

Postmodern Genre-Bending on Mainstream TV: A Case Study of *Fargo* Season 5

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of its complexity and bleakness, *Fargo*, the Coen brothers' classic postmodern neo-noir from 1996 has been adapted to the small screen, producing a show that has run five seasons (2014–). Since such a transfer to a mainstream popular medium might raise skepticism about artistic quality, the present study turns to recently aired Season 5 (2023–2024) to scrutinize how—returning to the Coens' original plotline—scriptwriter Noah Hawley renegotiates the clichéd comic character of the female victim to promote a feminist political agenda, while carefully balancing between market pressures and the demand of complexity posed to high-end television drama. The study argues that the season's generic hybridity—akin to developments in contemporary crime fiction—is a key factor in the artistically and commercially successful innovation that *Fargo* Season 5 represents. The series creates a self-reflexive postmodern blend of the realistic and the fantastic, melodrama and comedy, (true) crime drama and myth, to name only a few relevant modes and genres. With the help of that blend, the season both revises the representation of the female victim in the Coens' movie to target mainstream audiences, and subtly maintains a critical distance from its own all too utopian resolutions through the fantastic. (AR)

KEYWORDS: neo-noir, hybridization, high-end television drama, domestic violence, feminisms



Fargo, the Coen brothers' critically acclaimed midcult neo-noir from 1996 was, somewhat surprisingly, a popular success, and has become a modern classic by now. Surprisingly, because—as David Sterritt highlights—*Fargo* fits perfectly into its makers' well-known “genre revisionism,” it evokes and parodies the “small-town comedy,” the “true crime docudrama,” the “film noir,” and the “neo-noir” (16). All that, as for instance Steven Carter argues, in the spirit of a “quintessentially postmodern film” (244). Regardless of its complexity and bleakness, the movie has been adapted to the small screen in the form of a mini-series (2014–), producing a show that has run five

seasons, each with a separate time- and story-line. Such a transfer to a mainstream popular medium might raise some skepticism about artistic quality, yet the series has fared well with both critics and audiences, regardless of its maintaining, to a great extent, the Coen brothers' all-encompassing irony and resistance to "binary logic" (Lee 75). After some dwindling of quality and popularity by Season 4, recently aired Season 5 (2023–24) made a spectacular comeback. It returned to the Coens' original plotline and reworked its one component which scriptwriter Noah Hawley had hardly touched before: the female victim. Refocused on the theme of domestic violence, the season nevertheless has an apparently much brighter look and a more unequivocally happy-ending than any of the previous serial story-lines—let alone the Coens' feature film. Have artistic concerns been finally sacrificed to commercial ones? In my view, a closer scrutiny on the season's generic contexts indicates the opposite: similarly to developments in contemporary crime fiction, hybridization has facilitated both artistically and commercially successful innovation on television in *Fargo* Season 5. Just like the Coens' film, it creates a self-reflexive postmodern blend of the realistic and the fantastic, melodrama, and comedy, as well as (true) crime drama and myth, with the addition of several more genres, including the fairy tale, the animal fable, the puppet show, the Gothic romance, and the sensation novel. With the help of that blend, the season manages to retain the ambiguous and perplexing quality that comes with its *noir* legacy. It revises the clichéd representation of the female victim in the Coens' movie to convey up-to-date messages about gender roles, which clearly target mainstream audiences, yet it also maintains a subtle critical distance from its own all too utopian resolution, potentially relegated to the realm of the fantastic.

Contexts: Hybridization, film *noir* and high-end television drama

Highly eclectic, popular culture studies have traditionally provided the textual analysis of both literary and visual narratives with the help of literary critical paradigms (Burns 6; Riley 32–42), among others. Indeed, crime fiction studies, with its recent focus on hybridization, offers a convenient vantage point for the analysis of hybrid cinematic and televised crime narratives, since it directs attention to the crime genre's quick and increasingly complex reaction to current cultural, social, and political issues. That said, the fundamental generic contexts of film *noir* and neo-*noir*, established by the Coens' movie and consistently employed in the creation of its televised adaptation, could hardly be ignored in any attempt at

understanding the complexities and artistic pretensions of the *Fargo* series. Equally important for this purpose is a brief look at the phenomenon of high-end television drama, of which the series is a specimen. It is against that backdrop that, always bearing in mind the Coens' *Fargo* as a fundamental intertext of the series but not aiming to provide a comprehensive comparison of the two, I will discuss the reinterpretation of the female victim in *Fargo* Season 5.

Recent insights in crime fiction studies suggest that hybridity is a definitive feature of the genre and is key to both its adaptability and its ability to reflect with increasing complexity on current cultural phenomena. In their introduction to the 2020 *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper highlight hybridization as one of the “new developments” (1) in crime fiction, yet also emphasize that hybridity has always been a definitive feature of the genre (5), producing “narratives in which two or more forms are present to such a degree that neither dominates” (Humann 57). In fact, Gulddal and King view crime fiction as a heterogeneous “field” rather than a genre, defined—if by anything at all—“by hybridity and mobility rather than adherence to rules” (13). Therefore, having briefly surveyed the historically offered two major types of crime fiction definitions, labeled *ludic* and *formula fiction* understandings (14–15), they quickly move on to elaborate their *interface* account of the genre. In doing so, they conceptualize crime fiction as “a narrative vector for exploring a range of wider social, political, cultural or philosophical issues that do not necessarily have anything to do with crime in themselves, yet are significantly implicated and framed by the criminal/ investigative plot” (15). In other words, crime fiction is prominently structured by crime, but it is not *about* crime. Gulddal and King offer this new approach because they find that the discussions of crime fiction inspired by the *ludic* and *formula fiction* definitions—visions of the genre as a proliferation of subgenres, each established by a canonical author and each having its own “prescriptive model”—are no longer able to account for the heterogeneous nature of individual narratives. That, in turn, results from the conscious play with generic conventions and concomitant hybridization (16), featuring, for instance, “generic intertextuality” (Allan et al. 5), which became “a central norm of crime fiction” in the post-war period (Gulddal and King 16), substantiating claims about the innovativeness, adaptability, fluidity, and complexity of the genre (Allan et al. 4–5). As Allan et al. also acknowledge, “televised serials have . . . become” the flagships of “formal and thematic innovation,” and thereby

“the most significant manifestation of crime fiction” (6), which also calls for discussing *Fargo* Season 5 within the crime fiction studies paradigm of hybridization.

