

# An Analysis of the Opening of Fargo

I will talk about the first ten minutes of **Fargo** with two key approaches in mind. First, an analysis through a juxtaposition and comparison of the written screenplay and the actual film, which will draw attention to the differing roles of screenwriter and director. The accuracy of the directors attention to the script, the screenwriter's detail on paper and the extent to which both mediums explore the same themes and agendas will lead to an understanding of the creative gap between the written and the visual. Second, I will see how closely the opening fits in with the Syd Field/Michael Hauge model of screenplay construction. This formula represents the dominant, commercial, or Hollywood model of screenwriting, and will prove useful in distinguishing between mainstream and independent film-making (which, I argue, *Fargo* purports to be an example of). The extent to which *Fargo* conforms to this model will enhance our understanding of the film as an independent, and shed light upon the validity of the rigid and therefore contentious theories of Field and Hauge. The Coen brother's film will be held up next to mainstream notions of how characters should be introduced and developed, how plot should be conveyed to the audience, and the (limited) choices available to filmmakers in opening their films. These two approaches will run side by side in my argument, sometimes informing each other and illuminating certain issues in screenwriting whenever necessary.

The first ten pages of any screenplay are the most important.

(Field, 1994, 14)

The first ten pages of your screenplay are the most important of the entire script. You must immediately grab your reader emotionally.

(Hauge, 1989, 98)

The two quotes above show just one instance in which Hauge and Field overlap in their ideas of how a good screenplay should be constructed. Indeed, their theories are so similar as to be almost interchangeable, which is how they will be treated in this essay.

The first ten pages of the screenplay of *Fargo* do not quite cover the first ten minutes of the film, although with the removal of certain scenes and dialogue, the amount of text actually filmed is approximately ten pages, and equivalent to screen time using the rule of one page, one minute. Hauge writes that if the screenplay is not an action/adventure film, the writer

...must grab the reader with some other device: humour, a sense of foreboding, a provocative character, or even an unusual and interesting setting.

(Hauge, 1989, 98-99)

*Fargo* employs some of these devices outlined by Hauge. The first thing the audience sees is the title card: "This is a true story...". This effectively introduces a sense of foreboding: why have the filmmakers chosen a real life subject for this film? What has happened in real life that is exciting enough to turn into a film? More than this, the first sentence of this title card implies the main theme or dynamic of the film: the disruption of normality, ordinariness and American domesticity somehow from within. The choice of "This is..." adds an immediacy that something like "Based on a true story" (note the passed tense) does not communicate. As Field states, "[a] good screenplay begins immediately, with page one, word one" (1994, 14). *Fargo* seems to adhere to this immediate set up of theme. The first image of the film, "white particles wave over a white background. A snowfall" followed by "A car burst[ing] through the curtain of snow" (Coen, 1996, 1) completes the thematic dynamic: isolation and desolation. Here is domesticity removed and

relocated in a bleak landscape, where the crimes created by escalating petty domestic issues are covered and buried by a relentless blanket of snow. This establishment of location, and the 1980s time-frame, conforms to Hauge's requirement of "an unusual and interesting setting". The screenplay agrees strongly with the visual in this opening instance.

After this immediate opening, the screenplay takes us through three scenes which were omitted from the finished film. They show Jerry Lundergaard (William H. Macy) checking into a hotel on his own, sitting on his own in his hotel room, and eating on his own in a chain restaurant. These scenes were cut, I think, because they are repetitive and do not further our initial understanding of the character. Nevertheless, I can see why they were considered to be a relevant part of the film in the first instance. When Jerry checks into the hotel, the screenplay describes him as follows:

The man prints 'Jerry Lunderga-' onto a registration card, then hastily crosses out the last name and starts to print 'Anderson'.

