

**Perpetration and Performance:
Unlikely Villains and the Ghosting Effect in *Fargo***

Keywords: *Fargo*, unlikely perpetrators, performance studies, ghosting, role-playing, Martin Freeman, Kirsten Dunst

Abstract: Noah Hawley’s anthology series *Fargo* (FX, 2014-) has received critical acclaim for its equally humorous and violent depiction of small-town delinquency. Participating in a range of criminal conflicts in and around Fargo, perpetrators are at the heart of the series’ thematic interest. However, *Fargo* self-reflexively deviates from classic crime and detective fiction schemes and rearranges generic conventions into a pastiche of cultural references. As I demonstrate in this article, the series’ playful rearrangement of familiar elements also affects the depiction of perpetrators. While the series features classic criminal characters such as hitmen and gang members, it is also interested in portraying previously blameless characters who gradually develop criminal potentials—characters who evolve from ordinary citizens to murderers, from oppressed to oppressors, from victims to perpetrators. I argue that the evolution of these unlikely villains is complemented by the choice of actors for the respective roles. The “recycling of the bodies of actors” is part of what Marvin Carlson has termed “ghosting” in theatre studies (*The Haunted Stage* 10). By interspersing reminiscences of some actors’ previous roles, *Fargo* deliberately activates the audience’s cultural memory to alienate them from established connotations and create new, uncommon villains. In this vein, the series prompts its audience to reflect on their own expectations that are based on cultural conventions and problematizes the issue of role-playing in the evolution of perpetrators both on a thematic and on a performative level.

Noah Hawley’s anthology series *Fargo* (FX, 2014-), loosely based on the Coen brothers’ 1996 eponymous film, has received critical acclaim¹ for its equally humorous and violent depiction of small-town delinquency. Participating in a range of criminal conflicts in the Midwestern rural areas around the city of Fargo (North Dakota), perpetrators are at the heart of the series’ thematic interest. However, *Fargo* self-reflexively deviates from classic crime and detective fiction schemes and rearranges generic conventions into a pastiche of cultural references. In fact, activating the audience’s cultural memory and playing with expectations

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based on this memory seems to be one of the series' major concerns. This is, for example, evident in the show's intertextual references and in its misleading paratextual framing as a "true story." In theatre studies, Marvin Carlson has termed the recycling of identical elements in a new performance "ghosting." One of Carlson's proposed elements of ghosting concerns the "recycling of the bodies of actors" (Carlson 10) that guides the audience's reception process, for example with the notion of typecasting or the connotation of an actor with a specific role. As I argue in this paper, *Fargo* makes use of the ghosting effect in order to play with and complicate notions of familiarity in the representation of unlikely perpetrators. While the series features classic criminal characters such as hitmen and gang members, it is also interested in portraying previously blameless characters who gradually develop criminal potentials—characters who evolve from ordinary citizens to murderers, from oppressed to oppressors, from victims to perpetrators. These characters view their new criminal career as a role they actively assume to leave behind their old life as a victim. As I demonstrate here, this switch in roles is complemented by the choice of actors that is rather untypical for the respective perpetrator roles. In this sense, *Fargo* deals with the topic of role-play on two parallel levels when it comes to the depiction of these perpetrators. In this paper, I examine the effects of ghosting on the evolution of unlikely villains in *Fargo*, with a focus on the characters of Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman) in Season One and Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst) in Season Two.

Perpetrator Performance and the Ghosting Effect: Theoretical Considerations

Within the interdisciplinary field of perpetrator studies, a range of essays published in the volume *Perpetrating Selves: Doing Violence, Performing Identity* have addressed the topic of performance when it comes to the conception and representation of perpetrators. The volume conceives of perpetration as both a performative act and as a process that evolves over time, a notion that is also vital in discussing unlikely perpetrators in *Fargo*. As Clare Bielby and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer have outlined, perpetration is to be seen as "a form of 'doing' rather than something that one 'is' ('the perpetrator'). And as something we might 'do' or 'perform' as part of 'doing' or 'performing' our identities more generally" (3). *Fargo*'s unlikely perpetrators reinforce this notion in a double sense. For one thing, the characters in question conceive of their unusual criminal careers as a chance to evade previous roles in which they were victimized, bullied or patronized, performing acts of violence in order to reach a new version of themselves. On the other hand, *Fargo* addresses the intersection of perpetration and performance at the level of acting. At this level, *Fargo* plays with both similarity to and

alienation from the respective actors' previous performances to intensify the effect of an unusual character development in these perpetrators. These two dimensions correspond to Bielby's and Murer's differentiation between performance in a theatrical sense "where there is a clear sense of an actor behind the performance" (6) and performing perpetration "as part of performing one's identity more broadly" (6). In the following part of my article, I utilize Marvin Carlson's concept of "ghosting" to discuss the role of actors' performances in the representation of unlikely villains in *Fargo*.