Gulddal and King identify three major motive forces behind the widespread hybridization of crime fiction, each highly relevant to *Fargo* Season 5. These are the commercial demand for novelty, which is instigated by a saturated market; the literary ambition to “avoid”—through the introduction of postmodern playfulness and metafictional awareness (see also Humann 57)—“the stigma of genre fiction”; and the urge to offer complex approaches to “interpersonal relations and social structures” through the blending of genres (16). As for the first, saturation acquires a specific meaning in the context of adapting a feature film in the serial form: adaptation proper sets the task of repeating the original “without replication” (Hutcheon xvi) to avoid audiences’ sheer boredom, which becomes increasingly complicated as the scope for novelty is progressively limited with each already existing season. Indeed, by the time *Fargo* Season 5 was created, the first four seasons had more or less exhausted the Coens’ definitive characters, plot components, themes, and even motifs to construct their own separate narratives, variations on the feature film *Fargo* as their prioritized intertext (see Leitch 100–04). Season 1 focuses on the horror of ordinary smalltown existence by restaging Jerry Lundegaard as a socially awkward clerk carelessly meddling with criminal, even metaphysical, forces much larger than himself. The faint sense of supernatural evil surrounding Grimsrud in the film becomes explicit in the series through the charismatic, even mesmerizing figure of hitman Lorne Malvo. Seasons 1 and 2 revisit the iconic character of (highly pregnant) female detective Marge Gunderson, providing a critique of patriarchy from the perspective of a woman of profession. Season 3 is both an elaboration of the “struggle for the vehicle” (see Lee *passim*) and a return to the issue of intertwining organized crime and large capital, already taken up in the previous seasons. In Season 3, this theme is complemented by yet another figure of metaphysical evil, the mysterious V. M. Varga. Season 4 provides a historical panorama of organized crime, focusing on Kansas City turf war spanning over half a century. While doing so, it most prominently interrogates notions of race and supremacy, which feature with varying emphasis in all the seasons. In one way or another, all the narratives are concerned with motherhood, the (Symbolic) Father (see Lee 69), (parentless) children, and the motif of food—most emphatically in V. M. Varga’s scenes of abject eating and vomiting in Season 3, and in the

machinations of a poisoner, the murderous quasi-mother Oraetta Mayflower in Season 4. As a result, by 2023 audiences might have had their fill of *Fargo* recycled. This “saturation” must have gestured towards hitherto untouched components of the movie as potential enablers of an adaptation proper. As the list above has hopefully demonstrated, turning the movie’s victim figure, Jean Lundegaard, into a central character offered itself by that time as practically the only option for producing the novelty demanded by the market. As later discussion will show, by 2023 it was also high time to reconsider the female victim’s less than subtle 1996 representation: interrogating patriarchy as it does, *Fargo* operates with a misogynistic cliché there, which both lacks the complexity that twenty-first-century crime fiction aspires to and proves to be non-PC in the post-#MeToo era.

Refocusing the narrative on a victimized female character and reinterpreting it in an era of intense social activism against all forms of gender discrimination, harassment, and (sexual) violence, logically entails a turn towards female genres, in contrast to the masculine film *noir* tradition.¹ Indeed, with the central figure of Marge Gunderson, the Coens’ movie already evidences a feminine appropriation of film *noir*. At least, that much is suggested by applying to the Coens’ neo-*noir* Heather Humann’s insights that genres are “cultural categories” and hybridization equals moments when a particular genre—a means of expression for one particular group—is appropriated by another one (57). The very definition of neo-*noir* involves such an appropriation, a conscious reuse of film *noir* conventions with a difference:

The term neo-*noir* describes any film coming after the classic *noir* period that contains *noir* themes and the *noir* sensibility. . . . These later films are likely not shot in black and white and likely do not contain the play of light and shadow that their classic forerunners possessed. They do, however, contain the same alienation, pessimism, moral ambivalence, and disorientation. (Conrad, *Introduction* 2)

What seems to define the makers of neo-*noir* films as a group, as Mark Conrad’s definition implies, is their awareness of contributing to the film *noir* tradition, which urges them to consciously employ *noir* features and reinterpret the *noir* legacy (Introduction 2; see also Naremore 24–25, Silver and Ward 398)—repurpose it for more specific groups hitherto excluded from the discourse of film *noir*, one could add. The Coen brothers’ *Fargo* is, though for various reasons and to varying extents, consistently associated

with neo-*noir*.² Yet, it provides for female audiences a new entry point into the *noir* tradition compared to the genre's accustomed *femme fatale* figures "representative of deep-seated patriarchal anxieties" (Lindop 3) or "demonised" masculine female detective characters (Gates passim): a crossover between an unfeminine cop and a mother. For Christopher Sharrett, for instance, it is actually the highly pregnant female detective with a "bright disposition," this blatant defiance of genre clichés (see Doherty 47; Grace 35), that at first sight seems to define *Fargo* as "a true neo-*noir*" (Sharrett 70), since the maternal and jovial female detective is iconoclastic in the contexts of the highly masculine classic *noir* tradition, largely inspired by hard-boiled fiction. James Naremore, in his Foucauldian approach to describing the "most amorphous" genre of film *noir*, traces back the emergence of its critical discourse to the surrealist and existentialist intellectual milieu of post-war Paris and predominantly associates film *noir* with a European male fascination with otherness, prominent in the high modernist tradition (15). He also emphasizes that by the end of the short film *noir* period (1941–1958), the term came to be applied to "allegories of the white male condition," by then rather clichéd (23).³ Naremore follows Raymond Borde and Eugene Chaumeton in pointing out that specimens of film *noir*, narrating ambiguously the stories of ambiguous (male) heroes engaged in ambiguous action and representing an ambiguous moral stance, were meant "to disorient the spectator" (qtd. in Naremore 19; see also Conrad, Introduction 2). Though retaining the disorienting ambiguity of the detective figure, the Coens' *Fargo* launches a process of feminine appropriation; its representation of the female victim, nevertheless, leaves ample room for extending that process and including female genres.⁴

