

“THIS IS A [...] STORY”: THE REFUSAL OF A MASTER TEXT IN NOAH HAWLEY’S *FARGO*

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Abstract

Each episode of Noah Hawley’s first two seasons of *Fargo* begins with the same claim: “this is a true story.” The claim might invite the formation of what Thomas Leitch (2007) calls a “privileged master text,” except that Hawley undermines the creation of such a text in at least two ways. On the one hand, Hawley uses his truth claim as a way to direct his audience into the film he is adapting – Joel and Ethan Coen’s (1996) film by the same name. Hawley ensures throughout his first season that those who know or who come-to-know the Coens’ work will recognize his story as an extension of the Coens’ world. Hawley references the Coens’ world so much that his audience is never entirely outside the Coens’ universe, and certainly not in any world a story based on a true event might pretend to occupy. At the same time, Hawley allows different speakers to make the opening truth claim by the end of his second season, which further prevents his truth assertion from locating viewers in any actual world. Hawley’s second move reveals that true stories are always subjective stories, which means they are always constructed stories. In this way, a true story is no more definitive than any other story. All stories are, in keeping with Jorge Luis Borges’ attitude toward definitive texts, only a draft or a version of a story. Every telling invites another, alternative retelling. A true story is, therefore, above all a story.

Keywords: true stories, adaptation, Coen Brothers, Fargo, subjectivity, constructivism

Thomas Leitch concludes his perceptive overview of the problems adaptations must negotiate with a chapter on moving images based on a true story. Leitch claims that such projects assume an interesting place in the world of adaptations. They begin in ambiguity – “just what does it mean to be ‘based’ on a true story” – only to express at every move the certitude of their content (283). What is the filmic adaptation of a true story if not the true account of some real-world event? Taken as such, the audience that witnesses a true story on screen might be less critical of what they see than an audience watching, say, an adaptation of a cherished novel, play, or short-story. The audience would need to know the true story being depicted to be able to dissect it as other adaptations get examined.

Leitch explains, though, that part of the charm of a true story is that the story being projected has gone untold, has been forgotten, or has at least been misrepresented. None of these scenarios require or even accommodate prior knowledge. Only in the case of misrepresentation can the audience really analyze a true story in the way they might other forms of adaptations, and even then, only to a limited extent. The point of the retelling is, after all, to set the record straight and audiences know it. They arrive at theaters to see what has been missed. They are unlikely to insist on their earlier ignorance or misunderstanding.

Leitch offers Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) as an example. The film, which is based on Nicholas Pileggi's book, *Wiseguy* (1985), tells not only the true story of Mafia aficionado Henry Hill, but also the supposed true story of life in the Mafia. Scorsese's version intentionally stands against the "romanticized" version of Mafia life portrayed in Francis Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972). The "based on a true story" tag earns Scorsese's film the generic claim – this is "not just another mob movie [...] [it] cannot be [wrong], because a true story, unlike any particular history or memoir [...] is by definition true" (289). Certainty eclipses ambiguity. The claim to truth inserts a "privileged master text" that threatens to stifle the process of adaptation at the moment it is being most clearly revealed (286).

The persistent presence of a master text, any master text, but especially one that arises simply by extension of the claim to be based on a true story, which means it never really exists, frustrates the active process of adaptation Leitch champions throughout his monograph. It undermines the "practices of rewriting" Leitch hopes to foster (303). From Leitch's view, the most meaningful adaptations promote literacy over consumption. Such projects expose the ways in which adapters contribute to rather than complete the ongoing process of adaptation they enter. Their work awaits an active audience who will continue the process the adaptor and the adaptation can only identify and isolate. This is even the case with moving images based on true story. Leitch offers that the impetus for marking a story as a true story is "strategic and instrumental" rather than confessional (286). Despite appearances to the contrary, the goal is to tell a *story* rather than to tell a *true* story. In Leitch's words, a film "based on a true story" will be "both more and less than the truth: less because it is only a selection of the truth, and more because it has already been constructed as a story" (290). Set in this light, the decision to circulate a story as a true story can be as much an admission that what follows is an adaptation, a re-presentation, as it is anything else. The based-on-a-true-story trope need not stifle anything. The tag might even help spur active responses rather than threaten them, especially when the label is presented as a constructed rather than confessional element.

