

## **The Return of the Morality Tale    Breen O'Reilly**

Oliver Stone's Wall Street (1987) is often cited as the movie that best depicts the state of the American dream during Reagan's 80s. A Machiavellian Gordon Gecko (Michael Douglas), with greed as his means and money as his end, represents American society that has skewed its notion of morality. Materialism dominates conventional wisdom. Gecko tells his colleagues, "If something's worth doing it's worth doing for money." (Wall Street, 1987) In the movie's most famous catch phrases, Gecko preaches, "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works." (Wall Street, 1987) Morality was sidelined in the quest for affluence and material gain. Three years later, Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather Part III, presented a world of American business and politics that was indistinguishable from the underworld of crime, gangsters, and the Mafia. Michael Corleone (Al Pacino), now head of the Family, realizes that the world of politics and business is no cleaner than the world from which he has graduated. He says, "The higher I go, the crookeder it becomes." (The Godfather Part III, 1990) Needing guidance as the Family moves into the world of legitimate business and finance, Vincent Mancini (Andy Garcia) seeks advice from Don Lucchese (Enzo Robutti): "Don Lucchese, you are a man of finance and politics. These things I don't understand." Lucchese replies, "You understand guns?" To Vincent's "Yes", he explains, "Finance is a gun. Politics is knowing when to pull the trigger." (The Godfather Part III, 1990) The means of achieving the American Dream were no longer hard work and ambition. Businessmen and politicians, not just criminals, were taking the more direct route to wealth and power. Both films portray an America that is ethically bankrupt at the top. Society is shown to have become morally corrupt in

its desire for power and money. Crime and business have become indistinguishable. The American Dream has been hijacked.

In the late 1990s, two crime movies were released that were the antithesis of moral code highlighted in The Godfather III and Wall Street. Though two movies hardly constitute a trend, the significance lay in the source of these films. They were directed by Joel Coen and Sam Raimi, maverick directors whose backgrounds lay in independent film, and who had previously delivered violent crime and horror movies. Sam Raimi and Joel Coen (with his brother Ethan) had worked together on The Hudsucker Proxy (1984), directed by the Coens with Raimi as second unit director. Fargo (1996) and A Simple Plan (1998), both set in a landscape of snow can best be described as morality plays. Both films featured characters whose greed and lies bring about their own destruction and the destruction of others. More significant, however, was the portrayal in both films of ordinary everyday life, with its simplicity and banality, as the “right way”.

Fargo With Blood Simple (1984), Miller's Crossing (1990) and The Hudsucker Proxy (1994), the Coen brothers had previously produced films whose themes were dominated by Faustian element. Fargo revisited the theme of a man selling his souls to evil with unforeseen disastrous results. Trademark Coen Brothers elements included the idea of deceit and mistrust resulting in no one knowing what anyone else is doing, and the notion of a relatively minor misdemeanor leading to carnage. Like their earlier movies, comedy and violence were again juxtaposed.

Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) hires two criminals Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare) to kidnap his wife Jean (Kristin Rudrud). When Jean's father Wade (Harve Presnell) pays the ransom for her freedom, Jerry plans to divert the majority of the funds into a building project that Wade has already refused to finance. As things go wrong, Jerry digs himself into a hole of deceit and greed-driven lies. As his plan goes awry, his situation is communicated through a series of shots that depict his relationship with his environment and mirror his emotional state. The Coens use relatively static camerawork and a quieter classical visual style of long shots and close-ups. Jerry's stifling situation is expressed through framing showing Jerry is a succession of locations where he is visually and psychologically trapped. We see him framed by the vertical lines of the windows in Wade's office as his planned to convince Wade to invest fails. When he enters his house after the kidnapping, he is framed within the rectangle formed by the doors and hallway. Later he is filmed through the vertical bars on a chair and when he is seated at his office desk the backdrop consists of vertical blinds that foreshadow the prison bars that await him in this morality tale.