The model of complexity and reinterpretation presented by the Coens' postmodern neo-*noir* indicates a pressure on the creators of the mini-series to comply with sophisticated audience demands by avoiding the appearance of cheap entertainment, which is a major driving force behind hybridization. This artistic ambition—as Max Sexton and Dominic Lees's comparative analysis of the *Fargo* movie and television series suggests⁵—resonates with the specific demands of high-end television drama, which in turn tie in with the third potential major motive behind hybridization: the need to provide a subtle and complex interpretation of current affairs. Sexton and Lees classify the series as both "high-end television drama" (347) and specifically Season 1 as "small town *noir* crime thriller" (353). The first of these categories implies a high-budget TV production with cinematic pretensions in terms of style and complexity, as well as actors: a show that

would present “contradictory truths” about an “unknowable and unpredictable world” with the help of first-rate movie actors and taking full advantage of the longer screen time the mini-series form offers (354). The second category suggests, as Sexton and Lees’s consistent comparison confirms, that the television series adapts the world of the Coen’s film to the small screen to continue the same generic tradition and to recreate signature features of the Coens’ style (349–53). This, in turn, is a risky affair that pay cable channels have been able to afford only for a decade or so—a new development which, Sexton and Lees highlight, has reshaped the mini-series into a complex and artistic television genre (344). This means that all three factors promoting hybridization in crime fiction—a search for novelty out of market concerns, artistic ambition, and the need to provide a complex vision—seem to be in full force in the case of *Fargo* Season 5.

Indeed, just like Season 1, *Fargo* Season 5 confirms the view that “drama has become a key marker of quality in prime time programming” (Sexton and Lees 344). Through its reminiscences of the Coen brothers’ plot turns and other filmic devices, episode one firmly locates the series in the comic neo-*noir* *Fargo* cinematic universe, as well as in the framework of a postmodern parody of true-crime docudrama. Plot-wise, the episode fundamentally replays the crime in the focus of the film: the kidnapping of a Minnesota housewife, who is married to a car salesman, sets a female police officer on the trail of the perpetrators. As it later turns out, the perps are only hired guns and it is the victim’s (ex-)husband who commits violence by proxy. This is where the two plot-lines fork: implicitly present in the Coen’s film, domestic violence is turned into an explicit central concern in *Fargo* Season 5, which the series promises to tackle with the sensitivity and complexity of the issue and the ambiguity of the *noir* tradition in mind. That is, the first episode, like all the others, is introduced by the updated version of the Coens’ time-honored title card: “This is a true story. The following events took place in Minnesota in 2019. 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.” (S05E01 00:02:44–00:03:03).⁶ Yet, by the time these lines appear on the screen, viewers are most likely already suspicious of the realistic—let alone documentary-style—representation of the events, thanks to the linguistic and behavioral ambiguity created by the first intertitle, on the one hand, and to the emphatically non-realistic shooting of the opening scene, on the other. The first intertitle, which actually replaces the Coens’ script as the opening frame, is a dictionary definition of the cultural stereotype *Minnesota nice*, explained as “[a]n aggressively pleasant

demeanor, often forced, in which a person is chipper and self-effacing, no matter how bad things get” (S05E01 00:00:31). This summary of inauthentic manners, establishing the sense of ambiguity typical for the *noir* tradition, is immediately both contradicted and maybe corroborated by the first scene: a school meeting gone haywire and turned into a mob fight, artistically choreographed and shot in the pulsating rhythm of alternating slow motion and normal speed. The irresistibly comic sequence is rich in ironies: of all the combatants, it is a fragile, doll-like young mother—Dot Lyon, the protagonist—who is taken into custody, when out of a terrified onlooker she decides to become a rescuer of her own daughter, but accidentally electro-shocks a policeman with a Taser while trying to get out of the fight. The emphatically cinematic nature of this scene is highlighted a couple of minutes later in Dot’s metafilmic evocation of popular culture: as she recalls, the math teacher attacked her “like something from a zombie movie” (S05E01 00:04:08). The series, just like the Coens’ movie, promises to be a self-reflexive parody of true crime docudrama right from its start, which, regardless of its comic vision, does not shy away from the nuanced representation a highly sensitive issue, domestic violence. Just as importantly, it appears to be targeted at female audiences right from the start.

From “shrieking windup toy” to “Rambo”: The Post-#MeToo female victim and (post)feminist sisterhood

Seen in this light, *Fargo* Season 5 appears to be a blatant demonstration of how quickly crime narratives react to current social phenomena and how often that reaction takes the form of rewriting generic conventions—in this case, rewriting the residue of gender stereotypes present in the Coen brothers’ otherwise highly subversive neo-*noir*. I argue that Season 5 presents a radical counter-narrative to the cliché of the helpless female victim, whom the Coens unfailingly represent as a ridiculous object of business transactions, and thus, as a subhuman caricature. In the light of the fact that the fourth wave of feminism and the #MeToo Movement were already in full swing by the mid-2010s, with a special focus on activism against (sexual) harassment and rape (see Chamberlain 2), such an image appears to be especially untenable today. In the series, its reinterpretation is combined with gender-bending alterations in the Coens’ cast—mergers, splits and rewritings of characters—which turn the season into a feminist manifesto and a call for sisterhood, while paradoxically celebrating a postfeminist epitome of domesticity. The focus on female

characters entails a feminine appropriation of the masculine *noir* tradition through hybridization: neo-*noir* is blended with other genres and modes of representation, some of which have a history of providing a platform for expressing women's anxieties and critique of patriarchy. The result is basically a political statement, an instance of activism against domestic violence, which, exactly for that reason, seems to be somewhat simplistic and didactic on the surface and apparently fails its promise of complexity and ambiguity by being a straightforward lesson directed at mainstream audiences.