(Coen, 1996, 2)

The reader can immediately see that Jerry is lying about his name. He therefore comes across as a character who is dishonest, but not used to acting in such a surreptitious manner. He is lying badly, and initial impressions suggest that Jerry is inept, incompetent and out of place in this particular role, impressions that hold true throughout the whole movie. The following two scenes do not build on this. We do not find out in these following segments why Jerry is lying about his name, while at the same time, the scenes in the hotel room and in the chain restaurant do not set up any more questions for the viewer to engage with. For whatever reason this section was cut from the filming process, the exclusion shows differing agendas between the screenplay and film. The screenplay emphasises the solitude of Jerry, his incompetence, and introduces something of the society in which he lives through the television report he sees in his hotel room. The film's agenda, however, seems to be to depict Jerry as out-of-his-depth through his conversation with Carl and Grimsrud, and leaves his personal isolation and incompetence to unfold more gradually as the film takes its course.

In the film, what follows the title card, "Fargo", is a car pulling "into the snow-swept parking lot of a one-story brick building. Broken neon at the top of the building identifies it as the Jolly Troll Tavern" (Coen, 1996, 3). Inside, Jerry enters the "downscale" bar. It is the first time we see him in the film. There is no description of him here, although in the omitted section the screenplay describes him as "[a] man in his early forties, balding and starting to paunch" (1996, 1). When he approaches the two seated men, the first thing he says is his full name, making it clear to the audience who he is. This is the first character the audience is offered to identify with, and having him verbalise his name implies that the Coen brothers expect viewers to invest some empathy with him. Jerry's second line of dialogue, and the Younger Man's response, introduce an unseen secondary character who both of them know, suggesting that it is because of Shep Proudfoot that these two men are talking in the first place. The misunderstanding of the time of meeting introduces an important device employed throughout the film: bad organisation and amateurism which ultimately leads to ever escalating violence, disaster and death. This is echoed later in the scene when there is a misunderstanding over what exactly, and when, Carl and Grimsrud are getting paid.

This first scene with dialogue and identifiable characters sets up the plot of the film, the film's genre, and most of the central characters. Shep, Jerry's wife, and Wade are all mentioned in the conversation between Jerry and Carl. This concisely foreshadows the following scene where Wade and Jerry's wife (tellingly not given a name at this point in the screenplay) are properly introduced. These narrative hooks would probably agree with the Field/Hauge school of screenwriting, but Fargo's set-up of character differs in one crucial way from the mainstream model. The central character, the hero, the source of justice and righteousness within the narrative, Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) is not introduced until half an hour into the

film. Hauge states that:

The audience is waiting for someone to identify with and root for. The sooner you get that person on the screen, the more effective the screenplay will be. It is hard to think of many films where the hero doesn't appear within the first ten minutes.

(Hauge, 1989, 44)

With this in mind, the character roles become confused. Hauge outlines four categories of primary character types: the hero, the nemesis, the reflection and the romance. An effective mainstream screenplay should introduce all of these characters in the set-up of the film, frequently in the first ten minutes. Sticking with this system, Jerry is the hero as he is the first character we see, and the character whose "outer motivation...drives the plot of the story and determines the basic story concept" (Hauge, 1989, 51). It is, after all, his ill-conceived plan that triggers the series of events that make up the film's narrative. But at the same time, he is the nemesis, as it is the trail of destruction his plan leaves which Marge must unravel and solve. The character of Grimsrud seems most closely to fit into the category of the nemesis. He is nothing other than a cold calculating villain. Jerry is both hero (in the sense of his motivation driving the narrative) and nemesis (as the orchestrator of the kidnapping). Predominantly Marge is the hero, as she provides the moral commentary throughout the film. The allocation of more than one role to the character of Jerry, and later Norm (who is both the reflection and romance), and the late introduction of the true hero, place Fargo in a non-mainstream aesthetic.

Revealingly, however, by not introducing the true hero to the audience for a third of the film, the screenplay adheres to a structural rule of Hauge's: "Give the audience superior position" (1989, 90). As viewer's we are drawn into the plot and develop an understanding of what is going on before the central protagonist does. This device, according to Hauge, creates maximum empathy for the character from whom certain information is withheld. The discrepancy between Hauge's views on character types and his rules for structure do not show a contradiction as much as they show how his model is a paradigmatic one. By including several options for each of the choices the screenwriter must make, Hauge's model can be applied to a relatively broad number of seemingly very different narrative structures and character developments. The main point to make about Fargo's character introduction and development in relation to Hauge is that it is the outer motivation of the hero/nemesis figure of Jerry that drives the plot, whereas in the Hauge model, this is strictly a function of the true hero (which is not to say that Marge's outer-motivation does not forward the plot to any great extent).

