WILLIAM LUHR

1 Introduction

Fargo (1996) is Ethan and Joel Coens' most commercially and critically successful film (Fig. 1). It merits the kinds of examination this book offers not only on its virtues as a remarkable film, but also as one that provides insights into the Coen brothers' singular career, and into significant recent trends in both the film industry and American culture. Immediately and widely recognized as an important work, it received two Academy Awards (Best Actress for Frances McDormand and Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen, for Ethan Coen and Joel Coen) and was nominated for five more (Best Cinematography, Best Director, Best Film Editing, Best Picture, and Best Supporting Actor). It also received accolades from such prestigious venues as the Cannes Film Festival, the British Academy Awards, the Chicago Film Critics Association, and the New York Film Critics Circle. This is highly unusual for a low-budget, independently produced film without major stars. Further, this aspect of the film's success places it within the trend of the rise of independent filmmaking and distribution in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, for a cluster of reasons, numerous films made and/or distributed outside the major Hollywood studios enjoyed unprecedented cross-over success into major markets. *Fargo* is not only important as an independent film of the 1990s that signals major shifts in the film industry, but it is also a haunting and delightful one that explores middle-American themes and settings from an original and unsettling

perspective, that challenges traditional cinematic genre structures, and that comments on American racial, gender, and cultural traditions.

It does this as a film by the Coen brothers, a writing/directing/producing team that has displayed unusual assurance, as well as a distinctive vision from their first film, *Blood Simple* (1984), nearly 20 years ago. The distinctiveness of their vision is evident in the difficulties that many, even among its champions, have had in classifying *Fargo*. Some have placed it in the tradition of *film noir*, others call it a comedy, and some call it both.

Fargo is a particularly useful film for the Cambridge Film Handbooks series because the very diversity of its characterizations leads viewers in varied, at times contradictory, and often provocative directions. On some levels, such potentially confusing responses result from little more than jokes. For example, the credited editor, Roderick Jaynes (who was nominated for an Academy Award) does not exist; the name is a pseudonym for the Coen brothers, one they have used in other films. Other aspects of the film that produce diverse interpretation are more complex. An opening title asserts that "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." A closing title, however, directly contradicts this and states that "No similarity to actual persons living or dead is intended or should be inferred." Although these certainly are contradictory statements, the first one is also part of a complex strategy to guide the viewer's response to the film. Regardless of whether the first statement is true, it is certainly no joke. It sets a somber mood that is reinforced by the tone of the opening scenes. Unlike some Coen films that begin by evoking old film genres or broad comedy, this one establishes the mood of a grim buildup to a "true crime" from the recent past. With ominous music on the soundtrack, an isolated car crawls across a frozen landscape. The driver soon meets with two criminals to set a doomed series of crimes in motion. Fact-based or

1. Marge points her revolver at Gaear as she identifies herself by her sheriff's shield.

not, the film strives for the *feel* of actual events and invites the viewer to accept its story as such.

The sad, ugly, and somehow inevitable events that follow, combined with the self-destructive nature of many of the characters and the overall atmosphere of doom, have led many critics to place the film in the tradition of *film noir*. Yet, in June 2000, the American Film Institute placed *Fargo* on its list of the 100 greatest American film comedies. How can a *film noir* be a comedy? Such an opposition is not as contradictory as it might initially seem, and while it points to the Coens' sense of playfulness, it also underscores genuinely distinctive aspects of their work. Their *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), which deals with chain gang escapees in the rural U.S. South in the 1930s, asserts in its credits that it is "Based on *The Odyssey* by Homer." Such a claim at first seems like a preposterous joke, and yet elements of Homer's epic do inflect the film in ways much more significant than the fact that its central character has "Ulysses" for his middle name.

The Coens frequently take character and genre types familiar to audiences and develop them in unexpected ways. *Fargo*'s plot concerns a kidnapping that goes horribly wrong, resulting in the murders of innocent people and disaster for the perpetrators. It fits into a long-standing concern of the Coens with kidnapping and/or criminal life that began with the spectacular success of their first feature, *Blood Simple*, continued with their second, *Raising Arizona* (1987), and pervades their career. The Coens have repeatedly said that many of these interests have roots in their affection for American hard-boiled fiction, especially that of James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and Dashiell Hammett.

Although references to Hollywood genre traditions pervade their work, the Coens have taken pains to stress that film is not their only creative influence. They have a long-standing interest in literature and literary issues that extends beyond their affection for American hard-boiled fiction. Ethan Coen has published a well-reviewed collection of fiction, *The Gates of Eden* (Delta, 1999), and even essays such as his introduction to the printed screenplay for *Fargo* (Faber and Faber, 1996) display a reflective, literary sensibility. One of their films, *Barton Fink* (1991), takes as its central topic the difficulties of a Depression-era playwright who comes to work in Hollywood. Although the Coens are steeped in film history, other components of their intellectual makeup should not be ignored.