The almost ten hours of screen time the series offers facilitate the emergence of a more complex generic hybrid than what the movie *Fargo* presents, which creates a platform for the (post)feminist rewriting of the helpless female victim, a cliché widespread in crime fiction and film, and also present in the Coens' movie. The victimization of women in crime fiction, as Adrienne Gavin highlights, is a central concern of both feminist literary criticism and feminist crime fiction itself: "Women are victims: captured, raped, murdered, butchered and in the hands of forensic detectives dissected into evidence" (268). Similarly, audiences are conditioned to expect "spectacularly" victimized female characters in the "thriller, horror, crime and action" genres in the cinema (Stringer 275–76). As Glen Close highlights, the hard-boiled genre introduced into these scenes of violence a tone of "pornographic sensationalism" (9), which allows him to coin the term "necropornographic fantasy" to conceptualize the misogynistic representation of the cadaver—most frequently a female corpse—in mass market crime fiction (3). The Coens' female victim does not become a sexualized dead body: Jean Lundegaard appears to be a plain woman in her mid-thirties, who is kidnapped in her comfortable but most unbecoming home outfit and with disheveled hair, and whose dead body only features on the screen for a split second. Yet she is turned into a spectacle—and a comic one, at that. Depriving her of any sex appeal does not exempt her from the misogynistic objectification implied above; rather, it contributes to her comic image, which almost forbids compassion for her, even in her death. As Pamela Grace recalls, the brief shot of her dead body (01:24:19) is included in such a comic context that it invariably provoked laughter in US cinemas (49). Indeed, Jean is a passive object of financial transactions both in her presumably financially motivated marriage—Jerry is much more concerned with his father-in-law's money than with his wife—and in her capacity of a hostage for ransom in a mock kidnapping orchestrated by her own husband. Devin McKinney's claim that Jean is like

“a shrieking windup toy” (34) resonates with this sense of objectification and, especially, aptly describes Jean in the iconic scene of her futile attempt to escape from her kidnappers. In her slippers, with her hands tied behind her back, blinded by a black hood-like cloth, maybe one of her kidnappers’ ski masks covering her head and face, she whines incessantly as she pointlessly tries to run away; she just ends up comically tottering and stumbling around in the snow (00:43:58–44:40). Indeed, she is like a toned down, comic version of the clichéd female victims in horror movies, who have one task to do: to scream (see Clover 201). Or, through the prism of Carter’s remark that *Fargo* “makes a statement about inhumanity” with the help of animal motifs (242), this caricature of a female victim recalls the proverbial headless chicken as a summary of the irresistibly comic impression it creates. This spectacle of the suffering of an objectified, passive, and helpless female victim clearly offers fertile ground for rethinking it now, in an era of intense feminist activism.

The presence of two intertwined genres is instrumental to reconsidering the female victim’s image in a (post)feminist context in *Fargo* Season 5: both the conventions of the sensation novel—though inverted—and those of female Gothic are prominent in the narrative. These two genres, also feeding into European crime fiction upon its emergence (Pykett 32–37; Knight 19), had from the start endowed women—as criminals, self-liberating victims, and most significantly as writers like Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Mrs. Henry Wood, or Mary Elizabeth Braddon (Pykett 35)—with agency to a lesser or greater extent. Since these genres often voiced women’s anxieties about patriarchy (Wallace and Smith 2), they both gesture towards a feminine appropriation of the masculine *noir* tradition. In the Coens’ movie, the mock kidnapping gone wrong leaves the housewife, her father, and one of her kidnappers dead, and lands the villain, Jean’s husband, in jail. The modified replay of Jean’s kidnapping (S05E01 00:17:46–00:20:15) apparently sets Dot Lyon’s narrative on the same trajectory. Yet, the plot turn is repeated with a very significant difference: though Dot is overwhelmed by her two kidnappers in a sequence of slapstick comedy (S05E01 00:17:00–00:23:11), she is anything but helpless. With marvelous ingenuity, she uses all household products she can lay her hands on to fight her kidnappers—most spectacularly, a bottle of spray and a lighter to create a flamethrower (S05E01 00:20:41). Later on, instead of groping around blindly, like Jean in her miserably failed attempt to break free, Dot escapes when the first chance offers itself (S05E01 35:31–36:04), wounds one of her kidnappers and causes the death of the other—this time

with a bag of ice found in the petrol station shop where her pursuers catch up with her. Incidentally, she also saves the life of a male state trooper along the way. All that in jogging pants and a hand-knit cardigan, barefoot, with slightly disheveled hair and both hands tied behind her back, in clear homage to the Coens' film and Jean Lundegaard. This housewife mysteriously turned "Rambo," as State Trooper Witt Farr later calls her (S05E02 00:31:14), or even "a real Comanche" (S05E02 00:32:19), clearly has full agency, in stark contrast to the painfully ridiculous helpless female victim of the Coens. Yet, the kidnapping scene unveils that she also has a past—very much in the sense heroines of nineteenth-century sensation novels, like, for instance, Braddon's *Lady Audley*, do (see Pykett 34). She lives under an *alias*: originally called Nadine Tillman née Bump, she apparently never divorced her first husband, Roy Tillman, a militant WASP North Dakota sheriff, alive and kicking, out for her blood and responsible for her very real kidnapping. The shadow of the sensation novel plot casts Dot in the role of the bigamist gold digger in the manner of *Lady Audley*—a view warmly embraced by her mother-in-law, billionaire debt management business shark Mrs. Lyon Sr. This suspicion is quickly dissolved—for viewers, at least, if not for Lorraine Lyon—though not before her mother-in-law commits Dot to a mental institution, with a turn frequent in both sensation novel (Pykett 33) and Gothic plots (Botting 87; Kilgour 82). Dot is then revealed to have escaped from a mentally and physically abusive relationship with Tillman. Her escape from the patriarchal homestead of domestic violence in the past fits the bill perfectly for a female Gothic narrative, which conventionally stages a conflict between a persecuted heroine and a violent sexual predator of a villain, yet is bound to end happily thanks to the active female protagonist's self-reliance (Williams 103; Wallace and Smith 2). This generic allusion is confirmed by both Tillman's character and house, just as well as Dot's breakouts from various forms of imprisonment in the present. Tillman, true to the Bluebeard stereotype of the Gothic villain (see Williams 38–48), has the dead body of his murdered first wife sunk in the cesspool of his ranch, complete with a Gothic mansion-inspired ranch house and subterranean, labyrinthine tunnels. He lives now in yet another abusive relationship with his third wife. Though the gruesome details of Dot's first marriage remain blissfully obscure, the series culminates in her imprisonment and brutalization on that ranch. Yet, as from the mental institution before, she escapes on her own, even gaining a chance to take revenge: it is only the appearance of the police that stops her from killing Tillman, after already having shot him once. If Dot Lyon is a

woman with a past, the series turns that sensation novel cliché in the spirit of the female Gothic into a (post)feminist celebration of the ingenious housewife-*cum*-action-heroine's successful escape from and rebellion against patriarchy in general, and domestic violence in particular.