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson argues that the theater is deeply concerned with the activation of cultural memory through recurring elements in the reception process. The premise of his consideration is that "any theatrical production weaves a ghostly tapestry for its audience, playing in various degrees and combinations with that audience's collective and individual memories of previous experience [in the theater]" (Carlson 165). Carlson explores this phenomenon under the name of "ghosting" that is present in all theatrical productions. The ghosting effect takes multiple forms; among the most important sites of ghosting Carlson discusses are the dramatic text, actors, stage properties, and the theatre space, all of which may create a "sense of something coming back in the theatre" (2). Even though Carlson's study is located in theatre studies, many of his proposed elements of ghosting are equally vital in televisual narratives. In parallel to theatrical productions, TV series present their stories through an audiovisual channel that involves particular spatial settings and the performances of actors. The activation of cultural memory in TV series may, for instance, involve a shooting location that has particular connotations by its iconographic appearance in earlier works. Also, in the case of adaptations, a series may be haunted by the original cultural work it adapts, falling under the category of "retelling [...] stories already told" (Carlson 3). Since these parallels allow for Carlson's considerations to be applied in television studies, I use ghosting as a theoretical foundation for the study of uncommon perpetrators in *Fargo*.

This article specifically explores the relevance of ghosting when it comes to actors' performances. Connotations to actors' previous roles are always present in a given performance. Therefore, "[t]he recycled body of an actor [...] will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles" (8). In Carlson's conception, this phenomenon happens whether or not the present role is similar to the actor's earlier roles and it may color or even dominate the reception process (Carlson 8-9). A well-known effect of the ghosting of actors is the notion of typecasting that indicates how certain actors are associated with and deliberately hired for specific types of roles, for example because of their earlier success in such roles or because of their physical characteristics that are particularly apt for certain roles (Carlson 8-9).

Once an actor has built a successful career and is widely recognized in public, their appearance in a new role may attract people to the production and underlines its perceived eminence (Carlson 92). Sometimes, the ghosting effect also becomes visible when two or more actors appear in productions together repeatedly (Carlson 93-95). On yet another level, the ghosting effect may be influenced by aspects from actors' lives outside the acting career, for example when an actor is involved in a scandal (85-89).

Importantly for the representation of perpetrators, ghosting is based on *identity* rather than *similarity*: an actor reappearing in different roles remains the same individual actor. This makes the reappearance of actors different from, for example, the reappearance of genre conventions that take similar, but not identical reiterations (Carlson 7). As numerous cases show, the level of performance is essential in the filmic or televisual representation of perpetrators. In some cases, there is an association of a certain role with the face or identity of an actor, as for example with Anthony Hopkins becoming an icon of Hannibal Lecter or Christoph Waltz becoming an epitome of something one might call perpetrator typecasting. An actor's convincing performance in the role of a perpetrator might even lead to the assumption that, in order to play an evil character, an actor must be evil as well. For instance, this effect led to young actor Brenock O'Connor being harassed by hate mail and death threats after playing evil character Olly, who murders Jon Snow in *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) (see for example "Game of Thrones Star"). Thus, the identity of a certain actor and the qualities of a certain role are often conflated in the public perception. These aspects create a sense of familiarity when an actor assumes the role of a perpetrator who is known for his or her ability to play this kind of role. Conversely, if an actor has played many roles of kind and innocent characters, the audience is likely to associate the actor with this category of roles and is less likely to expect them in the role of a perpetrator.

In the case of unlikely perpetrator figures in *Fargo*, the ghosting effected by the choice of actors is to be seen as a deliberate tool that contributes to the series' meaning-making. In his consideration on theatre, Marvin Carlson in particular allocates such deliberate utilizations to the postmodern theatre that is interested in rearranging fragments of existing material into new constellations and to emphasize their quoted nature (Carlson 14). As will become obvious over the course of this essay, *Fargo* utilizes the ghosting effect in a similarly self-reflexive way. In the following, I will offer a brief general account of the ghosting effect in *Fargo* before considering the cases of Martin Freeman as Lester Nygaard and Kirsten Dunst as Peggy Blomquist in more detail.

