

Speaking truth to power in *Beatriz at Dinner* and *Fargo*

## The characters Beatriz and Gloria model resistance against powerful, immoral blowhards.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue



Beatriz (Salma Hayek) in the film *Beatriz at Dinner*. Photo by Lacey Terrell. © 2017 Roadside Attractions. All rights reserved.

The movie *Beatriz at Dinner* and the third season of the FX drama *Fargo* both take on the Trump era without mentioning the man himself. Both explore how we got to an era of alternative facts and fractured common good. Neither provides a sure way out of our predicament, but *Fargo* suggests a choice of roles for the viewer.

We are in Trumpland from the minute we meet Doug Strutt (John Lithgow), the guest of honor at the dinner in *Beatriz at Dinner* (directed by Miguel Arteta). Doug is a

blowhard who is used to having his ideas and whims humored. When he thinks out loud about titles for his memoirs, his possibilities are *Get Out of My Way, Asshole* and *Life Is a Game and Guess Who Won?*

Everyone at the dinner party is hoping to get rich in Doug's next real estate deal, except Beatriz (Salma Hayek), a friend of the hostess who joins the party when her car breaks down. Beatriz is the water to Doug's oil, the light to his dark. Doug is a destroyer, Beatriz a healer. But Beatriz is a match for Doug and the only one of the characters with a moral center coherent enough to take him on.

Beatriz takes the force out of Doug's petty jabs about her legal status (she is a Mexican immigrant) and the validity of her work as a massage therapist ("Rolfing? Did you go to school for that?"). The other dinner guests fall over each to approve whatever Doug says. When he passes around pictures of a slaughtered rhinoceros from a hunting safari in Africa, he waxes poetic about the exhilaration of claiming his rightful mastery over the wild. Beatriz connects this half-baked philosophy with his life of greedy accumulation, and she tells him that all his pleasures are built on pain.

Doug is baffled by her attack, while the other guests are horrified at the breach of decorum. Grant (David Warshofsky), the host, wants her to leave, and his wife, Cathy (Connie Britton), looks at her friend as if Beatriz belongs to another species. The couple's desire to get in on some of Doug's financial schemes has left them morally impotent.

We are given glimpses of Beatriz's alternative moral system in descriptions of her spiritual practices (prayer and meditation), her care of animals, her work as an environmental activist, and her vocation of healing. Her strength, however, is also her weakness: she feels the pain of the world strongly, even as she struggles to hold back the tide of greed and destruction.

In the third season of *Fargo*, it's V. M. Varga (David Thewlis), a smooth-talking British capitalist with bad teeth, who personifies greed. Varga has a knack for sowing doubt about the truth. He opens episode six ("The Lord of No Mercy") with a voiceover, telling three stories. The first is the true story of the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. In the second, he mixes truth and embellishment in a story about the start of World War I. In the third, he presents a conspiracy theory about how the moon landing was faked in a Hollywood movie studio. With each successive story, the nature of reality is called further into question.

When Varga is asked a question, he answers with a strange and unverifiable blend of truth and fiction: a saying he just made up, a word that may or may not exist in a foreign language, or a story with shaky facts presented as absolute truth. This might be funny if his alternative facts didn't lead to the destruction or death of those who stand in his way.

The series links Varga's love for alternative facts to his work as a financier. He acquires a parking lot business in order to strip-mine it for profit, then inflates its worth, leverages the debt load far above its material value, pays out huge bonuses, and leaves it to collapse. By the time reality catches up with speculation, Varga is long gone. Thanks to his network of international business partners, mercenaries, and thugs, his reach is unlimited.

Varga's nemesis is Gloria Burgle (Carrie Coon), a small-town police chief who is uncovering Varga's game of smoke and mirrors. As she closes in on him, he frames another man for the murders she is investigating. Gloria's boss, Moe Dammik (Shea Whigham), lacks the ability to interpret facts and accepts the frame as truth. But with multiple homicides in an international get-rich-quick scheme, the real truth lies somewhere between Varga's alternative facts and Dammik's knee-jerk response.

Gloria knows that facts are real but need interpretation. She sees through Varga's false speculations and knows he's a con artist and a criminal. With a standoff between Gloria and Varga, the viewer must decide whose version of reality will prevail. It's a cheeky ending, one that will leave some unsatisfied. It felt exactly right to me.

After all, the truth has two enemies: those who would obscure it with lies and those who would reduce it to something simplistic. *Fargo* reminds us that our ability to both claim and interpret facts is one of the few bulwarks against greed and raw power.

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