Although Dot's agency and self-reliance are emphatic throughout the narrative, her story functions as a battle cry for (post)feminist sisterhood, realized apparently all too neatly in the season's resolution: the online activism typically associated with the fourth wave of feminism (Chamberlain 3) is conspicuously absent from the series, yet as a whole it can be interpreted as an act of political activism, risking even didacticism. The protagonist herself is readily associated with postfeminism, while her resistance to victimization urges allegorical figures of the first and second waves of feminism to voluntarily join her fight against patriarchy. It is in order to protect at all costs the domestic idyll of her current marriage and her maternal identity that Dot activates a self, hidden under the most ordinary surface of a complacent housewife, a young, even girly-looking, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman—in short, a product and embodiment of postfeminist sensibilities (see Gwynne and Muller 2–4). In other words, she becomes more militant than any feminist to fight, ironically, for a feminine identity generations of feminists rebelled against: living next to a highly feminine husband, slightly more handsome but on occasion intensely reminiscent of and even more comically idiotic than the Coens' Norm Gunderson, Marge's overfed baby of a spouse. Dot's insistence on domesticity and motherliness is epitomized in her attitudes to food and feeding. For her, providing her beloved with food has an anchoring function in normalcy, which is best exemplified by her hectic biscuit-making in the dead of the night right after the craze of her kidnapping (S05E01 00:50:22). Indeed, food seems to be metonymically identified both with her maternal identity and her beloved, which is indicated by the shots of Dot's intense and prolonged stare at a box of Bisquick at the petrol station before her kidnappers catch up with her in the chase (S05E01 00:35:50–36:08). She looks as if she was collecting the stamina needed to fight her kidnappers from remembering, through food, the reasons worth fighting for, and as if the terror of losing her current identity and family gave her the force to do so. While in the Coens' *Fargo* care and motherly attention, traditionally associated with food (Grace 42–44), is only one of the motif's many potential functions and interpretations (see Carter 243), the series fully shifts focus to these aspects and associates eating and feeding with the preservation of Dot's current domestic idyll.

Her inseparability from food and an apparent simpleton of a husband suggest that this girly, even doll-like, fragile-looking, and innocently attractive woman reimagines in postfeminist terms not only the “quintessential housewife” (Doherty 47) of the Coens’ film, but also the uncouth maternal figure of fearless Police Chief Marge Gunderson.

According to Angela McRobbie’s often-quoted insight, postfeminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism” (Gwynne and Muller 2). Similarly, Dot’s postfeminist figure is assisted in her fight by female characters who verge on allegories of the second and first waves of feminism, respectively. Following the chronology of the series, the first of these is Police Officer Indira Olmstead—a straightforward reimagining of Marge Gunderson, *née* Olmstead. She enjoys the achievements of feminism with a vengeance: pursuing a stereotypically male career, she is rewarded with the right to support a himbo for a husband, who neither works nor keeps house, but evokes yet another stereotype—that of the brainless nagging housewife. He is more than a nuisance, though: thanks to his expensive hobbies, Indira finds herself owing huge sums to the bank, which financially imprisons her in a modern evocation of Gothic confinement in patriarchal relationships. No wonder that Indira is associated with second-wave feminism through Judy Brady’s famous essay from 1971, “I Want a Wife.” The memorable effect of Brady’s piece is rooted in the central irony that its speaker is a woman who calls attention to the plight of a working mother and housewife by wanting to imitate how men take advantage of their wives. Fully appropriate to his stereotypical femininity, in the series it is Indira’s husband who delivers the monologue (S05E06: 00:04:41–06:16), complaining that Indira does not give him emotional support and does not put him on top of her priorities. Indira’s retort—and re-appropriation of the feminist call for equality at home—comes when later she finds her husband in bed with another woman and finally decides to break up with him: “I, too, would like a wife. I’d even settle for a husband” (S05E08: 00:15:37–43). Indira’s position as a female officer of color is also tenuous, to say the least, in the patriarchal structures of the police force. Victimized on various levels in these hierarchies, she is quick to feel empathy for Dot and does not fall for her cover-up story about her kidnapping: like most victims of domestic violence, Dot is well-versed in coming up with fictitious narratives to hide the real cause of her injuries, and pretends that the kidnapping never happened at all. Nonetheless, Indira cannot rest until she finds out the truth about Dot and Tillman. She responds to the victim’s mute call for help regardless of the fact that—as Indira points out to Mrs.

Lyon Sr.—Dorothy would never identify herself as a victim or accept such a label (S05E06: 00:46:55). The police officer’s solidarity for Dot is the starting point of building a sisterhood in the series which is, as Lidia Rodak’s survey of this fundamental but contested feminist term suggests, consistent with its reinterpretations in the third and fourth waves of the movement: focused on reciprocal acknowledgement and understanding, contemporary notions of sisterhood allow for diversity and an inclusiveness transcending barriers of age, class, race, and sex (120S-21S; see Siegel 4; Chamberlain 2).