Though much of the irony, violence, and deceit in Fargo are typical of previous Coen movies, what is new is the emphasis that is put on the existence of love, its warmth and simplicity, and the tacit understanding in the loving relationship of Marge and Norm. Their mutually supportive marriage, though relentlessly banal, is respectfully depicted without a hint of irony, and is further highlighted by its contrast to the sad dysfunctional family world of Jerry, Jean, their son Scottie and Wade, and the world of evil inhabited by Gaear, Carl, and Shep Proudfoot.

Marge Gunderson is the genuinely good hero. She exhibits many of the values and characteristics of the good citizen as listed in Table 2: kindness, routine, commitment, safety, idealism, and most of all an attachment to home. Typical of the good citizen hero of an earlier age, she is never sentimentalized. She is an excellent detective. Coming on the crime scene, she can instantly deduce the sequence of events that led to the killings, telling Lou, "OK, so we got a trooper pulls someone over, we got a shooting, these folks drive by, there's a high-speed pursuit, ends here and then this execution-type deal."(Coen & Coen, 1996, p. 42) She is kind and unassuming in the manner in showing her personal expertise in the detective skills as she corrects Lou poor deductive skills.

LOU :            So I got the state lookin' for a Ciera with a tag startin' DLR.  
                     They don't got no match yet.

MARGE:        I'm not sure I agree with you a hunnert percent on your  
                     policework, here, Lou.

LOU:            Yah?

MARGE :        Yah, I think that vehicle there probly had dealer plates. DLR?

LOU:            Oh...

Lou gazes out the window, thinking.

LOU:            ... Geez.

In the face of a world of lies, greed, and violence that is alien to her culture, Marge simply gets on with her job. Never intimidated by individuals or situations, she is not afraid to speak her mind. When Jerry is uncooperative she tells him, "Sir, you have no call to get snippy with me; I'm just trying to do my job here" She handles the psychotic killer as deftly as the old school mate who hits on her. Mike Yanagita (Steve Park), who lies about his wife's death from leukemia, makes a pass at Marge in the restaurant.

MIKE:           You mind if I sit over here?

He is sliding out of his side of the booth and easing in next to Marge.

MIKE           ... I was married to Linda Cooksey -

MARGE:       No, I - Mike - wyncha sit over there, I'd prefer that.

MIKE:         Huh? Oh, okay, I'm sorry.

MARGE:       No, just so I can see ya, ya know. Don't have to turn my neck.

MIKE:         Oh, sure, I unnerstand, I didn't mean to -

MARGE:       No, no, that's fine.

Having apprehended the psychotic Gaear who has just disposed of the partner's body in the wood chipper, she is not afraid to give a lesson in life, "There's more to life than a little money, ya know. Don'tcha know that? And here ya are. And it's a beautiful day. Well. I just don't understand it."

None of the characters in the movie knows a fraction of the happiness experienced by Marge and Norm in their boring but wholly trusting marriage. The relationships between Gaear and Carl and between Jerry and Wade consist of constant power struggles fueled by mistrust and need to dominate. They are constantly anxious about being cheated by the others since they are dishonest themselves. Marg's ability to inhabit two worlds, one of which she can deal with but cannot comprehend.

Fargo is set in a world of lies and is bookended by untruths. The film opens with a false claim:

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.

The Coens later admitted that the story was entirely fictional. In an interview at Cannes, Joel Coen claimed the film was based on a real kidnapping incident in Minnesota, but "the details of the story and the characters [were] invented." (Ciment & Nioget, p. 153) The closing credits list that the "Victim in Field" was played by The Artist Formerly Known As Prince. The role was actually played by J. Todd Anderson. Maybe the Coens were having a little fun using Minneapolis' famous son to represent prints (Prince) in the snow! Marge Gunderson enters this world of lies on a daily basis, but she does not reside in that world. It is world into she ventures and then retreats to a

duller, but infinitely better, one. Her real world is the one she buys night crawlers for her husband, checks which hotel offers the best value buffet lunches, and lies in bed discussing stamps with Norm. In this safe banal world, they each offer support to the their partner, something that is absent in the relationships between Carl and Gaeear, and Jerry and Wade. When Marge gets an early morning call to investigate the roadside killings, she tells Norm to stay in bed but he insists on helping out.

MARGE:     You can sleep, hon. It's early yet

NORM:       Gotta go?

