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Sins, Debts, and Food in *Fargo* Season 5

> "The debt must be paid. A man's flesh was taken. Now a pound is required in return."
>
> (Ole Munch, hitman in *Fargo* Season 5)

> "It feels like that. You know, what they do to us. Make us swallow – like it's our fault. Bet you wanna know the cure? You gotta eat something made with love and joy. And be forgiven!"
>
> (Dot Lyon, the hitman's target)

Mentioned in the context of crime fiction, food most probably evokes associations with the crime itself in the first place: poisoned food most obviously offers itself as a murder tool. Yet, as the lines quoted above from the resolution of recently aired *Fargo* Season 5 (1923–24) clearly suggest, the situation is somewhat more complicated than that. A high-end television drama adaptation of the Coen brothers' iconic film from 1996, the series has a history of working with the often-noticed food motif contributing to *Fargo*'s neo-noir critique of patriarchal American consumer society. Heavy with Shakespearean allusion, the hitman Ole Munch's above-quoted words are only the culmination of an underlying discourse connecting debt with violence, which features prominently throughout the season. Dot Lyon's retort, in turn, is the essence of a counter-discourse, which replaces the conventional final shootout scene in crime films to offer food, nurture, solidarity and inclusion instead. Intrigued by the centrality and the implied complexity of the food motif here, the present study aims to discuss food and eating in Fargo Season 5 against the intertextual backdrop of *film noir*, the Coens' neo-noir and the reiteration of the food motif in *Fargo* Season 3. I will argue that, inseparable from the two other central motifs of the series, sin and debt, food and eating are used to contribute to a poignant critique of commodity culture, the way patriarchal consumer society promotes the commodification and concomitant violation of human beings – in their physical, moral and emotional integrity. Re-associated with the maternal and the logic of nurturing, unconditional love, the postfeminist re-appropriation of the food motif in season 5 is still not free from its own ironies, in close parallel to the polysemy of food (cf. Gunkel 246–47) in the Coens' *Fargo*. Premised on the truism that "[i]f there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food" (Eagleton 204; cf. Goldstein 43), the present case study of *Fargo* Season 5 aims to demonstrate how food is able to convey intricate messages concerning gender, social and political critique – even political activism – and artistic self-reflexivity in the context of crime drama.

Establishing the Pattern: Noir and Abject Consumption

Recent research on food in crime fiction urges readers to look way beyond the self-evident association of food with the murder weapon. As Jean Anderson, Carolina Miranda and Barbara Pezotti highlight in their *Blood on the Table*, prior to the publication of their own volume in 2018, research on food in crime fiction was relatively scarce.[1] But even what was available, regarded food not only as an excellent murder weapon, but also as a motif prominently contributing to the investigator's characterisation, as well as a device adding to couleur locale and "credibility" (4). With what signifies a major turn in the discussion of food in crime fiction, Anderson et al. call attention to the fact that diverse theoretical contexts – notably cultural semiotics, gender studies and the Kristevan theory of the abject (5–6) – offer a much more nuanced view of the roles food plays in the crime genre. Also drawing on the insights of Elspeth Probyn and Peter Messent, they see food as central to representing "family […] and gender," as well as to "reflect[ing] political and social issues at a personal level," and to "problematis[ing] national and supranational identities" (7). This, in turn, recommends an interdisciplinary approach to food in crime fiction and drama, very much in accordance with the fundamental approach of literary food studies. The field is, to quote Gitanjali Shahani, "omnivorous" in its use of theoretical frameworks and methods to study the "body and its political, racial, and gendered economies," employing "feminist, queer, and gender studies as well as critical race studies" (17; cf. Tigner and Carruth 5).[2] Taking its clues from the interdisciplinary field of literary food studies and the existing body of research on the Coens' Fargo, the present analysis aims to employ a broadly feminist approach, informed by a Kristevan theoretical framework, on the one hand. On the other hand, the analysis inevitably incorporates film studies discussions of the *film noir* and neo-noir tradition, with a special focus on the role of food.

If there is one neo-noir film[3] in which the centrality of eating as a leitmotif cannot be overlooked, it is the Coen brothers' *Fargo*. Indeed, reviewers have made much of Marge Gunderson and her husband's constant eating (Grace 42) and the one consistent study of the motif to date, Pamela Grace's feminist reading (41–50), clearly bears in mind the Coens' conscious dialogue with the *film noir* tradition. This dialogue, a definitive feature of neo-noir,[4] gestures towards the treatment of food in *film noir*, which offers a solid

[1] Indeed, literary food studies as such is a fairly recent development. It was only in 2018 that two comprehensive literary studies volumes came out, *Food and Literature* in the *Cambridge Critical Concepts* series, and *Literature and Food Studies* by Routledge.