The Ghosting Effect in *Fargo*

As such, ghosting is present in all performances, provided that the respective actor has a history of public performances. *Fargo* self-reflexively instrumentalizes the ghosting effect by overtly alluding to some actors' earlier roles, thus drawing on the audience's memory of these actors. The most forward instance of this technique is the inclusion of actors whose roles in *Fargo* evoke earlier roles thematically. For example, this is the case for the roles of Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele as a pair of clumsy FBI agents in Season One. Their detached dialogues—including the topics of fast food, a river crossing puzzle, and the question of whether life is just a dream—are in stark contrast with the violent acts they fail to prevent as FBI agents. This contrast is not only part of the comic mode deployed in *Fargo*, but it is also reminiscent of the two actors' joint performances in their comedy series *Key & Peele* (Comedy Central, 2012-2015). This also happens in the case of Ray Wise, whose spectral appearance in Season Three evokes his role as demon-possessed Leland Palmer in *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991, 2017). Considering that *Twin Peaks: The Return* was on the air simultaneously with Season Three of *Fargo* in 2017, the appearance of Ray Wise in a similar role might be seen as an explicit intertextual reference. In view of its narrative complexity, unconventional genre mixing and a focus on crimes in small-town America, *Twin Peaks* is also to be seen as a conceptual precursor to *Fargo*.

Apart from these references to actors' prior performances, *Fargo* employs forms of ghosting that operate within its own boundaries. For example, the voice of Martin Freeman, who has one of the main roles in Season One, reoccurs in the penultimate episode of Season Two in the form of an anonymous, heterodiegetic narrator. This acoustic appearance is entirely detached from Freeman's role in Season One. Freeman's voice is most likely not even recognized by all viewers, as he is speaking in a British accent as opposed to the Minnesota accent he uses in Season One. Another experiment with ghosting within the series concerns the brothers Emmitt and Ray Stussy, who are both played by Ewan McGregor in Season Three. McGregor's twofold performance is marked by a stark visual difference between the two brothers, possibly making their portrayal by the same actor unrecognizable for some viewers. Only when Ray dresses up as his brother on a sex tape, does it become strikingly obvious that both characters are portrayed by the same actor. In this case, the series most overtly addresses the topics of role playing as well as makeup and costume design. These examples demonstrate

that *Fargo* extensively uses the level of performance for its meaning-making and confronts its audience with recognition and similarity, but also with alienation and confusion.

When it comes to the depiction of perpetrators, *Fargo* deliberately makes use of expectations created by the ghosting effect in order to turn the feeling of familiarity into a feeling of surprise, irritation, and alienation. The series features some rather unlikely perpetrators who are first introduced as somewhat quirky, but seemingly harmless people, and then evolve into villains, some of whose criminal potentials become even more skillful than those of professional criminals. The choice of actors for these roles complements the unexpected character developments and raises the issue of identity and role-playing on two parallel levels. Firstly, it challenges the audience's expectations about the respective actor's identity, as they have never seen him or her in evil roles before and might have difficulty accepting their unpleasant character development. Secondly, on the diegetic level, the series raises the question of whether evil is a constant part of a character's identity or whether it can evolve from a kind of role-playing in which the character deliberately decides to take a new identity as a criminal. This consideration takes into account two instances of evolving perpetrators, namely insurance salesman Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman) in Season One and beautician Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst) in Season Two. Both characters combine the act of self-renewal with the start of a criminal career and their respective development can be seen as a result of criminal reinterpretations of established gender roles. The haunting of Lester's and Peggy's character developments by Freeman's and Dunst's earlier roles will be the subject of the following sections.

Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman): "What if you're right and they're wrong?"

Season One of *Fargo* depicts a complex entanglement of different criminal forces that result in a number of brutal murders and are investigated by deputy Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman). One of the season's main story lines documents the evolution of insurance salesman Lester Nygaard from an ordinary man with integrity to a manipulative liar whose crimes eventually enable him to evade his former role as an unsuccessful, bullied person. Martin Freeman, who was nominated for an Emmy and Golden Globe Award for his performance as Lester Nygaard, had previously gained international renown in comedic productions such as *The Office* (2001-2003), *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005), and *The World's End* (2013). Arguably, his most iconic roles—that he played either simultaneously with or shortly before *Fargo* aired—include Dr. John Watson in the BBC *Sherlock* series (2010-2017), as well as Bilbo Baggins in

the *Hobbit* trilogy (2012-2014). Both Dr. Watson and Bilbo are righteous, likeable characters who make it their mission to fight evil forces and who have significantly contributed to Freeman's reputation as "this very nice guy" (Conan 00:16) who embodies integrity and harmlessness in many people's perception. In this sense, critics talk about "[t]he cuddly Bilbo and John Watson actor" (Pelley) who has become "a household name in Britain" (Smith).