MARGE:     Yah.

Norm swings his legs out.

NORM:       I'll fix ya some eggs.

MARGE:     That's okay, hon. I gotta run.

NORM:       Gotta eat a breakfast, Marge. I'll fix ya some eggs.

MARGE:     Aw, you can sleep, hon.

NORM:       Ya gotta eat a breakfast...

He clears his throat with another deep rumble.

NORM:       ... I'll fix ya some eggs.

MARGE:     Aw, Norm.

She wears a heavy belt holding a revolver, walkie-talkie and various other jangling police impedimenta. Norm is in a dressing gown.

MARGE:     Thanks, hon. Time to shove off.

NORM:       Love, ya, Margie.

As she struggles into a parka:

MARGE: Love, ya, hon.

As Marge leaves the house she pauses by the door to talk to Norm. Visually this is the movie's most important shot encapsulating as it does the film's theme. The Coens' use of mis-en-scene here represents the two worlds of Marge Gunderson's life. On the left of the screen is the warmly lit domestic world of kitchens, dressing gowns, fried breakfasts, and Norm. A wall divides this world from the one on the right of the screen. It is the cold outside world that includes Marge's police uniform and the patrol car in the snow. The doorway to this world is lit by a cold bare light bulb.

The movie opens in the outside world as the pure white landscape is violated by dark cars from a world of deceit. Jerry drives to meet his hired accomplices in a bar with red neon lighting the surrounding snow. Red, foreshadowing the bloodshed and anger that will follow, is encroaching on the peaceful white landscape of Brainerd. The film closes in Marge and Norm's bedroom. If Norm's name is derived from "normal", then banal normality has been restored. Now Marge supports a disappointed Norm whose painting has been chosen for the little used three-cent stamp.

MARGE: Norm, that's terrific!

Norm tries to suppress a smile of pleasure.

NORM: It's just the three-cent.



MARGE: It's terrific!

NORM: Hautman's blue-winged teal got the twenty-nine cent. People don't much use the three-cent

MARGE: Oh, for Pete's - a course they do! Every time they raise the people need the little stamps!

NORM: Yah.

MARGE: When they're stuck with a bunch a the old ones!

NORM: Yah, I guess.

MARGE: That's terrific.

Her eyes go back to the TV.

MARGE I'm so proud a you, Norm..

Norm murmurs:

NORM: I love you, Margie.

MARGE: I love you, Norm.

The movie ends with declarations of love - stark contrast to the mayhem and deceit that encroached on the lives of the Gundersons. The final moment of the film is an affirmation of the victory of love and life over death and deceit. As Norm and Marge lie in bed watching TV, Norm reaches out and rests his hand on her pregnant stomach.

NORM: Two more months

Marge absently rests her own hand on top of his. .

MARGE: Two more months.

Fade out.

Like David Lynch's Blue Velvet, where the robin returns to Lumberville to restore peace and normality to a town wracked by violence, the Coens end their film with the prospect of new life and its attendant hope. In this morality play the banality of normality is superior to the violence and deceit of those who wish to dominate others. All the criminals pay a high cost for their action, losing either their lives or their freedom, while the good citizens end up with peaceful contentment.

Sam Raimi's A Simple Plan (1998) was written by Scott B. Smith who adapted the script from his own novel of the same name. For Raimi, best known for his Evil Dead horror trilogy (1982, 1987, 1993) and The Quick and the Dead (1995), A Simple Plan was very much a change in direction. The film is a morality play and the antithesis of the immorality portrayed in The Godfather Part III and Wall Street. Raimi's film shows that greed, most definitely, is not good. Though the gore would not have pleased Will Hays, he would have been very satisfied with the film's conclusion that crime does not pay.