[2] This clearly resonates with the interdisciplinary popular culture studies approach to food (Gunkel 245), which slightly predates that of literary food studies.

[3] Though for various reasons and to varying extents, the Coen brothers' *Fargo* is consistently categorised as neo-noir (comedy), see Grace 33; cf. Sterritt 16; Sharrett 70.

[4] "The term neo-noir describes any film coming after the classic *noir* period that contains *noir* themes and the *noir* sensibility. […] These later films are likely not shot in black and white and likely do not contain the play of light and shadow that their classic forerunners possessed. They do, however, contain the same alienation, pessimism, moral ambivalence, and disorientation"

pattern, recognised by Jay Telotte as early as the 1980s. As he explains, partly inspired by the naturalism of Italian neorealism, post-war *film noir* turned food into a focal component of its critique on American consumer society (399). As if to corroborate Shahani's insight that although "culinary moments" might appear to be "digressions," they are never really "incidental" (4), Telotte's survey blatantly demonstrates how eating emerged in *film noir* as a signifier of self-destructive desire, perpetuated by consumer society (407–9) and associated either with perpetrators (404) or cops lacking moral integrity (407). For instance, in Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), the corrupt Hank Quinlan's "bloated, unwieldy body" (407) is clearly presented as abject,[5] though Telotte's study was published before the term became common currency in Anglophone criticism. The moral responsibility of investigation, in turn, is associated with shunning food – prioritising the task at hand over self-sustenance (406). Also, as a constant of its critique of disintegrating family structures in modern American society, *film noir* turns the roadside diner into the primary scene of eating, as opposed to eating in a family environment and consuming home-made food (399).

Grace's analysis of *Fargo*, unfortunately, does not take into consideration the established patterns of *film noir* for her interpretation of the food motif. She relies heavily on a positive understanding of the Gundersons' eating habits and rituals in a feminist context: for her, they exclusively evoke maternal nurturing, with Norm playing the role of caregiver in the film's gender-bending scenario (41–44). This reading ties in with Grace's single-minded effort to interpret Margie as the "moral centre" of the film (33), who represents the "Law of the Mother" (50). Grace's reading apparently has a blind spot for the repulsiveness of the couple's eating scenes and, by implication, of Marge's pregnancy/motherhood. Conversely, Christopher Sharrett aptly notices both in discussing the couple's lunch scene in Marge's office: while Marge is commenting on the food Norm has brought her, "Oh yum, looks pretty good," instead of the lunch the camera cuts to the wriggling, disgusting bag of nightcrawlers she herself offers to Norm (73; cf. Grace 43). The abject worms are apparently commented upon as if they were appetising food – hamburgers, i.e. fast food,

(Conrad 2). As Mark Conrad's definition implies, neo-noir films consciously employ *noir* features and reinterpret the *noir* legacy (Conrad 2; see also Naremore 24–5, Silver and Ward 398).

[5] Since Julia Kristeva's own definition of the term in *Powers of Horror* (1–31) is notoriously unquotable, the following working definition is applied for the purposes of the present discussion: "Every social order defines itself as opposed to the non-signified, the non-structured […] the marginalised segments and elements are under the laws of prohibition and taboo: the filthy, the disgusting, the dirty, the perverse, the heterogeneous. The term *abject* includes all these elements that are not fixed symbolically, which are hardly encodable and are menacing for culture. The abject is the most archaic experience of the subject, which is neither an object nor the subject, but already articulates separation by marking the future space of the subject in relation to the disgusting, to the heterogeneous, and to the terrifying. […] it threatens symbolic fixation and the formation of identity. The aspect of the abject most imminently and constantly threatening the subject is the very existence and feeling of the body: it is this uncontrollable structure full of streams and flows that language, the word, and discourse must totally cover so that the subject can feel her/himself a homogeneous monad." (Kiss 19–20; translation by Nóra Séllei)

a "metonym for Americanness" (Gunkel 249) –, which creates an irony that is hard to ignore: the Coens' maternal detective engages in an excess of consumption traditionally associated with corruption, self-destruction and, ultimately, dissolution[6] in the *film noir* tradition. Regardless of the couple's cosy bonding, this sense of dissolution also pertains to their family and homestead: except for the breakfast, which Norm prepares for her on the first day of the investigation, Margie consumes in immense quantities products of the American service industry outside their home. The Gundersons seem to be just as obsessed with consumption as the perpetrators, with the difference that they restrict their desires to a socially acceptable form of fulfilment, eating, which – because of the sheer quantities of food consumed – suggests abject gorging and comfort eating rather than self-sustenance: a compensation for their imprisonment in their machine-like small-town existence.[7]