Returning to the first dialogue scene in the Jolly Troll Tavern, the viewer can discern the characters and place them in certain categories mainly through the dialogue. Apart from the well constructed speech patterns that lend individuality to the characters, it is purely through dialogue that this scene sets up the narrative structure of the film. Apart from the foreshadowing of certain other characters (mentioned above), the scene can be distilled to just one line:

CARL  
You want your own wife kidnapped?

(Coen, 1996, 6)

This one line of dialogue immediately tells us something about all three characters; Jerry is married and evidently in some desperate state to be driven to such lengths, and Carl and Grimsrud are two criminals who have been brought in to conduct the kidnapping and subsequent ransoming. This statement constitutes the first 'plot point' of the film. The rest of the dialogue in the scene builds on this fact and the information the viewer can glean from it. We get a muted explanation of why Jerry wants his wife kidnapped ("See, these're personal matters"), we are

given the hooks of several secondary characters, and we learn something about the kidnappers. Grimsrud, for example, is set up as being inarticulate and base in the opening ten minutes: a clever change from the script into the film makes him the character who has "peed three times already", his one and only line in the Jolly Troll Tavern scene is profoundly inarticulate ("Or your fucking wife, you know") and later in the car he is hungry for pancakes. These three examples construct the unintelligent, animalistic Grimsrud concisely and subtly. Carl, on the other hand, is the talker and thinker. He has evidently given the job some interrogative thought:

CARL

...You - my point is, you pay the ransom - what, eighty ??thousand bucks? - I mean, you give us half the ransom, forty thousand, you keep half. It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul, it doesn't make any -

(Coen, 1996, 6)

The dynamic of the relationship between Carl and Grimsrud is thus set up as 'the brains and brawn' duality which is common to crime films (often the physically stronger criminal is lampooned for comedy value - here he is used to conduct the shocking violence which counterpoints the film).

The next scene, set in a Minneapolis Suburban House, not only introduces new characters but establishes the relationships between these characters. The screenplay differs from the film in the opening of this scene as it has Jerry entering the house "in a parka and a red plaid Elmer Fudd hat" (Coen, 1996, 7). In the film, Jerry is hatless. I think this decision has been made by the director as the connotations of Elmer Fudd labour the point that Jerry is a blithering incompetent fool. Apart from the reference being so crude, the hat may also have been left out so that the audience can immediately identify Jerry returning to his home. Again, the agendas of the writer and director are crossed: while the writer must strongly convey character through description (which the hat does), the director must consider other concerns such as continuity, flow, audience identification and subtlety. It is probably often the case that written descriptions do not seem as laboured or as exaggerated as a visual depiction, purely because the viewer can see the whole person, whereas the reader only sees the elements of the character the writer draws his attention to. The opening dialogue is also slightly different, but this does not seem to be of any significance. When Wade says "Dad's here", the viewer can immediately see Jerry's reaction to this, while the reader of the screenplay cannot. A foundation is laid in the film for the relationship between Wade and Jerry which does not exist in the screenplay.

Wade, "mid-sixtyish, vigorous, with a full head of gray hair" (Coen, 1996, 8), is watching ice hockey on television. He is completely engrossed, and is not listening properly to Jerry when he asks "Who they playin'?". The interest of this character in competitive sport, his familial role as a father, and the already disclosed fact that he's "real well off" set Wade up as a capitalist patriarch. He is the most powerful figure in the film, and Jerry is very much in his shadow both financially and personally. This is implied in the screenplay, but more clearly indicated in the film, by the fact that Wade does not turn from the television to make eye contact with Jerry when he addresses him.