Accordingly, Indira’s most important recruit to Dot’s cause is Lorraine Lyon, a woman who could hardly be more different from her or Dot. Played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, “the prestige-endowing theatrical talent” (Sexton and Lees 344) of the season, she is a white billionaire, also a ruthless modern militant feminist, a remnant from a century before, so to say, who is transformed from a wicked mother-in-law/stepmother figure into Dot’s adoptive mother by her solidarity for a victim of patriarchy. The CEO of her own company, Mrs. Lyon Sr. apparently enjoys all the achievements of feminism. Yet, she has to fight daily to be taken seriously by men as a professional, as is clear from her scene with two bankers, who start their business negotiation by demanding her male representative to be present. Fully empowered, Mrs. Lyon mercilessly humiliates them as men and professionals: they are left speechless and agape by her calm arrogance and self-confidence (S05E05: 00:06:58–09:58). Regardless of her feminine, grand dame appearance, her almost toxic masculinity is clear even without recalling that she is the female equivalent of Jerry Lundegaard’s father-in-law, one of the central father figures (Lee 69) in the Coens’ movie.⁷ She is the agent of the final showdown with Roy Tillman (S05E10 00:21:55–27:28) for a reason: they are each other’s equals in power and lack of moral scruples. This is what allows her to turn tables on Tillman and break him by taking care of his victimization through physical violence in the prison—repaying Dot’s “debt” to him (see S05E02 00:06:03–27) in kind. Mrs. Lyon’s support of Dot is equally violent: once Indira shows her photos of the fragile woman’s brutalized body, she soon reaches the point of wanting to have Tillman killed and she summons an army for her daughter-in-law’s rescue from Tillman’s ranch.⁸ Finally overcoming her lasting suspicions that Dot married into her family for money, she symbolically adopts her by calling her a “daughter of mine” (S05E09 00:23:32–37), as if in recognition of the organic connection between her militant feminism and Dot’s postfeminist stance.

Thus, three waves of (post)feminism seem to unite in solidarity against patriarchy through the mutual assistance these three very different female figures give one another. Dot inspires both Indira and Lorraine to become a better version of themselves by saving her from her violent ex-husband. Indira, specifically, urges Lorraine to use her money and power for the humanitarian purpose of empowering other women, even if they are very different from her. The debt queen, in turn, encourages Indira to have dignity and break the shackles of her marriage, debts, and victimization—also gives her a job that enables her to do so. She becomes a foster-mother to Dot—someone she has needed quite badly—and gains a foster-daughter in return, though their reunion (S05E10 00:18:17–55) suggests that the fully rational and insensitive Lorraine might need considerable time to process the emotional baggage that comes with their new relationship. This sisterhood is called into existence by a form of patriarchy that—regardless of its Gothic overtones—is deeply engrained in American culture and provides a scathing critique of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 832–34) and contemporary American politics. Running for re-election, wife-beater Tillman is the dirty sheriff of the very American genre that celebrates the frontier legacy and a hypermasculine ideal: the Western. The always armed Tillman's middle-aged, portly father figure with his constantly worn Stetson hat, jeans, and boots, as well as his horse-riding, recalls the sheriffs of the genre in general, and one specific sheriff, the iconic John Wayne, in particular. Should that allusion be missed, it is comically highlighted by the name of Dot's second husband, Wayne, who is anything but hypermasculine. As Tillman's "I am the law" soliloquy (S05E02 00:17:00–20:00) evidences, he has almost divine pretensions for power in both the domestic and the public spheres. Yet, instead of protecting the collective, as a sheriff should (see Pronko), he coerces people at gunpoint to follow his orders, runs a private army and finds justification for his actions in the words of the Scripture—which he uses and abuses at will. The figure of the dirty sheriff legitimizing with the Word of God his violent and immoral abuse of power and other people—men as well as women—in both the private and the public, political sphere points towards the ideology and masculine ideal central to the frontier heritage as the root cause of rampant violence in today's US society. Tillman is an anachronism, a remnant of the American past, an allegory of patriarchy which must be defeated, the series suggests, to turn a new leaf in shaping both the private and public spheres: to build families and societies founded on the feminine

principles of compassion, solidarity, and inclusion instead of power, revenge, and victimization.

All in all, a diverse and inclusive sisterhood emerges from the (post)feminist revision of the female victim's crime fiction cliché.⁹ The season's unambiguous political statement, indeed, might appear to be alien to the *noir* tradition as well as too didactic, too utopian. But that is only the surface.

Subverting the fantasy of female utopia

The (post)feminist utopia implied above apparently acquires mythic dimensions in *Fargo* Season 5 through the reformation of the season's archetypal patriarch, Ole Munch. Yet, it is precisely the prominent inclusion of genres associated with the fantastic that re-establishes balance: regardless of its straightforward and topical political message, the season proves to be a postmodern hybrid that maintains the ambiguities of the neo-*noir* and subverts its own surface messages, presumably targeted at mainstream audiences.

The Gothic, which fundamentally informs the (post)feminist narrative of *Fargo* Season 5, is inseparable from the fantastic (see Botting 39), and implies the potential presence of other related narrative types. To start with, the series intertwines myth and realism to create an interpretive framework for the critique of patriarchy in a manner reminiscent of magical realism, a postcolonial mode of writing that authors like, for instance, Angela Carter or Jeanette Winterson, appropriated and combined with the Gothic tradition to address feminist or queer concerns, respectively (Bényei, *Apokrif* 14–16, 299–311; Bényei, “Rereading” 170). Key to the relevance of magical realism in the series is the inclusion of Ole Munch, a grotesque yet childlike, gruesomely comic Welsh sin eater, who has allegedly rambled the earth for half a millennium and now acts as one of Tillman's hitmen. This archetypal scapegoat and wandering Jew figure (see Botting 70; Punter 42), who also evokes the abject fatherless child of a Gothic monster created by Frankenstein, shatters any semblance of verisimilitude in the story. His outlandish clothes and speech are remarked; yet, just like in magical realist fictional worlds, no character in the series bats an eyelid at the presence of this fantastically immortal, mythical figure (see Bényei, “Rereading” 151–52). Scarred for life by Dot, and cheated of his payment by Tillman, Munch seeks revenge on both, yet intervenes in their battle to aid Dot, apparently in accordance with an ancient code of honor and in respect for her as a noble enemy—the “Tiger,” as he calls her (S05E02 00:44:03). Just like