The neo-noir ambiguity[8] of the food motif, its connection with the abject and with a critique of global capital, is cast into relief by *Fargo* Season 3 (2017) through the figure of the villain, V. M. Varga. The faint implication of eating disorder behind the Gundersons' (over)eating is restaged as explicit bulimia in his case,[9] and thus distinctly abject overeating is used in true a *film noir* vein in the perpetrator's characterisation. Varga's involvement in global tax fraud, together with the season's central intrigue of filial conflict over the father's estate,[10] which leads to fratricide, suggests a sustained focus on consumer culture and its critique. Regardless of the money Varga owns, just like Marge, he is humble and moderate in his habits of consumption, with the single exception of food. The abject dissolution of Varga's body is represented in gruesome detail – close-ups on his rotten teeth and him picking his bleeding gums are hard to stomach or forget – and

[6] Marge's comically grotesque body, as Mikita Brottman's Bakhtinian reading of *Fargo* highlights, is only one of the many "distortions of communicative relations marked by bodies that bespeak the trauma, violence, and estrangement of the human condition," and who after a while appear to be "less funny than sad, incomprehensible and strange" (89).

[7] A certain machine-like quality is also implied in Hilary Radner's seminal reading of *Fargo*, who suggests that Marge – a crossover between the *femme fatale* stereotype of the *noir* tradition and a mother figure – is mad in her merciless pursuit of the perpetrators, who embody another type of insanity, that of the violence inherent in men's world (254–62).

[8] The ambiguity of characters and plot, as well as moral ambiguity, is a classic feature of *film noir* (Naremore 19), which is present in neo-noir with equal consistency (Conrad 2).

[9] Relying on Susan Bordo's insights, who asserts that consumer culture turns the bulimic personality into the norm (qtd. in Séllei 21), Nóra Séllei provides an exemplary interpretation of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) to demonstrate how a critique of consumer culture can be realised through replicating bulimic patterns in structuring a literary text (15).

[10] With a respectful nod to the Coens' film, the Stussy brothers fight over a vintage car versus a collection of high-value stamps. See Scott Lee's discussion of the Coens' film, which is focused on the interpretation of the car, this other embodiment of the American way of life (mobility). Lee argues that the conflict over the car is inseparable from the fight over being the symbolic Father figure in the Coens' world (69). The stamp collection references, with an intriguing twist – three-cent stamps versus a collection worth a fortune – the subplot of Norm's stamp design in the Coens' *Fargo*.

are clear indicators of his long-term and severe condition. As an intertextual interpretation of the Coens' *Fargo*, the season underscores the significance of (abject) food and eating in a sustained dialogue about consumerism, corruption and self-destruction with *film noir* in its own visual terms.

Reversals and Ambiguities: Food in *Fargo* Season 5

Regardless of its fundamentally comic tone, *Fargo* Season 5 has an explicit feminist political agenda: it is a blatant protest against hegemonic masculinity and concomitant domestic violence. It creates a platform for advocating female agency and resistance by refocusing the narrative on the Coen brothers' victimised housewife character, Jean Lundegaard, whom it re-presents as Dot Lyon, a woman actively resisting victimisation. The serial narrative links itself intertextually to the Coens' film by replaying its kidnapping scene, which triggers a sequence of events that ultimately reveals Dot Lyon's hidden past and identity. That is, originally called Nadine Bump and married to Sherriff Roy Tillman, she was the victim of brutal physical abuse at his hands and, fearing for her life, was forced to run and hide. She has, as she puts it, "climbed through six kinds of hell" to establish her new identity as an angelic housewife and loving mother and is ready to kill to keep her possessions, her new life, "what is mine" (S05E02 00:23:46–24:10). When her carefully protected cover is accidentally blown and her first husband tracks her down, the chase begins with the above-mentioned kidnapping. A hyper-masculine patriarch commanding a private army and emanating violent WASP ideology, Roy Tillman does everything in his power to make Dot atone for leaving him. What ensues is, in my reading, a blatantly unequal fight between allegorical Father and Mother, commodification and its rejection, exclusion (abjection) and inclusion (commensality) – a bundle of conflicts spelt out in a discourse connecting sin, debt and food inextricably. The intricate connection of these motifs is highlighted by the incongruously fantastic figure of the Welsh sin-eater Ole Munch – one of the hitmen hired to kidnap Dot. The resolution of the narrative explicitly stages the victory of the maternal, even to the extent of re-forming the patriarch through divorcing food and eating from the baggage of abjection carried with the *film noir* legacy, and re-establishing the familial and even religious commensality of eating. Nonetheless, the season's critique of commodity culture remains poignant and – true to the Coens' all-encompassing irony and resistance to "binary logic" (Lee 75) – undercuts even its own all too utopian ending.