In *Fargo*, Freeman as Lester Nygaard is first introduced as an unobtrusive middle-aged man who seems to have no way of standing up for himself, an image that is evidently consistent with Bilbo and Dr. Watson, who are harmless and sometimes helpless characters. Lester's life is in a pitiful state, as he is bullied and humiliated by other people, including his own wife and brother. The pity that is asked of the audience is likely to be reinforced by their memory of Freeman's earlier good-hearted characters. Interestingly, this thematic connotation is explicitly underlined by an overt visual quotation from *Sherlock*, as Lester is wearing a deerstalker hat that is a typical iconographic item of Sherlock Holmes. The series thus directly points to Freeman's earlier role as Sherlock Holmes' assistant, who has subscribed to the mission of catching perpetrators.

However, the role Lester assumes over time is diametrically opposed to that of Dr. Watson, as Lester becomes a criminal who repeatedly deceives the police. After accidentally breaking his nose on a window because he is threatened by his former schoolmate and bully Sam Hess (Kevin O'Grady), Lester tells a stranger in the hospital waiting room about the incident. This encounter is decisive for Lester's character development. The stranger, who turns out to be a hitman named Lorne Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton), tells Lester that he would have killed Sam Hess if he were in Lester's position (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1). Through a bizarre misunderstanding, Lorne Malvo takes their conversation as an instruction to kill Sam Hess and therewith initiates a vicious cycle for Lester. After the conversation with Malvo and the murder of Sam Hess, Lester is motivated to explore a new facet of his personality and—even though he initially found Malvo's suggestion absurd—takes Malvo's advice to kill someone by whom he is humiliated, namely his own wife, Pearl (Kelly Holden Bashar). Arguing with Pearl about their washing machine, Lester spontaneously hits her on the head with a hammer in order to silence her. In desperation, he then calls Lorne Malvo for help and subsequently causes the murder of a police officer when Malvo comes to his house. Left alone with two dead bodies in his home, Lester is desperately concerned with hiding evidence of his crime and a game of cat-and-mouse with the police begins, in which Lester more and more actively harms other people.

The ghosting of Martin Freeman in the role of evolving criminal Lester Nygaard raises important questions for the study of perpetrators. How do the audience's experiences with

Freeman's previous roles affect their viewing experience of *Fargo*, starring Freeman as a perpetrator? Do we perceive Lester as decidedly evil? If so, do we perceive him as evil in the same way that we perceive as evil, for example, supervillain Lorne Malvo, who is introduced as a ruthless murderer from the beginning and whose appearance is haunted by Billy Bob Thornton's history of perpetrator roles? Does our initial sympathy with Lester and his connotation with Freeman's good-hearted earlier characters impact our judgement of his criminal capabilities?

Some insights on these questions can be gained by observing Lester's character development and the corresponding visual cues from beginning to end. Even though Lester, within only one episode of the series, develops into a criminal who has murdered his own wife and caused two more deaths by accidentally instructing a hitman, the series still asks the audience to pity and sympathize with Lester in the beginning. Lorne Malvo's killings of Sam Hess and the police officer were the result of a misunderstanding and the murder of Lester's wife seems to have happened in the heat of the moment rather than with an insidious plan. In this sense, Lester does not appear as a genuinely evil character in comparison to a perpetrator like hitman Lorne Malvo, who deliberately plans his crimes and takes pleasure in harming other people. Also, the theme of desperation that was already present when Lester was bullied is continued after the death of Sam Hess and Pearl because he is not only trying to cope with the events, but also faces a police investigation. As a result, Lester's connotation with Freeman's innocent roles can be maintained for a while because Lester's criminal history begins under adverse, highly unlikely circumstances. He is represented as a perpetrator made by circumstance, not by conviction.