The first two seasons of Noah Hawley's television anthology, *Fargo* (2014–5), serves as an interesting example of “a true story” that spurs on rather than suffocates an ongoing process of adaptation. Each of the twenty episodes begins with the same declaration: “this is a true story.” In all but the last two episodes of Season Two, Hawley has the word “true” linger on the screen longer than the rest of the opening sentence as if to reaffirm the veracity of his claim. When the word “true” finally vanishes, Hawley again asserts the truth of his story three more times. One line establishes when and where the events depicted took place; two others say what has been changed and what has been left the same. The whole set piece suggests that Hawley's falls into that category of adaptations that adapt “actual” rather than invented events. Of course, those who know or who—come—to-know the admitted source for Hawley's story, Joel and Ethan Coens' *Fargo* (1996), know better. Hawley's opening simply repeats the Coens' opening graphic which itself is an admitted lie. Ethan Coen (2000) states as much in the published version of the screenplay for their *Fargo*, wherein he admits the film only “pretends to be true” (8). One could say that Hawley's story is also only interested in pretending to be true, but a close analysis of the first two seasons of the anthology suggests Hawley's declaration can expose more than just some pretense; it can show the extent to which even true stories are always previously constructed. Hawley achieves this reversal by openly undermining his truth claim in a way the Coens' do not. Hawley's claim is part of the construction. His statement signals that what follows is a reconstruction rather than an attempt to correct an inaccurate record or invoke a master text. His true story is a constructed story precisely because it has been declared a “true” story.

When set against the story that follows, Hawley's use of the “true story” trope encourages audiences to see something other than a true/untrue binary when watching his episodes. Audiences are always aware that the version in motion on the screen is but one version of some story that belongs to a group of people. The story would be different if given to another person. This knowledge subverts binaries between truth and fiction, and it does so in a way that provides audiences and adaptation theorists alike with a reason to see true stories as constructed. Hawley's anthology is especially good at exposing true stories as constructed stories, in part, because the claim itself is part of an already constructed story. The writer/producer bills his story “a true story,” but it would seem he does so only as means to encourage audiences to identify the framework of a story. The trope itself becomes, at least in Season One, a reason to watch Hawley's story through the Coens' *Fargo* rather than a declaration of truth. In this way, the first season, like the film that shapes it, pretends to be part of the real world, only to sit within the cinematic world the Coens create. Hawley prefaces each episode of Season Two with the same statement, but the claim works differently in the second season. The writer incorporates actual events

into his second season – famous speeches by Presidents Carter and Reagan and references to UFO sightings reported across Minnesota throughout the 1970s. Hawley refuses to build on these references, though. They disappear almost as quickly as they appear. They fail to establish any lasting significance. In the end, then, even these events based on true events fail to support the formation of the privileged master text Leitch describes. Instead, Hawley ensures that even his true events get exposed as invented events by the time they reach the screen. This insistence is particularly clear by the seasons' end when Hawley tweaks the presentation of his truth claim to show that even that claim is made from a subjective rather than an authoritative position. True stories are subjective stories. They can only deliver one side of the truth they pretend to portray. As such, a true story is also a constructed story. The tag itself can be used to celebrate the relative nature of such a statement, and it can invite viewers to reconstruct rather than accept what they might otherwise see as truth.

The central argument in this article is that Hawley's *Fargo* remains open for revision, and it does so as a true story. Hawley's declaration is just one of many already constructed elements in the first season of *Fargo*. The references occur so frequently, in fact, that it is easy to begin playing a game of identification, looking for the next Coen brother reference. These references gain an unexpected significance, though, when set against the opening claim that "this is a true story." Under that umbrella, these references become something of a meditation of the status of "true" stories, which are, in one way or another, always already an invented story, a constructed story. Take for example Hawley's opening, which is certainly "original" to the extent that one would not immediately know that what he presents draws from the Coens' *Fargo*. Those looking at this scene through that film, though, are sure to see some undeniable connections. Hawley's show opens graphically, visually, and aurally in that film. Graphically speaking, Hawley places the line "this is a true story" at the center of his first image. The line signals those who know the Coens' opening that what follows is as much the Coens' as it is Hawley's. Aurally, Hawley has Jeff Russo's theme music fill the soundtrack. Russo admits to trying to replicate the musical score produced by Carter Burwell in the Coens' *Fargo*. Russo arranges a complete orchestra and creates suites that remain in the "musical landscape" Burwell created (Rosenbloom). The result is a theme that returns one to the sounds of the Coens' movie. Visually, Hawley captures a line of highway cutting across two snow-covered fields, which approximates the Coens' opening if only generally. Set against the graphic and aural clues, this general reference becomes more pronounced. The similarities are enough that viewers that know the Coens' *Fargo* are sure to look for further connections to the Coens' film rather than to the world normally cued by the statement "this is a true story."