The Law of the Father, allegorised in Roy Tillman, is that of objectification and commodification, which, in turn, justifies all forms of violence. Casting Tillman as a God-like embodiment of patriarchy at its worst harks back to the Coens' interrogation of patriarchy through presenting an Oedipal struggle for becoming the figure of authority, convincingly extrapolated in Scott Lee's analysis (passim). Tillman's allegorical status is explicitly established in his "I am the law" quasi-soliloquy, which he delivers to the audience of two flabbergasted FBI agents, staring at his royal highness enthroned in an outdoor wooden hot tub on a pedestal (S05E02 00:17:00–20:00). The Law of the Father –

or at least the law of this father – entails the commodification of emotions and, by implication, the objectification and commodification of human, especially female bodies.[11] That is, Tillman is able to conceptualise his motivation behind chasing down his former wife after more than a decade, when both of them already have a new partner and children, exclusively in financial terms, as if broken promises and (hurt) feelings were goods with a price tag attached to them. Concomitantly, sin equals not paying the price – running up debts with interest: "[Nadine] made vows to me. A pledge […] an oath. Consider it a debt, unpaid, leaving me in limbo: husband yes or husband no? You see, she hid from me nine-ten years – interest accrued, until the debt could no longer be paid with money" (S05E02 00:06:03–27). What the debt can be paid with is the mortification of body and soul to the utter limit – death. The violence carried out under this pretext is repeatedly presented as God's law, most horrifically when Roy is trying to beat up Dot with a chain and chants biblical verses in the meanwhile, to teach her a lesson, as he claims (S05E08 00:34:38–35:02). Citing the Bible as a legitimising discourse does not change the fact of the underlying business mentality and commodification: what it highlights is the deeply entrenched nature of women's objectification in patriarchy – the inherent père-version (cf. Kristeva 2) of its paradigm.

If (female) bodies are the hard cash to pay off debt with in Tillman's commodified patriarchal world, that is also connoted by a polysemous use of the food motif, tying in with the above discourse of sin as debt, but also complicating it by featuring woman as both a consumer and an object of (cannibalistic) consumption. That is, Dot's own narrative of her first marriage – her puppet-show (S05E07 00:35:31–40:07) as a counter-story to Tillman's monetary concerns – exemplifies how women are often compelled to assess their identity in patriarchal terms and view themselves as transgressive consumers who deserve (corporeal) punishment. Her story of how she 'ran up this debt' with Tillman is built on allusions to two mythical narratives prominently featuring food – the Fall and the fairy-tale "Little Red Riding Hood" (S05E07 00:35:31) – to evoke two stereotypical images of women as objects of consumption (prostitutes) and consumers (thieves, even kleptomaniacs) in commodity culture (cf. Roberts 817–27). Dot is first shown contemplating an apple in her hand in an Edenic forest setting. Her 'original sin' appears to be twofold: she runs away and shoplifts. As for the first, the moment she reaches puberty, she is threatened by being consumed: drawn by the smell of blood, wolves/boys hunt her for their edible/sexual prey, in a visual evocation of "Little Red Riding Hood." Whether she becomes a consumer, the classic sexually active female victim of crime fiction, remains unclear: she is shown fumbling around with the apple, but not having a

[11] For a brief but useful overview of the critical history of commodification – inevitably starting with its Marxian definition –, see Jackson 96–7. The present study relies on traditional accounts of commodification, defining it as "the extension of the commodity form to goods and services that were not previously commodified" (Jackson 96), which "reduc[es] human relations to an economic logic where everything has its price" (97). It is a matter of critical consensus that commodification "objectif[ies] social relationships" (105), resulting in the fact that women, in particular, are "seen as objects of consumption" (Rita Felski qtd. in Roberts 818).