However, a notable quality of Lester's character development is that Lester increasingly perceives his new criminal history as a chance to end his role as a victim and instead assume a new role that makes him a perfidious bully. Previously, the kind of oppression Lester experienced was tied to notions of masculinity that he did not fulfill in other characters' conceptions. While Sam Hess humiliated Lester by telling him about his former sexual relations with Pearl and calling Lester a "pencil dick" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1), Pearl accuses him of being "not even half a man" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1) After the killing of Sam Hess, Lorne Malvo tells Lester that he is now "more of a man today than you were yesterday" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1). Lester's newly assumed role as the murderer of both Sam Hess and his wife allows him to switch to the other side of the victim-perpetrator binary. Concurrently, he perceives his oppressor role as a way of proving his masculinity. In this vein, the series suggests that both perpetration and normative notions of masculinity are to be understood as

performative acts. Visually, the theme of personal transformation as a kind of role play is underlined by several inspirational writings in Lester's house. After Lester has killed his wife, he comes up with a plan to cover up his crime after looking at a poster in his cellar that says, "What if you're right and they're wrong?". The wording on the poster seems to give Lester confidence for his planned cover-up. The theme of motivational sayings is continued in several scenes from the following episodes. Such is the case of pictures on the wall saying "Everything happens for a reason" and "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams, live the life you've imagined" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 2). That is also the case with the kitchen fridge which is adorned with magnets containing the words "Dream," "Hope," and "The key to life is happiness" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 3).

In Lester's evolution as an unlikely perpetrator, a turning point is reached when he begins to actively fool and oppress other people. While he had initially used lying as a reactive mechanism to evade adverse circumstances, he increasingly plans and enjoys his crimes. This turning point is initiated for Lester when he places evidence of his wife's murder in his brother's house. He does so not only to evade conviction, but also to take revenge on his brother, who started to suspect Lester and who had previously been presented as the more successful and attractive brother. After taking this action that later leads to an unjust conviction for his brother, Lester (for the first time) gives the impression that he feels good about doing something bad. From this point on, Lester is no longer depicted as a victim of bad circumstances, but as actively enjoying hurting other people and building a new life on the basis of this behavior. In order to leave his old role behind, he enters an unusual combination of personal growth, hypermasculinity, and the start of a criminal career. His transformation takes place on several levels: not only does he change his behavior, for example, by seeking revenge on Sam Hess by sleeping with and defrauding Hess' wife, but he also changes his outer appearance and removes old furniture from his house, including the pictures with motivational quotes (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 8). Ironically, as Lester has now fulfilled the meaning of these sayings, he no longer needs them as reminders in his house. Also—and more significantly—Lester is no longer seen wearing the deerstalker hat after the turning point. Here again, the series deliberately plays with the phenomenon of ghosting by removing the visual reference to Sherlock at a point when Lester has entirely lost his sense of morality and has thus also lost every similarity to Martin Freeman's earlier roles. At this point, it is questionable whether the memory of Freeman's "nice guy" roles influences the judgement of Lester's deeds any longer.

One year after the beginning of his transformation, Lester is at the height of success: he has married a new woman, is admired by people, and wins the national prize as insurance

salesman of the year. His newly acquired eminence is underlined by a new look and his position in the center of attention that gives him an almost kinglike appearance. However, the climax of his development is soon followed by new problems and the final catastrophe for Lester when he has another fatal encounter with Lorne Malvo in Las Vegas. Malvo, who has also assumed a new identity, pretends not to know Lester. Yet Lester denies being ignored and remarks that “the old Lester now, he would have just had a slide, but not this guy” (). After Malvo shoots his own friends and wife in the elevator because Lester has destroyed his new identity, Lester flees and is caught in a new cat-and-mouse game, this time with the supervillain himself. Even though Lester eventually manages to scare Malvo away, this further line of events deprives Lester of control. In a spectacular flight from the police in the Glacier National Park in Montana, Lester is killed after falling through a thin ice sheet. In this final scene of Lester’s plot line, he is wearing the deerstalker hat again; in fact, the hat on top of Lester’s dead body in the ice is the last thing we see of him (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 10). The hat in this scene might signify a last return to Lester’s initial pitiable state and, thus, as one last reminder of the ghosting of Freeman’s earlier role.

Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst): “I wanna be the best me I can be”

Season Two of *Fargo* continues the series’ interest in antagonistic criminal forces and takes the audience back to the late 1970s. At the center of the plot is a violent war between two crime syndicates, the Gerhardt family, based in Fargo, and the Kansas City Mob. This criminal war is initiated by a fatal misunderstanding, as the Gerhardt family assumes that their youngest son, Rye (Kieran Culkin) has been murdered by members of the Kansas City Mob. However, Rye’s death was caused by an accident that had nothing to do with the crime syndicates’ machinations. Instead, it involves two previously blameless characters—beautician Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst) and her husband, butcher Ed Blomquist (Jesse Plemons)—who are pulled into the criminal milieu when they try to cover up for Rye’s death. While Jesse Plemons, who portrays Ed Blomquist, is possibly known to viewers as a perpetrator figure from his role as Todd Alquist in *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), Kirsten Dunst’s appearance in *Fargo* is haunted by a series of non-perpetrator roles in the actress’ earlier career. As is the case with Martin Freeman as Lester Nygaard in Season One, the casting of Kirsten Dunst as the story’s major evolving perpetrator is haunted by a sense of familiarity that is deconstructed over the course of the season. The ghosting effect, in this instance, is mainly achieved through the

thematic aspects of female gender roles and mental issues as points of connection to Dunst's previous history of performances.

