the Devil. Malvo stokes Lester’s discontent and offers him a solution involving an attractively effective (in immediate terms) but false—and ultimately evil—form of masculinity. Without guiding morals, children or other roots, how far will Lester go in his efforts to become what Malvo presents as a real man?

Season Two, set in March 1979, maintains the central theme. There are several plotlines with multiple characters, all going to extremes to satisfy pathologically selfish desires. We meet Peggy Bloomquist (played by Kristen Dunst), a hairdresser who dreams of a life beyond small-town Luverne, Minnesota. Dissatisfied with her future prospects, Peggy plans to attend the “Life Spring Seminar” in order to achieve “self-actualization,” the highest of Maslow’s motivational needs. (Abraham Maslow is not mentioned in the series but he was recognized as the father of humanistic psychology, which was very influential in the late-1970s.) Peggy becomes so focused on this goal that she completely disregards other needs, including her and her husband’s safety and security. As events spin out of control, Peggy is oblivious to the brutal and sometimes ridiculous events happening around her. How far will Peggy go to achieve self-actualization?



The Long and Winding Road to Normal

Significantly, “*Fargo*” portrays the police, who play the protagonists in the film and TV series, far more positively than most of today’s media. Good filmmakers want their audience to relate to their characters by putting them into their characters’ shoes. The police officers are not hardboiled, cynical caricatures. Instead they and their families are members of small towns who hold deep traditional values and genuinely care for each other and their communities. They are sincere public servants striving to keep the peace, which was easy until the beginning of each season and the movie.

In the second season, Sheriff Larsson (played by Ted Danson) tells his son-in-law, a Vietnam veteran and state trooper, that “after WWII, we went six years without a murder here. Six years. And these days, well, sometimes I wonder if you boys didn’t bring that war home with ya.”

In the previous season, Chief Oswald (played by Bob Odenkirk) says, “I used to have positive opinions about the world, you know, about people. Used to think the best. Now I’m looking over my shoulder. ... The job has got me staring into the fireplace, drinking.”

The central question in “*Fargo*” repeats for law officers, as best articulated by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.” As the

Ted Danson plays Sheriff Larsson, a lawman witnessing his world change for the worse, in the second season of the “*Fargo*” TV series.

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.

Friedrich Nietzsche

[The gangster] appeals... to that side of all of us which refuses to believe in the 'normal' possibilities of happiness and achievement; the gangster is the 'no' to that great American 'yes,' which is stamped so big over our official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we really feel about our lives.

Robert Warshow

police are drawn into the brutality of the plots and counterplots—which become increasingly bizarre into the second season—each officer has to decide how far to go to stop the mayhem without becoming morally indistinguishable from the criminals.

Anchoring the main lawmen and law women is family life. They court. They go home to husbands and wives, raise their children, eat and watch movies together. This enables them to gaze into the moral abyss of *homo criminalis* and still maintain their character and humanity.

Ironically, “how far will you go” does end up in *Fargo*—but the *Fargo* that actually exists for most residents. The *Fargo* of family, faith and ordinary, everyday life—if you will go far enough to resist the temptations of the seemingly easy route to wealth and power.

“There’s more to life than a little money, you know,” says Chief Marge Gunderson in one of the movie’s final scenes. “Don’tcha know that?”

From its heavy use of the Midwestern accent to beautiful shots of the frozen Upper Great Plains, and its presentations of greed versus wholesome family life, “*Fargo*” is clearly an American story. Perhaps “*Fargo*,” in all its iterations poses the most important question to Americans today: How far will we go to reestablish normalcy in a culture that tolerates moral insanity and even celebrates it?

As Roman law put it: *Qui tacet consentire*, which Sir Thomas More, a martyred saint, translates in “*A Man for All Seasons*” as “Silence gives consent.” Most police in “*Fargo*” do not choose to look away but instead counter wickedness with courage, dedication and virtue.

FX announced in May that Ewan McGregor will be the featured actor for the third season. With the story set in 2010, McGregor will play the two central characters, brothers Emmet and Ray Stussy. Emmet, the elder brother, is a successful business and family man, while Ray lives with his past glories and blames his current misfortunes on his brother. The third season is scheduled for release next spring.