bite. Her running away might imply her trying to avoid the inevitable: consuming and being consumed, reaching sexual maturity and becoming what she is at the time of telling her story – a wife and a mother. Yet, this is exactly what happens to her, with a vengeance. When Dot attempts to steal food (chocolate chips, a luxury item not essential to sustenance) and is caught, Roy's first wife, Linda saves the girl from being taken into custody. Consecutively, the first Mrs. Tillman adopts the homeless girl into her family, complete with a son, twelve-year-old Gator, from then on Dot's foster-brother. Dot's sustenance costs too dear, though: as she puts it later, Linda appears to "feed" her to yet another wolf, her own husband, so that she, Linda, could escape from her abusive marriage (S05E07 00:17:17–00:17:20). A girl-woman of fifteen, Dot ends up in a marriage that is hardly better than legalised prostitution: in exchange for her sustenance, she has to take Linda's place and become Roy's "puppet" (S05E07: 00:40:00), enduring both his sexual advances and regular beatings. Dot's self-narrative is deeply embedded in patriarchal discourses of femininity, representing the post-puberty female body as abject and sinful. She cannot conceive of becoming an adult in terms other than those of entering the commodity market, as both transgressive consumer and objectified 'food' for sexual predators, becoming someone who has to pay with her own body for her consumption – transgressive or otherwise. The Law of the Father ideologises this market economy in terms of order and lawful punishment: she is forced to believe – as she later says, forced to "swallow" (S05E10 00:42:54) – that adult femininity equals being a victim and she even owes it to be a victim for being tempted to sin/consume. That is literally the traditional message of a Gothic family romance (Kilgour 37–8) – a generic convention Dot's puppet show clearly evokes in a *noir* visual language, with transgressive eating/consumption as a central component.

Apparently, Dot is unable to conceptualise her traumatic experience of becoming a woman in any other terms but those of the founding narrative in Judeo-Christian culture and patriarchy: upon reaching puberty, she becomes abject, with the threat of disposal looming large above her ever after. That is, Tillman apparently uses objectified human beings just as predators consume their prey for sustenance and ultimately he disposes of them like abject human waste. He actually killed Linda (S05E08 00:36:20) and disposed of her body – the now useless earlier object of his desire – buy dumping it in the "grave" (S05E09 00:32:50) on his ranch. This is a huge pit with a wooden cover, with nondescript stinky thick liquid covering its bottom, and with content that is disinfected with lime when a new body – like the corpse of Attorney Danish Graves in episode eight – is added to it. At one remove from a cesspool – maybe it is a cesspool – this abject location connotes getting rid of (female) bodies as abject, as decomposing biological waste, without the saving grace of a (sacred) burial. As Tillman makes it clear for Dot, this is also the fate awaiting her (S05E08: 00:36:10) – indeed, she comes closest to being killed when she hides from Tillman in the "grave" and is found there by one of his accomplices.

If Dot's narrative provides a critique of patriarchy and commodification through a mythic narrative of transgressive consumption (abject eating, eating and becoming

abject) consistent with the *noir* tradition, Ole Munch's story does the same, with an even more conspicuous insistence on the intertwined motifs of food, sin and debt. As is spelt out in a flashback to Wales circa five hundred years ago, this fantastic character – in a clear parallel to Dot's narrative – became an archetypal scapegoat, an abject figure (see Kristeva 84–86; Hartland 157) excluded from human community by transgressive eating, i.e. taking a dead man's sins in the form of food, for money. Sin-eating has been associated in folklore with cannibalistic rituals (Hartland 155), a connection brought into the fore by the Shakespearean allusion in episode ten (S05E10: 00:30:53–31:06; cf. Goldstein 47) quoted above, which underpins the parallels between Dot's and Munch's respective narratives even further. Munch's exclusion is both spatial – he has become a wanderer, finding home only for a while with a Native American tribe, themselves associated with a migratory lifestyle – and physiological: slightly reminiscent of Frankenstein's creature in his grotesque looks, he has been unable to sleep and eat since his transgression. Sub- or superhuman, he also appears asexual, and with a fashionable though historically inauthentic turn, wears a kilt, like a cross-dresser. Potentially reflecting an internal split between the human and non-human, he speaks of himself in the third person, as "a man." In general, he uses an outlandish version of the English language, with which he keeps struggling – he does not fully appear to belong to the realm of the Symbolic. Yet he, too, is trapped in the logic of symbolic exchange marked out by debt–sin versus payment–revenge. To point out the obvious, his fatal decision to consume another man's sins, at the dawn of the modern era, is tied to monetary concerns: he decides to take the unwholesome food – to become a debtor and a sinner – out of poverty and hunger. He sells his soul (see Hartland 147), without which his body, a male counterpart to Dot's, becomes abject.