The following conversation over dinner serves several purposes. Firstly, Scotty's escape to McDonalds re-iterates the sentiment of Ethan Coen in the screenplay's introduction. He talks of Minnesota as "a bleak, windswept tundra, resembling Siberia except for its Ford dealerships and Hardee's restaurants" (Coen, 1996, x). I think the casual mention of McDonalds again reinforces the world view of the Coen brothers: it is not essential to plot or character, but strengthens the sense that even though this is a remote and snowy corner of America, the franchise capitalism of Ford's and McDonalds still saturates the land. Ironically, it is inescapable, even here. Secondly, the conversation introduces the sub plot of the Wayzata deal which also begins the motif of the parking lot as an area of isolation which continues throughout the film (several important scenes

take place in parking lots: Jerry's utter desperation after his failed meeting with Wade and Stan, Carl changing number plates in he airport car park, and Wade's death ). Finally, the exact nature of the relationship between Wade and Jerry is made resoundingly clear when the following dialogue is spoken:

JERRY

...This could work out real good for me and Jean and Scotty -

WADE

Jean and Scotty never have to worry.

(Coen, 1996, 11)

Wade clearly does not like Jerry, and sees himself as the dominant authoritative figure in the story. As the wealthy patriarch, he decides the fate of his family, and Jerry obviously does not figure very highly.

The next scene, set in the car Jerry has given Carl and Grimsrud, opens with a dazzling white image with a small solitary car driving along the bottom edge of the screen. This again communicates isolation and desolation, and continues the intention of the screenplay's description without carrying it out exactly (the shot on paper is taken from "an aerial shot"). The conversation between Carl and Grimsrud continues the characters exposition and again defines their roles within their partnership as discussed above. It is the following section that proves more interesting, however, as there are added shots in the film that are not described in the screenplay. In the script, the final scene of the sequence (set in Gustafson Olds Garage) opens with a description of Jerry "sitting in his glassed-in salesman's cubicle" with "an irate customer and his wife" (Coen, 1996, 12). The film, however, gives us three establishing shots before this which are highly revealing and effective in communicating theme.

The first shows a long line of ordinary Ford cars shot from the side. The following shot shows a wall of photographs of the dealership's sales assistants. By Juxtaposing these two images, the director draws an analogy between the mass of capitalist product, the cars, and the mass of workers at the showroom. And just as one of the cars has been used as payment in a kidnapping, so the third shot shows in close up the photograph of the kidnapper's employer, Jerry, in the middle of the wall of pictures. The notion communicated in purely visual terms is again the sense of isolation and desperation in amongst a community, or the idea of 'the stranger in a crowd'. One wonders what the other faces in the photographs hide beneath a veneer of normality, or indeed what other sinister purposes the Ford family cars will be put to. Like Hitchcock, the Coen brothers are here interested in implying that societies greatest crimes are caused from within that society. Mundane normality represses violent impulses which spring up again in the least expected of places, the American family home.

I think that this mood runs through the whole of Fargo and is skilfully set up in the opening ten minutes under study here. The fact that the director has added to the film these congruous shots indicates a true understanding and appreciation of the intention of the film script. It is perhaps this astute understanding between writer and director that makes Fargo a well crafted screenplay and a visually expressive film. It is also a film which can be made to fit the Field/Hauge model of screenwriting in certain areas, but not in the area of character introduction and development. Hauge in particular offers a paradigmatic model which is so broad, and offers the writer so many choices, most films, mainstream and independent, could fit into it. That Fargo resists two of Hauge's most rigid rules (introducing the hero in the first ten minutes, and making the hero's outer motivation the driving force of the plot) and succeeds on its own terms in creating interesting characters and an involving plot, again makes the project stand out as exceptional in both written

and visual areas.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Coen, Joel & Ethan (1996) *Fargo - The Screenplay*, Faber: London

Field, Syd (1994) *Four Screenplays*, Dell Trade: New York

Hauge, Michael (1989) *Writing Screenplays That Sell*, Elm Tree Books (Penguin): Middlesex.