The truth is that Hawley's *Fargo* routinely takes shape around the Coens' film by the same name. Episode one, "The Crocodile's Dilemma," for

instance, has Lester (Martin Freeman) deliver a rehearsed speech that very nearly matches Jerry's (William H. Macy's) call to his father-in-law in the Coens' *Fargo* after the "kidnappers" have taken Jerry's wife. Slightly different circumstances prompt Lester's speech, but the similarities are greater than the differences. Those who do not know the Coens' *Fargo* might take this scene as something that has been reported to happen; those who know the Coens' film hear and see Jerry as Lester gives his speech. They are not, in other words, in the real world or in a true story. They are in a world of the Coens' making. The same thing happens in Episode Three, "A Muddy Road," when Molly (Alison Tomlin) visits her friend from high school for lunch. The conversation would seem like a *non sequitur* to anyone who does not know the Coens' *Fargo*. Those who know the film, though, are sure to recognize Marge's (Frances McDormand's) visit to her high-school friend in that film. Again, what might give the allusion of a true story actually brings one into the world the Coens create. One last example of a predilection for the reel over the real occurs in episode seven, "Who Shaves the Barber?" when Molly visits Mr. Wrench (Russell Harvard) in the hospital room. The conversation begins by sorting through the details of Hawley's story as Molly and Mr. Wrench clarify who shot whom and who is alive and who is dead. The conversation quickly finds itself in one of the most memorable speeches of the Coens' film, as an introspective Molly asks, "I mean what's the point? Because here you are, your friend is dead, and you're going to spend the rest of your life in jail, and for what?" Those who know Marge's words from the Coens' scene can supply the answer: "a little bit of money." As with each of the earlier moments, the scene brings one into the Coens' *Fargo* rather than into the "real" world. Hawley's true story turns out to be the already constructed story found in a world the Coens have constructed.

This is not to say that Hawley merely restages the Coens' script. A simple re-presentation of the Coens' world would not invite the ongoing adaptation this article claims Hawley's use of the tagline "this is a true story" encourages. A straight appropriation would do little more than situate the film from which these moments are taken as a kind of master text, the sort of privileging Hawley's story works to frustrate. Hawley's use of the worlds the Coens construct in season one is consonant with the amalgam of reverence and irreverence Sergio Waisman (2005) finds at the heart of Jorge Luis Borges' anti-binarist approach to translation. Waisman asserts that Borges refused to assign a source-text any authority over his translations. He rejected the idea of the definitive text: "there are no 'definitive texts,' only drafts and versions" (43). A translation can be no more and no less than the "original," which is but one version of the story to be told. One reason for this limit, if one can call it that, is that all values exist in the reader and readers will assign values in a variety of ways. A translation will, therefore, always be unfaithful to some value. For this reason, Borges stresses paraphrase over literal translation. The translator can

“leave behind what is associated with the [original] artist: the specific elements of the poetic voice, his words, his syntax, and metaphors, even” (46). This is especially true of stories that readers already know: “with famous books, the first time is already the second, since we approach them already knowing them” (52). Translation, from Borges’ perspective, begs for an active translator, one that can balance reverence and irreverence in such a way that one translation, which is to say one draft, will prompt additional translations. Such is the way of the active translation, and such is the way of Hawley’s use of the Coens’ *Fargo*.