Prior to her performance in *Fargo*, Kirsten Dunst established a film career heavily based on innocent, non-perpetrator characters. Her appearance in this type of roles ranges from her child performances in *Little Women* (1994) and *Jumanji* (1995) to performances in romantic comedies such as *Bring It On* (2000) and *Elizabethtown* (2005). As an adult actress, Dunst has often appeared in the role of an attractive young woman who is of romantic and sexual interest to men, which is evoked with Peggy Blomquist's profession as a beautician in *Fargo*. In many instances, however, these roles are also characterized by loneliness, failing relationships and an unequal treatment of the female character. This tendency can be seen, for example, in her role as discarded teenage lover Lux Lisbon in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), as betrayed lover Mary in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), as Marie Antoinette in the eponymous film (2006) who entered an arranged marriage at a very young age, and in her role as Mary Jane Watson in the *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002; 2004; 2007) that addresses the pitfalls of loving a superhero. The theme of unstable relationships culminates in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) in which Dunst plays the lead role of newlywed Justine whose relationship breaks apart on the day of her wedding and is soon followed by a planetary apocalypse. Next to its focus on broken relationships, *Melancholia* intensely explores the topic of mental illness,² a theme that is also vital in Peggy Blomquist's characterization. In the context of these types of roles in Dunst's earlier performances, the character of Peggy Blomquist, who starts out as a "seemingly sweet and innocent hairdresser and wife" (Eidelstein) is haunted by several themes from Dunst's previous career that evoke a sense of familiarity. However, as in the case of Lester Nygaard, the character of Peggy soon significantly deviates from these connotations and develops towards an unusual perpetrator figure.

It becomes obvious early on in the series that Peggy Blomquist faces relationship issues and is not fully satisfied with her life. Before the audience learns that Peggy was involved in a fatal accident, she is introduced having dinner with her husband, Ed, in their house. Peggy seems like a harmless character at this point, but it becomes apparent in the scene that the couple's relationship is characterized by diverging needs and a lack of communication. While Ed does not seem to understand Peggy's interest in a seminar called "Life Spring," that promises self-fulfillment, Peggy avoids the conversation about Ed's future plans, that involve having children, and she shows little interest in sexual encounters with her husband (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 1). In this introduction of the couple's story line, the character of Peggy evokes the aforementioned aspect of Dunst's earlier roles as women who fail to live in fulfilled

relationships and are victims of larger patriarchal power structures rather than perpetrators. Peggy's outer appearance, too, deviates from typical visual representations of perpetrators. In particular, her appearance contrasts with the visual representation of the male members of the Gerhardt family, who have been introduced as the major perpetrator figures in the series up to this point. These male perpetrators, including Dodd Gerhardt (Jeffrey Donovan), Bear Gerhardt (Angus Sampson), and Hanzee Dent (Zahn McClarnon) mostly appear in dark, brownish colors that complement their brutal, almost animalistic behavior. Peggy, on the other hand, is wearing colorful clothes, make-up and styled hair, a visual style that is upheld throughout her character development. In terms of ghosting, her costumes as a fashionable woman of the 1970s can also be seen as a continuation of a number of roles in which Kirsten Dunst was outfitted with extravagant and period costume designs, particularly her performances in historical dramas such as *The Cat's Meow* (2001), *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), and *Marie Antoinette* (2006). This evocation of innocent femininity through costume design and a focus on relationship issues combines with the ghosting of Kirsten Dunst's roles as innocent women and makes it very unlikely for the audience to anticipate Peggy as a major perpetrator in Season Two.

Nevertheless, within the couple's first introduction, Peggy's characterization begins to change. The audience learns that, prior to the dinner, she accidentally hit criminal Rye Gerhardt with her car. Rye had previously shot several people in a diner. Instead of calling an ambulance or providing first aid, Peggy has brought the injured man home to her garage and made hamburgers as if nothing happened. This failure to render assistance already makes the initial impression of Peggy as a righteous character fragile and hints at her unusual character traits.³ When Ed hears noises from the garage, he discovers injured Rye and, in a subsequent fight, kills him in self-defense (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 1). At this point, the couple's criminal career begins: after Peggy convinces Ed that they have to cover up for the incident so that they will not have to go to prison, they get rid of all the evidence and soon find themselves at war with the Gerhardt family, who finds out about their killing Rye.