Ole Munch is not only Dot's mythical male counterpart, but also a double to Roy Tillman, an allegorical embodiment of the Law of the Father. Therefore, the sin-eater's narrative stages a myth of origin for violent oppression in patriarchy – and offers a possibility for reversing that scenario, to be addressed later. Munch is a reincarnation of the Coens' taciturn thug, Grimsrud, who is – in Lee's interpretation – "the letter of the law" (68), "the arch-Father who like God is identical to his own origins" (69). Indeed, Munch has a code of his own – or rather, similarly to Tillman, he is a law to himself – a mixture of the Old Testament *lex talionis* and medieval chivalry. Central to this code of honour are respect for the mother, a fair fight with the enemy, equal retaliation and the indelibility of debts. The first is exemplified when he punishes the disrespectful and unloving son of the old junky woman whom he chooses to be his landlady–foster mother by simply moving into her house: he kills the son with an axe (S05E07 00:02:40–04:47). Gator Tillman, who incidentally kills said old boozer (S05E07 00:29:08), has to pay – literalising the meaning of *lex talionis* – with his eyes for his crime (S05E09 00:04:02). As for a fair fight, Much rescues Dot from the "grave" during the final shootout on Tillman's ranch, on the pretext that it is unfair for Roy to fight the "Tiger," as Munch calls Dot, when she is caged (S05E09 00:40:20–42:40). Yet, not unlike Tillman, Munch is inseparable from the mercenary attitudes of consumer society: he wants to settle the humiliation he suffers

from Dot during the failed kidnapping mission by a triple fee from Tillman, regardless of Dot's escape. Apparently, Dot's cutting off a part of his ear, let alone defeating him in the kidnap adventure, scars him for life. Since Tillman refuses to pay him, Munch ends up with two debts to settle and a war to wage on two fronts: against Dot, who wounded him, and Tillman, who owes him money. In this convoluted business transaction for Munch, just as for Tillman, broken vows and hurt feelings are commodified as debts – to be paid by money or flesh. To further strengthen the parallel between the sin-eater and Tillman, Munch delivers an – unwitting – parody of Tillman's grand soliloquy from a tub of his own, during which the camera cuts to Tillman every time Munch says "king" (e.g. S05E04 00:35:14). Just like Grimsrud, with his near-supernatural power, grotesque looks and strange speech impediment, Munch is an arch-patriarch who, however, is also abject due to his transgression, an act of consumption that inseparably ties him to the discourse of food, debt and sin. Even more powerful than Tillman, he is an embodiment of patriarchy, whose back-story as a pariah (see Hartland 148) locates the mythical origins of violent patriarchy in victimisation and exclusion, which perpetuate themselves in undying, ever renewing forms – including objectification and commodification.

Thus, *Fargo* Season 5 continues the *film noir* tradition in associating food and eating with the Law of the Father and concomitant abjection, exclusion. Dot as a mother figure, in contrast, is linked with feeding rather than eating, to suggest a postfeminist re-appropriation of the food motif with a focus on nurture, inclusion and commensality – that is, "food in its relational aspect […], eating conceived as a network or as a principle of connectivity" (Goldstein 41). Dot's character, a housewife who is willing to protect at all costs her domestic idyll and motherly identity, resonates with postfeminist sensibilities. Her fragile figure of a doll-like, young, even girly-looking, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, who identifies herself as first and foremost a mother and a wife (S05E07 00:35:31), is an embodiment of the postfeminist ideal (cf. Gwynne and Muller 2–4), in many ways a return to traditional concepts of femininity. For Dot, providing her beloved with food has an anchoring function in normalcy, which is best exemplified by her hectic biscuit-making in the dead of the night right after breaking free from her kidnappers (S05E01 00:50:22). Indeed, food seems to be metonymically identified both with her maternal identity and her beloved, as the shots of Dot's intense and prolonged stare at a box of Bisquick indicate at the petrol station before her kidnappers catch up with her in the chase. Cuts to a joint image of her second husband and their daughter (S05E01 00:35:50–36:08) suggest that she is collecting the stamina needed to fight her kidnappers from remembering, through food, the reasons worth fighting for, that is her family and the motherly identity that family defines for her. Similarly, in one of her climactic dialogues with Tillman, when she comes as close as she can to begging for being released from captivity on his ranch, her first argument is that she is Scotty's mother (S05E08 00:10:28). She spells this out in terms of care and feeding, care as feeding, with repeated references to food ranging from ice-cream cakes to shepherd's pie. She does not only take care of her beloved – by feeding them to give them pleasure rather than simply nurturing them – she is also a mother to teach her daughter how to take care of others –