The Revenant: How far did Hugh Glass go?

For years, film critics have been wondering how far would Leonardo DiCaprio have to go to get an Oscar after five previous nominations and no wins? In this case, silence gives assent.

“*The Revenant*,” by Mexican writer, director and producer Alejandro González Iñárritu, won three Academy Awards this year for Best Director, Best Cinematography and (finally, for DiCaprio) Best Actor. For his portrayal of legendary frontiersman Hugh Glass, DiCaprio relied on an intense physical performance and a key use of facial close-ups to communicate great

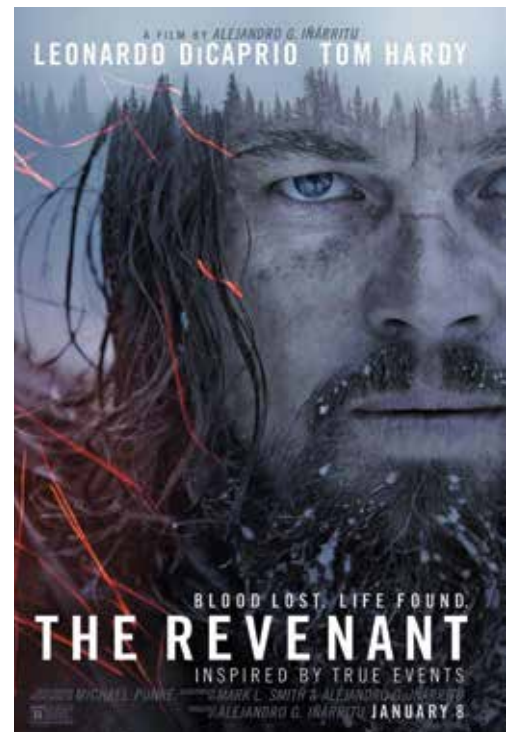
pain, desperation and determination. In an interview with Grantland, a now-defunct online magazine, Iñárritu said “Honestly, Leo, he’s attacked by a bear, and after that, he becomes almost like a silent character: a lot of things going on, but no words.” Iñárritu also notes, “That’s for me the essence of cinema: not to rely on the words, but images and emotions.” DiCaprio said, in an interview with Yahoo! Movies, “I can name 30 or 40 sequences that were some of the most difficult things I’ve ever had to do. ... Whether it’s going in and out of frozen rivers, or sleeping in animal carcasses, or what I ate on set, [I was] enduring freezing cold and possible hypothermia constantly.” In one scene, DiCaprio, a vegetarian, had to eat raw bison, which he quickly threw up once Iñárritu finished the shot.

Going to these extremes as an actor is commendable but seems minor compared to the story of Hugh Glass.

The film is a screen adaptation of the novel by the same title set in 1823 in what is now Montana and South Dakota. “The Revenant” follows the unbelievably true story of Hugh Glass, who battles for survival after being mauled by a grizzly bear and then left for dead—without his knife, gun and flint—by two companions charged with looking after him. One of the companions also killed Glass’ half-native son in order to leave no witness. Described as the “angriest man in U.S. history” in a 1939 Time magazine review of a non-fiction book that included the story, Glass crawls for most of the 200-mile journey to Fort Kiowa in South Dakota and then tracks (upright) those who left him for dead for hundreds of miles into Wyoming to seek vengeance. In the film, artistic license meshes these two journeys together.

“The Revenant” asks, how far will someone go to survive and then to reap revenge? The answer is two and a half hours of against-all-odds, harrowing adventure—albeit with more grunts and groans than dialogue. The answer is there’s no limit to human will. A man or woman might be stopped or killed by outside forces, but the will can be curtailed only by its owner.

More explicitly in “Fargo,” the question of will is conjoined with moral questions: How far will people go and in which direction? Oddly in “The Revenant,” Hugh Glass succeeds in taking revenge. In the actual account, he tracks down the two men who abandoned him but decides against revenge. Perhaps “The Revenant” went too far from the true story—and the moral question of revenge—for artistic (and possibly, commercial) gain. ♦



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