

# And Scene...on the Last Reel of Truth in Politics



One night back in 1996, I dropped by a local *Blockbuster Video* on the way home to my one-bedroom apartment (at the back of a popular barbecue restaurant), and picked up a film that would become one of my

all-time favorites: *Fargo*.

I hadn't heard much about the movie prior to watching it (other than noticing on the back of the DVD jacket that Siskel and Ebert were fans). That's why I initially didn't give the now infamous caption in the opening scene much thought: "*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 deeper I became invested in the story's unique plot and uncouth characters, however, the more I'd find myself thinking back to that introductory statement and marveling at the notion that what I was watching (even with what was surely some poetic license) had *actually happened*. That anchor kept me firmly immersed in the frozen, quirky world of car salesman Jerry Lundegaard and police chief Marge Gunderson.

As it turned out, *Fargo* was *not* a true story. It was completely made up by the film's esteemed creators, Joel and Ethan Coen. Joel later explained why he and his brother had chosen to fool their viewers: "If an audience believes that something's based on a real event, it gives you permission to do things they might otherwise not accept."

He was right, of course. It was a brilliant move – one that added to the audience's experience.

Not everyone appreciated the rouse. I remember a woman I worked with telling me that she resented being lied to by the filmmakers. She had found out the truth after watching the movie, and she was genuinely ticked.

"If it's not real, don't tell people it's real," she said to me.

I found her reaction amusing. I described the lie as "harmless" – contained within a product of entertainment. I said that because it didn't hurt, slander, or otherwise affect anyone's life, it was meaningless. I then added, "The Coen Brothers are artists...not politicians running for office."

I feel like the reasoning and the distinction I made back then were pretty sound. Twenty years later, smack dab in the middle of a bombastic election cycle, it's becoming clear that there really is no difference left at all between entertainment and politics in regard to the truth. Political audiences (aka voters) have joined entertainment audiences in demonstrating that they're every bit as willing to accept, absorb, admire, and even celebrate the lies they're told by today's *actors*.

Far too many of us just don't care that Hillary Clinton lied about what caused the Benghazi attack (and then lied about lying about it) or that Donald Trump made up stories about Mexican rapists and thousands of Muslims celebrating in New Jersey. We tell ourselves that it doesn't really matter as long as the product is attractive and the conclusion is desirable.

I pointed out in a recent column that even Bill O'Reilly – purveyor of the *No Spin Zone* – now finds this practice not only acceptable but also *brilliant*. I'd ask "Who's looking out for us?" but the truth is that we don't even care enough to look out for ourselves anymore. Along Joel Coen's point,

permission has been granted to *do things* that people *might otherwise not accept*.

Of course, the biggest fans out there are those who are so invested in their political actors that they've actually convinced themselves that all of these lies must somehow...in some way be true. I'm talking about the people you still hear lending credence to the anti-Muhammad YouTube video, or offering "ease-of-use" as a rational explanation for owning a private, secret email server. They're the ones claiming that they – with their own two eyes – saw enough people celebrating the collapse of the Twin Towers to fill a New Jersey high school gymnasium.



Breaking: Presidential candidate Donald Trump endorses John A. Daly's new novel.

Those people are more the exception than the rule, however. Most supporters don't even bother to defend the conduct. It's easier to just shout over the fact-checkers and misdirect the audience again. I guess conservatives should at least receive some acknowledgement for finally catching up to liberals in this area. Now, *neither* side is tethered to reality.

That being said, I never cease to be amazed by the things I

keep hearing in this campaign. Yesterday, Donald Trump essentially admitted to Chris Cuomo that he lied in 2008 to help Hillary Clinton. *Why lie?* In Donald's own words, he "needed votes for things."

Call me crazy, but it seems that if a presidential candidate admits to (and has no qualms with) lying to the public for the sole purpose of gaining votes, that's kind of a big story – maybe something along the lines of a gross *lack of integrity* or a *pattern of empty rhetoric*. But nope, not today. It's 2016 and anything goes.

As we continue on in this campaign, expect the script to get even stranger. Expect the story to become downright perverse. Joel and Ethan, I hope you're taking notes.