kittens, in this case. Dot's claim that Tillman is also doing to her family whatever he is doing to her suggests that the three of them are one continuous body, bound together by love, care and shared food (S05E08 00:10:28–11:37). When after the final shootout she chances upon Gater Tillman, her now fatherless and blinded foster-brother/step-son, who is facing a jail sentence, in response to his apology and request for a visit she promises to see him – and to take cookies with her. In fact, after more than a decade, she still remembers which ones are his favourite (S05E10 00:14:24–15:50). She re-adopts Gator into her new family by sharing the bond of food with him – not for sustenance, cookies are not essential for that, but as a gesture of love. All in all, fully relegating eating and feeding to the domestic sphere with Dot, the fifth season of *Fargo* shifts focus to the traditional aspects of care, motherly attention, commensality and inclusion associated with food (see Assmann 239, Goldstein 47), in stark contrast to the *film noir* tradition.

It is with this complex web of meanings in mind that the final showdown of the series (S05E10 00:28:28–44:53) – structured around debts as well as jointly prepared and consumed food – is worth addressing. Consistently with his code of indelible debts and honour, Munch shows up in the Lyons' house a year after Roy Tillman's defeat to seek revenge on Dot for his mutilated ear. When he voices his claim about the pound of flesh quoted above, Dot resolves to methods consistent with her maternal identity to counter Munch. She first appeals to his charity, offering the New Testament law of forgiving instead of revenge. Then she starts to ratiocinate with him while also mothering him. That is, she practically orders him to wash his hands and help her make biscuits, as if he was a child. Indeed, his response - baffled obedience – is that of a child. In other words, the acculturation of this timeless, archetypal figure of patriarchy is restarted from square one by a strict but loving mother. She even explains to him – while preparing food together – that being wounded is an occupational hazard for a hired gun, so he has no legitimate reason for seeking revenge. Yet, she succeeds in convincing him only when she recognises their shared victimhood: Munch, too, ran up debts by taking money for eating the unwholesome food of another's sins, for which he was punished by ritual exclusion from humanity, becoming an immortal monster. What Dot offers him is compassion: inclusion in the community of humans through shared food. The vicious cycle of debt, interest and repayment is broken by the comically heart-warming image of Munch munching biscuits in a moment of bliss, instead of taking the Shakespearean pound of flesh. With that, the narrative takes viewers back indeed to square one, to the discourse of the unclean and the abject informing the biblical Law of the Father at the foundations of patriarchy and countered by that of an inclusive ritual communal meal. To oppose hegemonic and violent masculinity, the scene re-establishes core values of motherhood and domesticity, the conviviality of eating in a clear reminiscence to the Holy Eucharist. Though the scenario of abjection and exclusion is apparently magically reversed, the realisation of the patriarch's utopian reformation is left to viewers' imagination: the series ties up this last loose end with the closing image of Munch's utter bliss.

Is this too good to be true? Obviously so. Regardless of this neat ending – or rather, a sequence of neat endings, taking up about thirty-five minutes of the last episode, dealing out rewards and punishments, like a good old Victorian three-decker – the series does maintain some fundamental ambiguities, inseparable from food and consumption. To start with the end, the last episode is titled *Bisquick*, since Dot uses this emblematic pre-packaged American baking mix in the joint preparation of biscuits – the same product she stares at in the shop at the petrol station and uses in her hectic culinary activity after her escape from her kidnappers in episode one. In brief, the series is enframed by Bisquick – or, to remain with food, it is like delicious filling in mass-produced, pre-packaged biscuits or pancakes. True, Dot does add a personal flavour to the standard baking mix by using milk instead of water, of which she makes a special point (S05E10 00:36:34). Other than that, this almost mystical, magical, sacred food item is only at one remove from fast food, that emblem of Americanness – and whatever it entails (see Gunkel 249–50).[12] What is behind Bisquick is the American food-industry complex, which is dependent on the consumption of highly processed, packaged meals. What Dot seems to have been fighting for is a return to a version of commodity culture and consumer society – sold as a pre-packaged dream of postfeminist utopia – with the sole difference that, as opposed to the Tillman ranch, she can make deals on her own terms here. The mass-produced, pre-packaged nature of the eponymous Bisquick – an identification of the season with Bisquick – is a perfect reminder "that all cultures are 'commodity cultures' to varying degrees" (Jackson 101).