The main impulses for covering up and therewith beginning a criminal career come from Peggy who, through the unlikely circumstances, begins to assume a more active role in her relationship with Ed. Her own plans for self-actualization have so far been inhibited by her marriage; in a conflict about money that Ed wants to spend on buying the butcher shop rather than for Peggy's seminar, Peggy repeatedly gives in to her husband's needs and subordinates her own plans to her husband's family plans, while Ed actively belittles Peggy's needs. In this sense, the act of patriarchal oppression that appears in many of Kirsten Dunst's roles is still visible in Peggy and may be understood as asking the audience for pity even after they have

learned about Peggy's criminal behavior. It then increasingly becomes clear that Peggy's quest for self-actualization is directly tied to gendered expectations of women that she wants to leave behind. Her work colleague, Constance (Elizabeth Marvel), who has recommended the Life Spring seminar, tells her not to be "a prisoner of 'we'" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 2) and instead pursue her own goals. Later, Constance reinforces the need for female empowerment by telling Peggy that "no man should be able to tell you what to do, not with your body or your money" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 4) and that women should stop surrendering their needs to men's (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 4). Even though Peggy never participates in the seminar, her personal interpretation of the Life Spring maxims functions as a blueprint for her criminal actions that she perceives as an act of female liberation.

Peggy becomes more self-confident when the situation for her and Ed becomes increasingly dangerous as the Gerhardt family, led by their oldest son, Dodd (Jeffrey Donovan), attempt to take revenge. When warned about the risks of starting a war with the Gerhardts, Peggy insists on her future plans that include becoming "the best me I can be, because these are modern times, you know, and a woman [...] just doesn't have to be a wife and a mother no more, [...] there's nothing she can't be" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 6). In Peggy's case, "nothing a woman can't be" also includes being a perpetrator. After members of the Gerhardt family burn down the butcher shop, Ed's plans of buying the shop and starting a family in Luverne are annihilated and he commits to Peggy's plan of leaving town. From this point on, Peggy manages to reach her aims of liberation and self-actualization by seeing the war with the Gerhardts as a way of actually breaking free from her old life. At the same time, her mental issues are depicted more intensely as she is shown hallucinating multiple times. After killing some members of the Gerhardt clan and taking Dodd Gerhardt captive, she talks to an imaginary man about self-actualization (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8) and interprets the hallucinatory conversation as a prompt to do things instead of asking for permission. As a result, she perceives her subsequent flight with Ed as an exciting road trip that allows her to have fun and self-actualize. Similarly to Lester Nygaard, Peggy takes her criminal involvement as a chance to become a new person and evade her old role as a victim of gender norms.

The climax of Peggy's newly chosen role as an active perpetrator appears when the couple flees to a cabin where they hold Dodd Gerhardt captive. In a moment when Peggy is alone with Dodd, she suddenly makes him obedient by stabbing him with a kitchen knife several times (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8). This scene is significant not only because Peggy is now actively exerting violence on a person rather than defending herself or trying to cover up for an accident, but also because her victim has previously been presented as the main oppressor of

women in the second season.⁴ After insulting and threatening Peggy, Dodd is silenced by her violent act, which can be seen as another step in her criminal emancipation from oppressive patriarchal structures. Underpinning the series' ironic tone, Peggy's attack is still haunted by the female stereotypical elements she tries to leave behind. She uses a kitchen knife as a weapon and forces Dodd to exhibit good manners while she is cooking beans (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8), marking an instant return to the domestic sphere Peggy was previously assigned to as a nurturing, cooking wife. Also, as Allison Keene has remarked, her stabbing of Dodd "is juxtaposed brilliantly with Peggy's childlike innocence again later as she watches TV, and in her friendly but hesitant telephone conversation with Constance (Elizabeth Marvel)." In spite of this ambiguity, Peggy's torture of Dodd Gerhardt marks the climax in her self-actualization process as a newly minted perpetrator.