Grimsrud in Scott Lee's interpretation of the Coens' film, this hired gun, an abject figure excluded from humanity and hardly able to navigate the Symbolic realm of language, is both an instance of the Real and a comic double to the powerful archetypal father figure (see 68–69) of Roy Tillman. This doubling is highlighted both by two parallel scenes—their respective (quasi-)soliloquies of power comically delivered from a bathtub, as if from a throne (S05E02 00:17:00–20:00; S05E04 00:34:46–36:40)—and by their childishness: Mrs. Lyon Sr. also calls Tillman a baby at one point (S05E05 00:15:00–15:17). Munch's back story of being a pariah stages a mythical narrative of origins for violent patriarchy in victimization and exclusion, which perpetuates itself, unless—as the closing scene of the series suggests—the vicious cycle is broken by re-embracing the abandoned child into human community through sharing Christian love and food with them. That is, a year after the final shoot-out between Dot and Roy Tillman, Munch's surprise visit to the Lyon household and his demand for a Shakespearian “pound of flesh” (S05E10 00:30:53–31:06) does not lead to bloodshed, but to joint preparations for lunch, the beginning of Munch's re-education, and Dot's miniature sermon at the table. In a scene much reminiscent of the Eucharist, she speaks for both herself and Munch as victims when she preaches inclusion and forgiveness:

It feels like that. You know, what they do to us. Make us swallow—like it's our fault. Bet you wanna know the cure? You gotta eat something made with love and joy. And be forgiven! (S05E10 00:42:44–43:24)

Through the closing image of the sin-eater's touchingly comic expression of absolute bliss while munching the jointly prepared and shared cookies, the series conveys a strong mythical confirmation of core American values like Christianity, the (heteronormative) family, and the absolute of motherly love. In fact, it suggests that the latter—epitomized in Dot as “mama lion” (S05E01 00:04:13)—is able to embrace and re-form even the primeval dark forces engendering patriarchy, which maintains its power and perpetuates itself through (domestic) violence. A fleeting comparison of this closing scene with its parallel in the Coens' film—the inhumanity of Grimsrud's mute stare in “response” to Marge's miniature sermon about the value of human lives in the police car (1:30:00–31:16)—brings this unambiguous confirmation to even greater relief. In stark contrast to the Coens' inaccessible Father figure, in this absolute female utopia, the maternal

succeeds in reforming the archetypal patriarch and even offers a place for him in an all-inclusive (post)feminist sisterhood.

The fantastic nature and centrality of Ole Munch's character, however, also reveals this smooth, reassuring, and magical closure as a fantasy, which ironically highlights the implausibility of such a resolution for the actual tensions and violence inherent in patriarchy. The metafilmic commentary of further fantastic genres featuring in the series corroborates this subversive effect by laying bare the device and calling attention to the wish-fulfillment fantasies shaping both characters and plot. For a start, resonating with the prominent animal tropes of the Coens' film, the series applies the closely related genres of the fairy tale—also fruitfully appropriated for voicing feminist concerns, for instance, by Angela Carter (see Botting 110)—animal fable, and puppet show to create a mainstream version of the Coens' world of "postmodern simulacra" (Carter 241) by turning characters into dehumanized, comic cartoon figures. The animal fable is evoked both by the names of the central characters—the Lyons; Dot dubbed as the Tiger; Roy as the self-acclaimed ruler of this animal kingdom—and by the zoo metaphor elaborated by Mrs. Lyon. That is, in a poignant critique of consumer society, she explains that "[o]ver 90% percent of American adults are debtors," which metaphorically imprisons, cages them. In other words, the whole US is a giant zoo, in which she, Mrs. Lyon, runner of a debt management business, is the "zoo-keeper" (S05E05 00:29:26). In that, she is yet again a perfect female counterpart to Roy Tillman, who nonetheless is associated with wolf in sheep's clothing, at heart an uncontrollable wild animal. This metaphor is established by Dot's single attempt to wrestle into verbal shape the trauma she suffered at the hand of the Tillmans: the story of her adolescence is that of Little Red Riding Hood, chased by wolves—male sexual predators—until she finds shelter in the Tillmans' house, who appear to be her foster-parents. Yet, Tillman is revealed to be just another persecutor, the fairy-tale wolf pretending to be a loving relative, when he starts to make sexual advances on fifteen-year-old Dot, while routinely beating up his first—current—wife, Linda. When Linda disappears to serve Dot on a plate to her husband and to reveal herself as the archetypal wicked stepmother of fairy tales, as the girl feels then, Tillman and Dot are married. This Gothic fairy-tale narrative of Dot's trauma, presented by her as a puppet show, which even evokes in its closing scene (S05E07: 00:40:00) the widely known story of domestic violence in this genre, the Punch and Judy show, is also blatantly a metadrama of the series.¹⁰ Together with the telling names and the all-

encompassing zoo metaphor, it turns the characters of the season into subhuman figures of children's literature and visual culture. Of those, the cartoon is readily evoked not only because of the fairy-tale and animal fable genres, but also because Dot, for instance, is both all too perfect to be "real" and imperishable, which, as Daniel Goldmark recalls, is a typical feature of cartoon figures suffering impossible violence, like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Tom and Jerry (61). Compassion for victimized Dot, together with the secure foreknowledge that she will survive her conflict with however cruel, brutal, and powerful patriarchy, sets the stage for the mixture of melodrama and comedy, a relatively light-hearted and definitely entertaining approach to an issue that is actually a matter of life and death: domestic violence. The happy resolution of the central conflict is undoubtedly facilitated by these generic contexts, but is also relegated to fantasy.