David Sterritt, in his essay on the Coens in this volume, gives a broad and perceptive assessment of major trends in their career, as well as a production history of the making of *Fargo*. Rather than repeat much of that information here, I outline three rubrics helpful to an understanding of broad contexts for their work. The first is the influence of Hollywood genres, the second is their status as American independent filmmakers, and the third is the importance to their work of carefully detailed settings in specific regions and eras.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Hollywood genres on the Coens' career. It started early; as boys they made home-movie remakes of old Hollywood films. Their films as adults both draw upon and distance themselves from Hollywood traditions. Although they

have never done a feature-length remake of an individual film, their work is steeped in genre traditions and references.

They do this in their own, distinctive way. Unlike directors such as Steven Spielberg or George Lucas in films such as the Indiana Jones trilogy, the *Star Wars* films, or *Always* (1989), they do not nostalgically engage old films or genres in an attempt to revive their effects for new generations. The Coens more resemble Robert Altman, whose films such as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), and *The Long Goodbye* (1973) both engage and severely critique those genres (the Western, the detective film, *film noir*). This posture partly accounts for the Coens' hip and irreverent reputation.

The Coens consider themselves American independent filmmakers in a tradition very different from that of directors such as Jim Jarmusch or Gus Van Sant. The Coens believe that that tradition approaches American film through the eyes of the European art cinema, and receives its dominant distribution in small, elite venues and the film festival circuit. The Coens do not see themselves as avant-garde or experimental filmmakers and do not want to make films for an elite audience. Instead, they want creative control over low-budget, entertainment films for a wide market. Their model is more that of the American independent horror film of the past 30 years, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) or *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). They entered the film industry working with Sam Raime, whose films such as *The Evil Dead* (1983) and *Evil Dead II* (1987) precisely fit this model. The Coens like the independence that low budgets give them, but also want the wide distribution that major studios can provide.

Because of their interest in a wide audience, they have adjusted their vision to distribution realities. For example, they wanted to make both *Blood Simple* and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), which evoke old genres (*film noir* and screwball comedy) in black and white, but accepted color because color films are much easier to distribute. (They did, however, finally make the *noir*ish *The Man Who Wasn't There* [2001] in black and white).

In a manner related to their use of genre, they have rooted all their films in a strong sense of locale and time, with great attention to the look and feel of a place and an era. This goes far beyond standard elements such as period wardrobe, automobiles, and music and extends to climate, regional accents, and cultural trends and mores – everything from William H. Macy's idiotic office display of golfing memorabilia in *Fargo* to George Clooney's obsession with "Dapper Dan's Men's Pomade" and hairnets in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

The Coens have alternated the period settings for their films, setting the first two in the present, the next three in the past, the succeeding two in the present, and the most recent two in the past. No one, however, regardless of era, looks anything like any other. They have referred to their first film, *Blood Simple*, as "Texas gothic." Their second film, *Raising Arizona* (1987), has an entirely different look and mood. Although both are crime/kidnapping films set in the contemporary Southwest containing grisly humor (a detective's hand is graphically nailed to a wall in *Blood Simple* and a biker's head is blown off by a grenade in *Raising Arizona*), they have radically different looks and styles. *Blood Simple* develops a *noir*ish mood with its dark lighting, grim events, complex point-of-view structure, and almost bewildering plot turns. The brightly lit *Raising Arizona*, to the contrary, creates a mood of frantic, goofy slapstick comedy.

Next, the Coens made three films set in the past, with strong evocations of Hollywood genres. *Miller's Crossing* (1990), their first "period" picture, deals with rival Prohibition-era gangsters who control an East Coast city. Its gloomy, stylized look evokes gangster films of the 1930s, and its plotting and themes recall Dashiell Hammett's fiction, particularly the novels, *Red Harvest* (1929) and *The Glass Key* (1931). *Barton Fink* is actually about Hollywood in 1941. It concerns a leftist Broadway playwright, a champion of the "common man," who is brought to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter. The film critiques many of the romantic legends that have grown up about "serious" writers in Hollywood during the studio era. The Coens' third period movie, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, although set in the late 1950s, evokes both 1930s screwball comedy and 1940s Frank Capra films about

"common men" caught up in large social forces, such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). It is broadly played for farce and parody.

The Coens returned to contemporary life with their next two films: *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* (1998). *Fargo* is something of a white *noir* and the Coen film least steeped in Hollywood referentiality. *The Big Lebowski*, influenced by Raymond Chandler's fiction, is a rambling, shaggy dog crime comedy set in Los Angeles.