Hawley borrows moments from the Coens’ *Fargo*, but he refits those moments to his own story, to his own values, to his own critical activity. One can see Hawley’s story as a repeat of Jerry making a call to his father-in-law, Molly talking to a friend over lunch, or Molly delivering what feels like the moral question of the moment, but these moments assume more significance due to Hawley’s repurposing of them, in part, because they are already known, and, yet, still able to be known anew. Hawley illustrates this very point at the end of episode one with a marvelous revision to what becomes a pivotal moment in the Coens’ *Fargo*. Hawley dresses Gus’s (Colin Hanks’) initial confrontation with Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton) in the narrative sequence and language of the actions in Brainard that lead to the death of the police officer and two passers-by. In Hawley’s story, Gus stops Malvo at what the officer must believe to be a fairly routine traffic stop. The scene begins as the scene in the film begins. Gus asks for Malvo’s license and registration. Malvo suggests that Gus get in his patrol car and drive away. Gus asks why he would do that. Malvo explains: “Because some roads you shouldn’t go down.” Gus laughs for a moment only to return to the script the officer in the Coens’ film followed: “step out of the car, please, sir.” Malvo refuses: “I’m going to roll my window up. Then I’m going to drive away, and you’re going to go home to your daughter, and every few years you’re going to look at her face and know that you’re alive because you chose not to go down a certain road on a certain night.” Gus balks, and Malvo drives away. The most interesting aspect of the scene is the way it adheres to and then revises the Coens’ scene. Hawley has Gus deliver the very words the officer in the Coens’ *Fargo* spoke, even if he refuses to allow those words to bring this confrontation to the same fatal conclusion. The revision suggests the presence of other possibilities, which both refuses the creation of a master text, a definitive text, and leaves Hawley’s story, and the story he adapts, open for further revision. Hawley’s “true story” does not circumvent the creation of alternative drafts or versions; it creates space for them.

Hawley’s revision also leaves audiences in the space between the story he adapts and the adaptation of that story. The first scene in season one, episode two, “The Rooster Prince,” has two men, Mr. Numbers (Adam Goldberg) and Mr. Wrench, arrive at “Hess and Sons” to investigate the murder of Sam Hess (Kevin O’Grady). Each side identifies itself. For their part, Mr. Numbers

distinguishes himself and his partner not by name, but with the simple line: “We’re from Fargo.” The statement is and, more interestingly, is not true. The two men are from Fargo, at least diegetically speaking. They are either literally from Fargo, North Dakota, or they arrive at “Hess and Sons” at the request of their boss, who is based in Fargo. Either way the men are right to say they are from Fargo. And, yet, Mr. Number’s line also entertains a false sense, at least for those who watch Hawley’s show, like so many in Hawley’s initial audience, with the Coens’ *Fargo* in mind. These two characters are not from *Fargo*, which is to say that they are not from the film. The Coens do offer their audience a duo, Gaear (Peter Stromare) and Carl (Steve Buscemi), and one side of that duo does eventually listen to the same lecture about life and money that Mr. Wrench hears at the hospital, but the similarities really stop there. Hawley ultimately distinguishes his two men from the twosome in the Coens’ film in such a way that the men are Hawley’s rather than the Coens’. In this sense, the men are not from *Fargo*.

Admittedly, the real question here is not if the men are from *Fargo* or not. It is how these overt or indirect references to *Fargo* impact on our experience of Hawley’s story. Audiences can witness the story Hawley provides them without any awareness of the film’s existence. One can accept the true story tag presented at the start of each show. To do so, though, limits the critical response season one can prompt when it is set within the worlds the Coens construct. It also undermines the discursive aim that Hawley establishes through his constituent references to recognizable moments in the Coens’ *Fargo*. Hawley offers those who recognize these moments an invitation to participate in the process of adaptation that Hawley’s first season initiates rather than completes, a process of adaptation that rarely occurs in true stories. The references become a means to keep that process alive and active, to refuse the creation of a master text that might stifle that process. They favor the individual text that each viewer will construct between the text they are given and the text they know is being referenced. If any master text is to emerge, it is the one the viewer constructs.

