

Fargo and marxism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Money is the root of all evil. ” This is a quote we have all heard before and it seems to be exactly the point that Joel and Ethan Coen are trying to make in their 1996 film, Fargo. Throughout the movie, money causes characters to do reprehensible things, and this film clearly criticizes America’s ideological view of money. But is it possible for filmmakers to adequately critique America’s views on money when they are making a profit from the movie? The Coen brothers are aware of the many hypocrisies in our class system and are therefore able to satirize them throughout the film.

By examining the hegemony of the upper class over the lower class, it becomes evident why the struggles between characters occur. Whether it’s the way the different characters react to how they want to pay the ransom to how the characters exploit the other characters to further themselves economically, the Coen brothers present plenty of opportunities to apply Marxist theory to their movie. Because the movie revolves so much around the way characters respond to the ransom money, it is first essential to understand a few Marxist theories.

First it is necessary to look at the structures of a society: the two types of structures examined are the base and the superstructure. The base is usually comprised of a society’s economic structures and considered to be the foundation that a society rests on. Often times, the base is how people form productive relations and it is usually based off the differences in classes. The superstructure consists of the groups, such as legal systems or schools, that help to protect, organize and strengthen the base.

The superstructure attempts to perpetuate the base so that it may continue to benefit the society in two ways: coercive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses. Coercive state apparatuses are police and judicial systems and are less effective than ideological state apparatuses, such as schools and religion. Hegemony is the idea that a society's dominant ideology will duplicate itself, both consciously and subconsciously, in art. Hegemony usually occurs without the artist, or in this case, filmmaker's knowledge. With that being said, it is also important to understand the idea of reification.

Reification can be described as the way that people are turned into commodities for others to capitalize on. Finally, it is necessary to realize that in a society whose base is economic-centric, one of the society's major ideologies must be the relationship between power and wealth. All these ideas together make up Marxism and are crucial to understanding how the Coen brothers condemn American ideologies. Jerry Lundegaard, the main character of Fargo, both complements and contradicts the base of our society with the plan he devises to ensure his financial security.

It can be said that the conflict in the movie begins when Jerry attempts to solve his unnamed financial problems. Because of the American ideology that money is equated to power, Jerry, a member of the middle class, seeks money to solve his problems. Jerry hires two lower class men to kidnap his wife and promises them \$40, 000 for helping him. He later tells his father-in-law, Wade, that the kidnappers are asking for a ransom of \$1 million. On one hand, Jerry is exploiting the lower class to make a far greater economical gain than the two kidnappers.

This is exactly how transactions take place in most marketplaces and this event perpetuates the way the base of our society functions. On the other hand, Jerry's plan undermines the usual way our society's base operates. By taking so much money from someone of a higher class, Jerry is changing the relationship that members of differing class status interact. This is where a major conflict of the movie spawns. Although Wade does not believe it is Jerry who is attempting to take his money, he still knows it is a member of the lower class who is seeking to further their economic standing.

Based on the normal workings of the base structure, it is he who should be exploiting the lower class for their money, not the other way around. Wade realizes the backwards way in which money is being transacted this is why he goes to the pickup without Jerry but with a gun. He plans on using the money to get his daughter back, but shooting the kidnapper once she is safe so he can keep the money and restore order to the class system. Because Jerry is a representation of aspects of the base of society, Marge, as a result, can be viewed as an extension of the superstructure.

As a policewoman, Marge acts as a coercive state apparatus. Diane V. Steinberg says, " people who upset the foundational economic and social order... are forcibly coerced by this part of the superstructure into supporting the dominant economic base... or they are punished. " Marge's job is to uphold the law so that the base can continue working the way it always does. If someone were to upset the foundational social order by killing someone, for example, it is Marge's job to punish them before they can kill anyone else and mess up the base structure any more.

In the end, Marge distances herself from the superstructure, despite her position as chief of police. As she is driving Gaear to the police station at the end of the movie, she says, “[All of those people dead] 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. ” Although she is a police officer and her job acts as a coercive state apparatus, her point of view distances her from the superstructure.

Due to the fact that this movie can be considered a work of art, it is necessary to consider the way our society's ideologies present themselves within it- or hegemony. At some base level, every character in this movie is driven by money. For some characters, such as Jerry or the kidnappers, it is very clear that their main motivation is to gain the ransom money. Other characters, such as Marge, act the way they do because of their job, but when it comes down to it, they are doing their job so they can attain money.

Often, ideological views are only subconsciously added to a work of art but it is clear that this is not the case in Fargo. The ideology that money brings power was a conscious addition to this movie because of the many times it is obviously criticized throughout the movie. One example of this criticism is when Carl kills Wade for the ransom money. This scene is such a shock to the viewer that it causes them to reflect on the importance of money in their own life.

Carl commits a heinous act, but it is for reasons the viewer can identify with and that causes the scene to register on a personal level. The movie also

criticizes the ideology through irony. After Carl procures the money from Wade, he buries it so that he can come back and pick it up later. This is ironic because later Gaear kills Carl for not splitting the money equally. With Carl dead, no one else knows where the rest of the money is hidden and no one will be able to find it. The most blatant criticism of American ideology in the movie is Marge's quote about how there is more to life than money.

This not only directly states the point of view the movie is trying to make, but because it is said by a character who has previously served as a coercive state apparatus, even more attention is drawn to it. The purpose of the superstructure is to perpetuate the ideology of the base. This means the Coen brothers had to make a conscious decision to create this dissonance and therefore are aware of the hegemony within their movie. Reification is another essential concept during the discussion of this movie. A major example of a person being capitalized on during the film is through Jerry's wife.

Jerry has his wife kidnapped for the sole purpose of making money off of her. By turning his wife into a commodity, Jerry is able to economically thrive off of her. Another less explicit example of this is when Mike Yanagita calls Marge. Mike uses the people who were murdered by Carl and Gaear as an excuse to talk to Marge. Although he wouldn't financially benefit from their meeting, he hopes to sexually benefit from it. In a society that often uses sex as a way to sell products, it makes sense that someone would use similar tactics when attempting to gain money or sex.

The film as a whole is another example of reification. Assumption College argues, “ the media’s obsession with tragedy make commodities out of grieving people. The media expresses sympathy but economically thrives on these events. ” If this is true, it can also be argued that the media, or more specifically the Coen brothers, are doing exactly that with this movie.

Moviegoers are ultimately drawn to movies because of their stories. Some of the driving elements behind this story are the multiple murders that occur and the Coens made money by creating a story that was rife with death and tragedy.

In the movie, they are able to sympathize with the grieving viewer by giving the murderers their comeuppance, but that still doesn’t mask the fact that the Coen brothers are participating in the activities that the movie so eloquently chastises. Joel and Ethan Coen’s 1996 film, Fargo, is a well-crafted social commentary on the way Americans view money. By including characters that fall into the base structure or the superstructure categories, they are able to lay down basics of how Americans interact with money.

The Coens are clearly aware of the hegemony that occurs within the movie and use it to their advantage by writing lines into the script that reflect their views on American ideology. As convincing as their opinions are, though, the Coen brothers end up thwarting their own message purely from the fact that their movie was a success. Reification is how people are used as commodities from which you can gain a profit, and the Coen brothers did exactly that off of every person who saw this movie.

In the end it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that the Coens made a movie criticizing America's view of money. It doesn't matter that it is in turn hypocritical for them to make money off of that movie. It doesn't even matter that people now have an even clearer idea of how unjust American society is. Because, in the end, the Coens prove that the upper class will stay upper class, the middle class will stay middle class, and the lower class will stay lower class- and there isn't a thing that anyone can do about it.