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Land of (Unfulfilled) Dreams

Elham Lotfi · Thursday, February 25th, 2021

***Nomadland* flips the coin of the American dream: you see people living in vans to survive Capitalism while feeling uncertainty. You are taken on a road trip to experience an alternate lifestyle in all its graceful melancholia while enjoying the most glorious of the American landscape.**

By Elham Lotfi

»My mom says that you're homeless, is that true?«

»No, I'm not homeless, I'm just houseless. Not the same thing, right?«

So she says, with a tinge of playfulness, and so she believes. There is a blend of grace, pride, resolution, and wit in Fern's reply that well represents her character, artfully portrayed by Frances McDormand, whose performance might have gained her a chance for a third Oscar.

Nomadland, based on the 2017 novel by Jessica Bruder *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, is written, directed, edited, and co-produced by Chloé Zhao. It premiered in September 2020 in Venice, where it won the Golden Lion. Having also won the top People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, the movie is a potential best picture nomination at the upcoming Academy Awards.

It opens with Fern, a woman in her 60s, selling all she has, buying a van, and hitting the road. *Nomadland* does not follow a usual storyline towards disaster, but takes interest in what comes after. After what? Fern has lost her husband, her life-long job, and her entire town. In 2011, after a reduction in demand for sheetrock, the gypsum plant in Empire, Nevada, closed down and so the whole industrial town with it; in six months, the zip code of Empire was entirely eliminated. Fern finds seasonal work at Amazon, loses it when the winter holidays are over, pays the fee of the park she is staying at with her van, and searches for another job.

Down the Road

The film soon takes us into the lives of many other elderly Americans who, just like Fern, are thrown out of the labor market and cannot afford early retirement. Fern

meets Bob Wells, a real-life figure played by himself, who has driven others out of despair and into a nomadic, van-dwelling lifestyle. Zhao does more than introduce us to this new American phenomenon. She literally takes us into these people's lives: the nomads Fern meets are mostly real-life nomads. Zhao gets the most out of cinematography to make the viewers tangibly experience an alternate way of life. The camera moves with Fern as she walks among the community when they are camping, catches the most glorious of the American landscape, and does not even refrain from taking an extreme long-shot of Fern peeing in the haunting majesty of the all-white desert or a more revealing middle-shot of her on the toilet in her van. *Nomadland* is a film to experience.

The Movie

Nomadland

USA 2020

Director: Chloé Zhao

Cinematography: Joshua James Richards

Starring: Frances McDormand, David Strathairn, and others

Nomadland daunts you as it reminds you how many people are out there with dreams unfulfilled. Melancholia is always there. It creeps up on you as you hear an old woman telling the story of her colleague dying of liver failure one week before his retirement. You listen to another one saying she has cancer and wants to, in the few months left to her, travel up to Alaska because of some good memories. This mood is further reinforced by the dismal soundtrack that plays on simultaneously with the instruments played by nomads at the camp, during many scenes shot at the golden hour, and most importantly, accompanying the quiet performance of McDormand. In fact, the prowess of the actor helps bring a character into life whose wistful smiles say she has a story to tell.

Neither Fern nor the film sinks into gloom. There is a kind of grace in this way of life, which the movie does not look over. Nomads have refused to be sent »as the work horse out to the pasture«, have taken control over their destinies, and are zestfully following their dreams. Their encounters are full of life and authenticity, their dances reflect the lightness that is their freedom of burdens and possessions, and they support each other on the road unconditionally. Fern, likewise, has no self-pity and does not allow any pity around her. Her story unravels only in small pieces up to the very end when she finally opens up to Bob and still does not say more than necessary. Regardless, we develop deep, lingering empathy for her and all the people she interacts with. Indeed, *Nomdland* earns its audience's honest emotions.

What exactly is it all about?

Nomadland is as complicated as Fern's character. She eventually becomes good friends with another nomad, David (David Strathairn, the only other real actor). When he goes to stay with his son's family as a new grandpa, he asks Fern to go with him. She cannot settle, though; she cannot stay under a roof, be it with David, or her sister,

or her friends. Perhaps, she is running from grief. She seldom talks about her family; we only know that she, by all means, preserves the plates she had got from her father and carries them everywhere. Similarly, she has never taken off her wedding ring and still remembers the Shakespeare sonnet she recited as her vows. By the end, she reveals the secret behind her deep stares and thoughtful expressions: »I maybe spent too much of my time just remembering«, and she believes, »what's remembered lives«. Thus, maybe she is not escaping after all, but holding on — to her grief, or her past, or something.

Nomadland could also be watched as a docufiction giving voice to the unease of the older Americans, or in the bigger picture, exploring an American uncertainty, an aspect of Americanness normally neglected in Hollywood. Meanwhile, it can be taken as a recognition of a new community and admiration of their free-spirited life style. On another level, the film can simply be enjoyed for its aesthetics and its glorification of the American landscapes, or in any case, identified with as a reaction to the distress and insecurity of 2020.

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