The film's main character is the college-educated Hank Mitchell (Bill Paxton). In the film's opening narration he gives us his father's formula for "what it took for a man to be happy - a wife he loves, a decent job, friends and neighbors that like and respect him." (Smith). It is a version of the American Dream that is not far removed from the scene presented in the opening of David Lynch's Blue Velvet. Hank already has all these

requirements at the outset of the movie. He tells us, "...for a while there, without hardly knowing it, I had it al. I was a happy man." (Smith)

Hank, his brother Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton), and Jacob's dimwitted buddy, Lou (Brent Briscoe), stumble across a plane that has crashed in a nature preserve. On board they find the body of the pilot and a cache of four million dollars in bills. Since it most likely drug money that has never reported as missing, they decide to keep it. Hank's simple plan is that he will keep possession of the money until spring. If anyone comes looking for the money, he will destroy. If not, he will divide it equally between the three. At first Hank's wife Sarah (Bridget Fonda) agrees it would be morally wrong to keep the money (responding to Hank's hypothetical situation), but she then realizes that Hank's situation is real. As she transforms into a Lady Macbeth figure, she urges Hank to return some of the money, so it looks like no one has been to the plane.

All of this is seen against a backdrop of Minnesota and Wisconsin in the winter (Raimi's friends, the Coen brothers, who made Fargo, gave him advice about shooting and lighting in the snow). The blanket of snow muffles voices, gives a soft edge to things, and underlines the way the characters are isolated indoors. As in Fargo, the snow represents a purity into which outside entity intrudes, bringing with it evil, violence, and destruction. The plane flies from another place, as does the kidnapper in the guise of the FBI man. The three men who discover the plane are also outsiders in the sense that the woods are the domain of the fox and the crows. At the end of both films, the evil has

been destroyed or removed, and all traces of the crimes are covered over by the concealing snow.

In the outdoor world of A Simple Plan there is death, (all the killings in the film take place outside) but the film clearly delineates between natural and unnatural death. In the film's title sequence a fox raids the chicken house and kills a hen. This not only foreshadows further death that will follow, but it also presents us with a death that is natural. The fox kills out of necessity, because it needs food. The human deaths in the movie are a result of greed, a desire to take what is not a necessity for survival.

The first image, and one which recurs throughout the film, is that of a sinister crow, its blackness in stark contrast to the snow covered countryside. In a reference to Hitchcock's The Birds, the crows oversee the actions of the men in the woods. They watch over the three men as they approach the plane, they watch their final visit to the plane in the company of the killer, and they are even inside the cockpit when Mitch first enters the plane. As a foreshadowing device the crow has always represented ill omen. In hieroglyphics, the crow symbolizes contention, discord, and strife. In medieval times they were said to forebode death and bring infection. The former notion arises from their habit of following an army under the expectation of finding dead bodies upon which to feed. Jacob does not like the crows, and comments about their strange eating habits. "Those things are always waiting for something to die so they can eat it. What a weird job!" (Smith) What he fails to see is that the birds await the dead bodies of Jacob and his

companions. It is as if Nature knows that these men will bring about their own their destruction and patience is all that is required by the crows as they wait for death.

Rogert Ebert called A Simple Plan, “ a film about ordinary people capable of monstrous deeds.” Like Fargo, it is a morality tale of the new American dream, earned by greed and lies instead of hard work and honesty. When Lou sees the money in the kit bag he reacts with, “It’s the American Dream in a goddamn gym bag!” Hank retorts, “You work for the American Dream. You don’t steal it.” Lou responds with, “Then this is even better.” (Smith) As in a medieval morality play, Lou pays the price of believing that immorality can buy happiness. The movie ends with the deaths of Lou, Jacob, and the FBI imposter. In one of the movie’s final shots we sees Hank through the flames of the money he burns. As in a morality play, these are the flames of Hell but for Hank they signify a living Hell. He has to live with the memories of what he had and what he destroyed. At the movie closes he tells us in a voice-over,

There are days when I manage to think of nothing at all – not the money or the murders or Jacob. Days when Sarah and I try to pretend that we’re just like everyone else – as if none of it had ever happened – but those days are few and far between. (Smith)

Like in Fargo, it is the simplicity and banality of ordinary life that is shown to be superior to greed and lies. Along with Raimi's A Simple Plan, both films mark a return of the morality tale, very much like the plots that were promoted by Hays' Production Code. However these new films were made outside the restraints of the Codes restrictions. The directors' rejection of greed and dishonesty is voluntary. In both films, it is only in the simple ordinary life that the characters can find true happiness.