Indeed, the world outside Tillman's ranch – starting with Dot's own home and encompassing the sphere of her mother-in-law's financial influence – seems to be governed by the same financial considerations of debt, interest and commodification, in more or less sophisticated forms. The major difference is that a matriarch is running the show. As Mrs. Lyon Sr. explains to Police Deputy Indira Olmstead, in poignant critique of consumer society, "[o]ver 90% percent of American adults are debtors," which metaphorically imprisons, cages them. In other words, the whole US is a giant zoo, in which she, Mrs Lyon, runner of a debt management business, is the "zoo-keeper" (S05E05 00:29:26). The metaphor strikes home with Indira – she immediately starts to protest – because she, too, feels imprisoned and suffocated by the huge loans she had to take out because of her husband, who does not work at all, but has expensive hobbies and demands. And just like Munch, she sells her soul to get out of that cage – and to end up in another, certainly more gilded one, which grants her some dignity as a woman and a professional, at least: she leaves the police force to work as security chief for Mrs. Lyon, who also starts to manage her debts. Mrs. Lyon herself, regardless of her feminine outlook, is surrounded by an air of almost toxic masculinity – she is the female version of

[12] A baking mix otherwise is one of the most redundant food items in a household: it is easy to have a reserve of the simple ingredients needed for pancakes or biscuits, like flour and eggs – the latter of which Bisquick does not even include among its many artificial ingredients – and there is no significant difference in preparation time.

Jerry Lundegaard's father-in-law, one of the central father figures (Lee 69) in the Coen brothers' movie. She is the agent of the final showdown with Roy Tillman (S05E10 00:21:55–27:28) for a reason: they are each other's equals in power and lack of moral scruples. This is what allows her to turn tables on Tillman and break him by taking care of his victimisation through physical violence in the prison – repaying Dot's 'debt' to him in kind. In clear indication of her monetary concerns, Lorraine Lyon has offered money before to her son's wife on condition that she disappears from her family's life, when the kidnapping made her even more suspicious and antagonistic to Dot than before. Dot, in her turn, has argued that she has held up her end of the "deal" and her husband loves her (S05E02 00:22:59–24:11) – quite a different story from the one she tells Tillman, according to which she is in love with her husband. Regardless of her longstanding distrust, however, while Dot is held hostage at the Tillman ranch, Lorraine symbolically adopts her by calling her a "daughter of mine" (S05E09 00:23:32–37) on the phone. So at the end Dot apparently returns to a world of postfeminist sisterhood, in which she is welcomed by her family and the two women instrumental to her survival: Lorraine and Indira. Below that surface, her world shows disturbing similarities with Roy Tillman's: it is permeated by an unhealthy mix-up of emotions with finances, which leaves women – and men – trapped in various prisons of consumption.

To what extent mainstream viewers are susceptible to such nuances as the above remains an open question. Yet the season also makes other subversive gestures regarding its own too neat and optimistic endings: Dot's experience of Camp Utopia, a version of the Tillman family romance without casualties, in which Linda establishes an all-female community for victims of domestic violence, turns out to be a dream sequence at the end of episode seven. It is a profoundly disorienting experience for unknowing audiences – that is, those who see the season for the first time – since indications about the dream nature of the events throughout the episode approach zero. As a result, Tillman's claim in episode eight that Dot's captivity on the Tillman ranch is the reality – in fact, she has never left – and her life outside has been a dream (S05E08 00:35:40–46) does not come across as the abuser's clichéd attempt to undermine the victim's sense of sanity and reality, but as an actual possibility. The narrative has broken with verisimilitude for good by including the sin-eater's fantastic figure – but how much of the season exactly are viewers supposed to consume as fantasy? After all, this is the Fargo universe, supposed to be disorientating and ambiguous in a true neo-noir fashion, as viewers are forewarned by the very first shots of the series, a surreal mob fighting at a parents' meeting, carefully choreographed and filmed in slow motion. It is the world of *Minnesota nice*, "[a]n aggressively pleasant demeanor, often forced, in which a person is chipper and self-effacing, no matter how bad things get" (S05E01 00:00:31), as the season's first intertitle announces. Food, far from being incidental in this crime narrative, contributes to the same disorienting effect. Embedded in an intricate discourse of sins and debt to contribute to a critique of both patriarchy and commodity culture, the polysemous use of food – relying heavily on the *noir* tradition but also conspicuously diverting from it – showcases that there is no outside of the systems the season criticises. Thus, its complex set of implications self-reflexively

undercuts the season's optimistic resolutions, revealed to be pre-packaged fantasies of commodity culture – in a box of Bisquick called *Fargo* Season 5.

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