The Coens followed these films with two more period ones. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a kind of musical farce set during the Depression, gives broad, mythic associations to sweeping social movements and forces of the era, from religious revival meetings to Ku Klux Klan rallies to the appearance of sirenlike women to a climactic flood of nearly Biblical proportions. The Coens then shifted to the deliberate, turgid *noir*ish pacing of *The Man Who Wasn't There*, set in the 1940s, as somnolent in tone as *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was kinetic.

The three rubrics of genre, American independent filmmaking, and setting should provide insight into the place of *Fargo* within the Coens' work. Although *Fargo* is distinctive in the Coens' career for its minimal evocation of genre films, it very much fits their model of independent filmmaking. Working with a small budget and without major stars, they were, nevertheless, able to secure wide, mainstream distribution. Finally, much of the film's identity comes from the specificity of its setting.

Fargo is set in the frozen Minnesota/North Dakota landscape. Its story concerns Jerry (William H. Macy), who, deeply and fraudulently in debt, engages two half-competent criminals, Carl (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear (Peter Stormare), to kidnap his wife, Jean (Kristin Rudrüd), in hopes of extorting ransom money from his wealthy father-in-law, Wade (Harve Presnell). Things go wrong from the start. After kidnapping Jean, Carl and Gaear are stopped by a highway patrol officer. They murder him, as well as two passers-by who witness the crime. Marge (Frances McDormand), a pregnant police chief, investigates the murders, ultimately solving the case. But in the meantime,

bickering among the kidnappers, Jerry, and Wade spins pathetically out of control. Carl kills Wade as well as a parking garage attendant; Gaear kills Jean for making noise, then kills Carl. Marge captures Gaear, and Jerry is easily tracked down and captured by police. This downward spiral of chaotic ineptitude and homicidal hysteria is counterpointed by the domestic tranquility of Marge's homelife with her husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch), and the imminent birth of their first child.

This handbook includes five original essays that will enable the reader to further enjoy and explore both *Fargo* and its contexts. These essays are written in an accessible style and incorporate significant approaches of contemporary cultural analysis. They look at the film with respect to decisions that went into its making; its visual, narrative, musical, and performance strategies; its commentary on American history, myth, and culture; its production history and relationship to other films by the Coens; the importance of its setting; and the gender and racial issues it raises.

More specifically, David Sterritt's essay gives a production history of *Fargo*, describing how and why it was made, and charts its relationship to the entire body of the Coen brothers' work. Pamela Grace's essay explores the unusual way *Fargo* develops its central character as both a resourceful police officer and an expectant mother. Grace shows how the film's development of this character comments incisively on the history of gender relations.

Christopher Sharrett's essay illustrates ways in which the film's setting and characters comment trenchantly on dominant myths of American history and culture, particularly those of the Western frontier. He demonstrates how the appeals of many of the characters to the American Dream for self-validation are little more than a hypocritical reliance on long-discarded values; a reliance that points not to cultural superiority, but rather to the nightmare world of the modern horror film.

Mikita Brottman's essay implicitly deals with the issue of how *Fargo* can be seen as both comic and horrific. She develops the relationship of the film's comedy to its grotesque elements and shows how *Fargo*'s

comedy does not contradict but rather reinforces its grim themes and events. William Luhr's essay shows how *Fargo* both invokes and deviates from stereotypes of genre, setting, comedy, and characterization to simultaneously engage and disorient its viewers.

The book also reprints an interview with the Coen brothers about the film, as well as pertinent articles that incorporate commentary from people involved in the making of *Fargo*, such as Roger Deakins, its cinematographer, and Carter Burwell, its composer. In addition, it includes reviews by Thomas Doherty and Harvey R. Greenberg, a selected bibliography, and a filmography of the Coens' work.

DAVID STERRITT

2 *Fargo* in Context

The Middle of Nowhere?

"Out of respect for the dead . . ."
– from the opening text of *Fargo*

"A lot can happen in the middle of nowhere." So asserts the well-received promotional tag for *Fargo*, which has accompanied the film's propitious commercial and critical career from its 1996 theatrical release through its later video incarnation.

But while *Fargo* indeed takes place in the middle of nowhere – if one accepts the notion that Minnesota and North Dakota are thus accurately described – it was clearly not conceptualized there. Joel and Ethan Coen had written, directed, and produced six feature films during the eleven preceding years, and as of early 2003 they have completed three more. *Fargo* reflects, refracts, and refines various thematic and stylistic ideas that have preoccupied the brothers throughout this period. To appreciate *Fargo*, one must take into account the context in which it was made – a multifaceted context that encompasses not only the picture's production history, but also a set of social and cinematic notions deployed by the Coens with a vigor and consistency that make this grim comedy one of their most fully realized achievements, even though it encapsulates other qualities that many critics rightly find problematic.

The comparatively small scale and proudly monochromatic look of *Fargo* have been described as outgrowths of the fact that this movie