Season two offers the same invitation, albeit in a different way. While season one bills itself as a true story only to deal almost exclusively with a world of the Coens’ making, season two positions itself somewhere between the real and the reel. Hawley alerts his audience that this is the space the second volume of his story will occupy by opening the season in black-and-white and on the set of a fictional documentary film “Massacre at Sioux Falls.” The opening image pans across a battlefield full of dead soldiers. Hawley sets a graphic in the center of the screen that announces the title of the film and the names of the principal actors, which include Ronald Reagan. The camera ultimately stops on an image of a Native American in full-dress. Hawley immediately reveals the image to be staged. The camera loses its hold on the actor more than once, and the actor’s words, “Am I, uh...what are we waiting for?” are clearly delivered out of

character. In this way, Hawley's second season opens as an outtake, one that has the movie-within-a-movie-director trying to pass the time with one of his actors while they wait for Reagan to be costumed properly. The whole makes for an interesting reversal of what most would assume to be the case in a true story. The common assumption would be that a true story sprinkles some artifice within an otherwise true account of a real world occurrence; Hawley's staged outtake captures a moment of real-life within an otherwise invented world. His choice for how to open the season signals a step beyond the cinematic world that shaped the first season.

Hawley further indicates a move beyond the world invented by the Coens when he follows the outtake with recordings of President Carter giving his famous "Crisis of Confidence" speech from 1979. Hawley rolls images of two principal characters from the season, Dodd (Jeffrey Donovan) and Hanzee (Zahn McClarnon), as Carter's words fill the soundtrack and the now-customary graphic appears on the screen: "this is a true story." The word "true" lingers as it does throughout season one, but Hawley returns to the footage of President Carter delivering his speech as the word sits alone on the screen. For the first time in eleven episodes, the word "true" truly designates an actual event from an invented one. What follows, though, reveals that Hawley controls the real details of his opening as much as the invented ones. Hawley intersperses images of the gas crisis in 1979 with images of his invented world. Hawley demonstrates his control over both the actual and invented images by freezing moments of both as the words continue to fill the soundtrack, or by using vertical and horizontal split-screens to juxtapose images in the way he wants them set and framed. The implied message is that Hawley adopts an anti-binarist approach by deciding how those moments are seen, for how long, and when. In this way, actual events are exposed to be as manipulated as invented ones. In this way, actual events lose some of their significance; they assume no additional authority.

Hawley's use of one of the stranger bits of real life from 1979 Minnesota further illustrates the way in which an actual event can be incorporated into a story without any of the presumed authority associated with a true story. As Tracy Mumford explains: "Minnesota in the 1970s was something of a hotbed of UFO activity" (Mumford). The decade ends with Sheriff-Deputy Val Johnson's encounter with a UFO in 1979. Johnson noticed a bright light in the distance that eventually envelops him, which caused his patrol car to crash. Johnson wakes up some time later with "burns around his eyes [...] [and] the windshield and one headlight of his [car]" smashed out. The event has been declared by some as one of the "top 10 most influential encounters in history," in part, because the car, a bit of actual evidence, still sits in the Marshall County Museum in Minnesota (Mumford). Hawley makes a series of nods to the more general attention to UFO's around the time and place of his story and to Johnson's encounter. Bright lights appear throughout the season. A UFO

actually appears in the penultimate episode. The clearest connection, though, relates to Johnson's story. Hawley has Peg's (Kirsten Dunst's) car endure the same injuries as Johnson's. He also "burns" her eyes by having her get accidentally struck by her husband, Ed (Jesse Plemons), during the struggle with Rye (Kieran Culkin) in the couple's garage. Surprisingly, these connections fail to shape the form or function of Hawley's story in any lasting way. They become interesting bits of trivia, perhaps, but nothing more. The details of Hawley's story subsume the actual events entirely, which, like the season's opening, reverses the balance normally struck between real and invented sources in a true story.