Subsequently, Peggy increasingly loses control of the situation, which marks the beginning of her downfall. While Peggy watches a film in the cabin, Dodd manages to free himself and confronts Peggy and Ed. As a surprising twist in the narrative, the fight between Dodd and Peggy intersects with another act of liberation, namely that of the Gerhardts' Native American accomplice Hanzee Dent (Zahn McClarnon), who kills Dodd after being called a "half-breed" and "mongrel" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8). The unexpected rise of Hanzee's revenge plan and the couple's further involvement in the persecution of criminal clans leads to a mass killing and a final showdown between supervillain Hanzee and the Blomquists. During another hallucinatory episode, Peggy tries to save Ed by hiding in a cooling chamber; however, this action results in Ed's death and her own arrest. When captured by the police, Peggy insists that she "just wanted to be someone" and was a victim of societal expectations concerning women before she became a perpetrator (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 10). As in Lester's case, Peggy's development into an unusual perpetrator eventually leads to the total annihilation of her new personality and aspirations, while she once more invokes her initial state of being a victim.

Conclusion: Perpetration and/as Performance

The ghosting effect as described by Marvin Carlson is part of *Fargo*'s idiosyncratic play with cultural references and contributes to the series' representation of unlikely perpetrators. Including familiar elements from actors' previous roles and gradually combining them with strikingly unfamiliar elements, *Fargo* makes its audience aware of their expectations based on

cultural memory. In Season One, the audience is initially asked to pity Lester Nygaard and to perceive him as a genuinely harmless character, both due to the inequities Lester has to face and due to the righteousness and innocence that viewers are accustomed to in Martin Freeman's previous roles. Similarly, the character of Peggy Blomquist in Season Two is introduced as an innocent wife who suffers from the patriarchal power structures that are imposed on her, an impression that is complemented by an array of different non-perpetrator roles in Kirsten Dunst's previous career. In both instances, the familiarity and positive connotations with the actors are gradually becoming fragile because both Lester and Peggy evolve from innocent victims to ruthless and self-confident perpetrators. On the diegetic level, both characters initially take accidental crimes as a starting point for a criminal career that allows them to leave their old role as victims behind. While they manage to self-actualize through their criminal acts of liberation, their development eventually leads to a tragic fall – in Lester's case, to his own death, and in Peggy's case, to the death of her husband and her own arrest.

In conclusion, *Fargo* deliberately estranges its audience from familiar perpetrator stereotypes by ambiguously rearranging cultural conventions and drawing on its cast's history of performances. The harsh discrepancy between Freeman's and Dunst's earlier roles and their evolution towards major perpetrators in *Fargo* intensifies the audience's disorientation while they are experiencing highly unusual character developments. As part of the series' self-reflexivity, *Fargo* problematizes the issue of culturally acquired expectations and role playing on two levels: the depictions of Lester Nygaard and Peggy Blomquist suggest that the evolution of evil is an act of deliberate role-playing and therewith thematically parallels the unexpected defamiliarization the series employs on the performative level. With its ambiguous interplay of familiar and unfamiliar elements, *Fargo* destabilizes binaries such as good and evil, victim and perpetrator, and identity and role playing. Accordingly, performance is not only a necessary element in *Fargo*'s televisual narrative, but is utilized as a meaningful tool to create uncommon perpetrator figures.

¹ The series was nominated for a number of prestigious awards, winning six Emmys (see "*Fargo*: Awards and Nominations") and three Golden Globe Awards (see "*Fargo*: Golden Globe Awards"), among others. As *Insider* claims, *Fargo* is among the 24 most popular series of all time according to data from *Metacritic* (see Renfro). Readers of *The Guardian* ranked season one of *Fargo* among the best TV series in 2014 (see "The Best TV").

² Dunst's performance in *Melancholia*, for which she was awarded a Best Actress award at the Cannes Film festival, received even more attention in the context of her private struggle with depression that she made public shortly before the film was released. The relevance of the actress's private life to the public perception of her work is another instance of ghosting, as outlined above.

³ Ironically, in a later conversation from Peggy's beauty shop about the missing Rye Gerhardt, sheriff Hank Larsson (Ted Danson) remarks that "it's not like you're gonna just drive home with a Gerhardt in your windshield and start supper" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 3), underlining Peggy's absurd behaviour.

⁴ This representation includes Dodd's violent and oppressive upbringing of his daughter, Simone (Rachel Keller), and his lacking acceptance of his mother, Floyd (Jean Smart), as the new leader of the clan after the patriarch, Otto Gerhardt (Michael Hogan), has suffered a stroke. Season Two of *Fargo* is generally interested in female characters who attempt to resist male domination, including Simone and Floyd Gerhardt, as they challenge male coercion as exerted by Dodd.

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