The hybrid of realistic and fantastic genres effectively subverts the season's all too neat happy-ending and its utopia of postfeminist sisterhood: what if it is only possible in myth, cartoons, tales—ultimately, in the imaginary world of fiction? This subversion is brought into relief with another metafilmic component, the episode of Camp Utopia, a community of abused women, allegedly established in the wilderness by Linda, the first Mrs. Tillman, which provides the setting for Dot's puppet-show. The episode both parallels and frames the main story line: it depicts a sisterhood of women, not unlike the one formed by Dot, Indira, and Lorraine, who mutually assist one another in working through the trauma of domestic violence collectively. It is a version of the Gothic Tillman family romance without casualties, in which even victimized Linda is alive and, stepping out of the wicked stepmother role, agrees to help Dot, just like Lorraine Lyon does. This *mise en abyme*, however, ultimately frames the utopia of sisterhood, whether in the camp or the entire narrative of the season, as a dream: at the end of Episode 7 Dot wakes up in a hospital bed to realize with dismay that instead of finding Linda, who *is* dead, she herself has been found by Roy Tillman. If Camp Utopia was a dream, an imaginary place of wish-fulfillment, a fantasy, Dot's story, in which the protagonist's survival at a crucial moment of the final battle (S05E09: 00:40:02–42:15) is dependent on assistance from the fantastic character of an undead sin eater, must equally be so.

Conclusion

Exploring *Fargo* Season 5 in the context of hybridization, the analysis has shown that generic hybridity has facilitated a narrative that is interpretable at various levels, and therefore marketable for a wide range of audiences. The incorporation of genres associated with voicing women's anxieties and a critique of patriarchy, such as the sensation novel or female Gothic, has resulted in the appropriation of the traditionally masculine film *noir* tradition for the purposes of expressing women's concerns. These include a range of issues from the representation of female victims to the victimization of women in society: in patriarchal hierarchical structures of politics, workplaces, everyday life, and, as a focal interest of *Fargo* Season 5, in domestic violence. In response to these, the season forms a message loud and clear about the necessity of sisterhood in the sense propagated by third- and fourth-wave feminism, and turns the comic neo-*noir* into a product marketable for a wide variety of female audiences, regardless of age, class, race, or even political stance. That is, with its focus on diversity—ranging from militant feminist to postfeminist sensibilities—inclusion, and a protest against domestic violence, it presents an instance of social activism that effectively targets women viewers in general. Yet, the inclusion of fantastic genres in this hybrid opens up meta levels of interpretation and subverts the apparently boundless optimism of its postfeminist utopia as well as its confirmation of core American values, clearly catering for white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian mainstream audiences. Its framing in myth, dream, fairy-tale, cartoon, or puppet show contexts promotes distanced and critical understandings of the series' self-irony and subversion, which both align with the postmodern genre-bending of the Coens' *Fargo* and the innovative hybridization of the crime genre as a form of quality assurance for high-end television drama.

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Notes

1. As James Naremore emphasizes about film *noir*, “nobody is sure whether the films in question constitute a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a ‘phenomenon’” (12). Indeed, Mark Conrad, for instance, speaks of both a “classic *noir* period” (Introduction 1) and the “*noir* style of filmmaking” (“*Reservoir Dogs*” 108). Addressing the issue of whether film *noir* is a genre or not is beyond the scope of the present study. Since scholars do discuss film *noir* and neo-*noir* in terms of a genre (see, for instance, Abrams 9, 19), that strategy is adopted here for the practical purposes of discussing *genre*-bending.

2. In some interpretations, like Pamela Grace’s discussion of Marge Gunderson and the maternal, the “neo-*noir* comedy” status of the Coens’ film is a premise, treated as critical consensus (33; see Sterritt 16).

3. They were, in their own turn, also “a challenge to Hollywood conventions,” since they “used unorthodox narration; . . . resisted sentiment and censorship; . . . revealed in the ‘social fantastic’; . . . demonstrated the ambiguity of human motives; and . . . made commodity culture seem like a wasteland” (Naremore 24).

4. While acknowledging the iconoclastic nature of her character, Sharrett goes on to claim that Marge is part and parcel of the film’s “comic ambience,” a general “silliness” permeating its world (70). In stark contrast, Pamela Grace celebrates the victory of Marge Gunderson, allegedly the film’s “moral center” (33), whose figure for her credibly intertwines “law enforcement with innocence and maternal concern” (34). This reading, however, seems to clash with the manifold ambiguities characterizing both film *noir* and the neo-*noir* (see Naremore 19).

5. Their article was published after the release of the first three seasons, but it mainly discusses season 1.

6. Here and in the rest of the article scenes from the *Fargo* television series are cited with timestamps including the number of the relevant episode. Timestamps without an episode number refer to the feature film *Fargo*.

7. Her entry into the season is that of a *prima donna*, complete with a descent on a grand staircase (S05E01 00:10:04).

8. One of her classic lines is produced at this stage: “What’s the point of being a billionaire if I can’t have someone killed?” (S05E09 00:22:04)

9. The group is actually both bigger and more diverse in terms of class, age, and race, than this sisterhood of three. If all of those who feel solidarity for Dot and act upon it were counted, the sisterhood would also include State Trooper Witt Far, a man of color; Danish Graves, a high-flying elderly male attorney with a white eye-patch; Scotty, Dot’s nine-year-old tomboy of a daughter, also a cross-dresser; two FBI agents of indeterminate gender (a comic homage to both *The X Files* and *Men in Black*); and even one of the hitmen, Ole Munch, presumably a *circa* five-hundred-year-old Welsh sin-eater, stubbornly wearing an outlandish and culturally inauthentic kilt.

10. Dot’s backstory of utter victimization and suffering, together with her heroic resistance and revenge in the present, add up to a somewhat magical plot of transformation. This, together with other characters’ reaction to her—they both admire Dot as a *hero* and feel solidarity for her as a *victim*—interrogates the victim–hero dichotomy that informs the contrast between the Coens’ and the series’ respective kidnapped housewives, as well as, in Carisa Showden’s view, many discussions of (female) agency (x). Due to this ambiguity, Dot’s transformation also gestures toward another female Gothic-

related subgenre, the domestic *noir* (Zsámbsa 118). As Renáta Zsámbsa points out, in domestic *noir* novels the victimized “female characters recognize and interpret the abusive relationship they live in and fight back . . . , which inescapably overrides their allegedly fixed identity” (120). In other words, these narratives condition the emergence of female agency on “suffering” which “triggers” action: revolt and even “revenge” (120).

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