Hawley allows other real-life realities to enter his second season, but none of these moments shape his story much either. Episode five, "The Gift of the Magi," for example, includes actual lines from a speech Ronald Reagan gives in 1979 to announce his candidacy for president. But Hawley refuses to extend these moments across the whole of the story in the way he stretched references to Coen brother films in season one. The correspondence to anything in the actual almost seems accidental, which undermines the significance of the announcement that "this is a true story" found at the opening of every episode. Hawley's statement becomes most interesting at the end of season two, when he alters his presentation of this statement for the first time in eighteen episodes. Rather than simply type out the opening message, episode nine, "The Castle," begins with a camera tightening on the spine of a book entitled "A History of True Crime in the Mid-West." A cut moves the book from the shelf to a table where the cover can be clearly seen. After a second or two, the book opens and the camera tightens on something of a dedication page, which presents a modified version of the familiar opening graphic in one shot. The story is no longer left in one locale; it now spans six states. Nor are we within the confines of one year. The story goes back to 1825. The words are also now in quotes, which is especially interesting. These quotes have always been implied. Hawley's opening has always been someone else's, namely, the Coens'. By making the quotes explicit, though, Hawley wrestles his opening graphic from that source. The statement becomes embedded in his use of it in the same way a quotation in a well-conceived academic article serves the purposes of that article.

Hawley breaks from his own formula for presenting the opening truth claim by having the opening statement spoken by a narrator in a voiceover – the narrator, it turns out is Martin Freeman, the actor who plays Lester Nygaard, in Season One. Audiences might not immediately recognize the voice; Freeman is talking in British English. In this way, Freeman both is and is not Lester, in the same way the true events in Hawley's story both are and are not true. Hawley indicates this by loading his opening graphic with the same anti-binarism by having his narrator admit "inaccuracies" – "readers will know that I have chosen

to file this case as a Minnesota crime even though most of the murders took place in North and in South Dakota.” Interestingly, this admission highlights both the constructed nature of the story and the opportunity one has to reconstitute that story further. The narrator justifies his choice to call his story a Minnesota crime in his next sentence by reminding the audience that the key to understanding the events he relates resides in Luverne, Minnesota. This explanation, combined with the shift for where and when the story took place, and the decision to speak rather than simply type the opening, marks what has transpired in the first eight episodes as but one version of the story. Other reports are equally valid.

Episode ten, “Palindrome,” especially proves this point, and it does so by altering yet again the method for delivering the opening statement. The episode starts in a place the season has already been, with a shot of Rye Gerhardt lying dead in Ed and Peggy’s freezer. Even this image is renewed, though, when, rather than pounding out an un-authored declaration that what follows is true, or by “reading” the authorized history of that story, Hawley has the voice of Lou Solverson (Patrick Wilson), one of the main characters in Season Two, saying: “This is a true story.” Lou imparts the rest of the opening graphic, reestablishing the limits of the story to “Minnesota, North and South Dakota” and to “1979.” Lou also admits that some details have been changed while others have remained the same. Hawley shows both sides of this argument during the opening narration – an image of each dead Gerhardt rolls beneath the bulk of the opening. The story is what it has been, the Gerhardt’s story, *until* Lou says “out of respect for the dead.” At this point, Hawley places Lou’s cancer-stricken wife, Betsy, on the screen in an extreme close-up that might easily be misconstrued as an image of a woman in a casket. The camera widens as Lou delivers the final part of the familiar refrain – “the rest has been told exactly as it occurred,” and the camera reveals that Betsy is still very much live and lying beside her daughter, Molly (Raven Stewart). Betsy opens her eyes, the music plays, and the last episode of the season begins in earnest, but not before “the true story” being related has shifted. For at least a moment, Hawley isn’t telling the true story of the “Sioux Falls Massacre” anymore, or at least not primarily; instead, he is recounting the story of Lou Solverson, Minnesota State Trooper, husband, and father, as an alternative way to construct Hawley’s second season.

The point here is not to argue that Hawley’s second season is Lou Solverson’s story, or that Hawley’s true story isn’t really true. One can argue these things based on the way Hawley frames the last two episodes of Season Two, but such an argument would miss the more general and global function these choices or his declaration that he is telling a true story can have. In the end, Hawley explicitly establishes in these last two episodes what might have always been implied in his assertion that his story is a true story, namely, that his story is an anti-binarist construct that can tolerate alternative arrangements, and not

simply because his statement is ultimately false. A claim to be telling a story based on a true event might always draw attention to the relatively arbitrary choices an adaptor must make, to the fact that the story being projected is a reconstruction of a story rather than an accurate portrayal of that story. “This is a true story” might be above all an invitation to participate in the ongoing process of adaptation the filmmaker starts rather than finishes.

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