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

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.

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