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Nomadland

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Nomadland

Abstract

This is a film review of *Nomadland* (2020) directed by Chloe Zhao.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is Associate Professional Faculty at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she teaches faith and film. As a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film, she works as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media. Preparing to be ordained as a deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



Nomadland (2020), dir. Chloe Zhao

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVP7PNRx8Mw>

“Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.”
— Psalm 84:3

There is a moment in Chloe Zhao’s *Nomadland* that acts as a spiritual centerpiece from which the stories of nomadic life in the movie spiral out like the twisting lines of a southwestern USA roadmap. Main character Fern (played by Frances McDormand) is speaking with a woman named Swankie about her change in health. Facing cancer, Swankie is determined to return to a place of spiritual peace for her in Alaska, where she once kayaked into a river corridor of swallow nests embedded in cliffs on either side. Her description of her memory is filled with the kind of

detail that is used when an experience almost defies words. The birds, she tells us, flew over and above and around her, their reflections flitting on the river surface beneath her kayak, with the egg shells tossed out by newly hatched birds scattering on the water. The image conjured is so beautiful and so complete on its own, that it is almost startling when we actually see it later in the film, as Swankie sends Fern a video of the remembered place that she has now returned to.

It doesn't matter that Swankie is based on a real person, and played by that real person in the film, or that Swankie is still very much alive, even though she dies in the film's story. The unique hybrid of documentary and fiction that inhabits every frame of *Nomadland* is meant to show us a lived reality in which any moment could belong to any of us. The sudden magical appearance of the swallows captures the beauty of this extraordinary film, which uniquely blends a So Yong Kim-like poetic realism within a Barbara Kopple-style relational documentary sensibility. The swallows take us by surprise with their beauty at the very moment when we least expect it, modelling the experience of watching the film, which also almost constantly takes us by surprise with its beauty, whether we expect it or not.

In her book, *Nomadland*, on which the movie is based, Jessica Bruder describes nomads, the (mostly senior-aged) people who live in their vans, as “moving like blood cells through the veins of the country.” In the book, Bruder focuses mostly on Linda May, a retired long-haul trucker who is looking to “find a piece of land where she plans to build a sustainable, off-grid Earthship home.”¹ Although Linda May herself is in the movie, *Nomadland* the movie focuses instead on an imaginary character named Fern, a creation of Frances McDormand and Chloe Zhao based on stories from Bruder's book. In an interview for the New York Film Festival, Zhao says the film is one-third based on Bruder's book, one-third on people she herself met on the road while

traveling extensively in the United States, and one-third on McDormand's imagination of herself in a future persona, having changed her name, hit the open road, and left acting behind.²

Similarly, McDormand says that Zhao, herself and the crew became like “an organism,” traveling through seven states over five months making the film.³ McDormand had been given the book by producer Peter Spears with whom she optioned it. Having seen Zhao's 2017 film *The Rider* at TIFF, about an injured cowboy who searches a way to reclaim his identity, she knew Zhao was the one to direct. The highly collaborative aspect of the filmmaking also includes the many nomads who appear as themselves in the film. A quick glimpse of the movie's IMDB page reveals the cast to be almost entirely non-professional actors.

The film's narrative takes place over the course of a year, with the seasons marked out in the long and often empty highways that Fern finds herself driving on. She travels to get work in places where other nomads do, in often challenging contexts. Fern cleans toilets in a campground, flips burgers in an amusement park and walks the miles of concrete at Amazon as one of that company's legion of RV employees. The movie's depiction of the conditions at Amazon reveal the underlying critique of American empire that runs through the movie's otherwise passive storytelling like a series of potholes and speed bumps, and give the film its depth. Amazon covers the cost of parking while its RV employees work, but does not cover any other costs for those living in a remote community in a job that requires immense amounts of physical stamina and the mental capacity to work alongside robots. The jobs are seasonal, so that Amazon does not have to consider permanent employee benefits, an unjust arrangement that the van dwellers seem to accept, and which offers them the option of continuously moving down the road. The tension in the film between a corporate business insensitivity to employee needs on the one hand and the van dwellers' need for freedom on the other, is an uneasy but important one.

We come to know Fern's story in glimpses. She and her husband had lived and worked near a gypsum mine in Empire, Nevada, before the mine shut down and her husband died. The real Empire, Nevada to this day is a ghost town, with homes and offices left exactly as they were when the last person headed out. Fern's happy marriage is referred to often, her grief for her husband still vivid and preventing her from responding to the overtures of Dave (David Strathairn) whom she meets in a van park. Dave helps Fern to find new work and they become good friends. When the birth of his grandchild leads him to settle down in his son's house, he invites her to come and visit, and eventually to live there. As she drives up to Dave's rural family house, she sees Dave's van, highly regarded among the nomads for its detail and loving care, now sitting with a flat tire in a field of grass. The image stops Fern in the drive, riveting her. "You have a flat tire", is one of the first things she says to him upon entering the house. In a series of scenes on that visit, we come to understand that Fern is not really interested in relationships. Her connections with people are passive and passing, intimately engaged in one moment and gone the next. This is also true when, pressed for funds, she goes to see her sympathetic sister. Each time Fern is offered a chance to live in a more comfortable environment, we almost ache to have her accept. But even so, we know it is wrong. The central relationship of Fern's life is with herself and the road.

Zhao has spent a lot of time herself on the road. Working on *The Rider* took her into the heartland of America and to its people. It is an unexpected calling for a young filmmaker born in Beijing and schooled in New York and Los Angeles whose film career will not be the same after the pervasive awards and success of *Nomadland*. Yet her first feature film, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, is only five years old. Despite her coastal origins and urban education, Zhao says she is drawn into dialogical relationships with nature. Besides its small intimate film crew and company, Zhao says her major collaborator on the film was nature. She learned not only to be

flexible to weather on the road of shooting, but also to listen to its messages. In this way, she says, nature helped to set the course of what happens in the film.⁴

Although Bruder's book is filled with landscape, Zhao's camera has a unique and powerful relationship to environment, both man-made and natural. She loves the magic hour of dusk and a number of the film's pivotal sequences are shot then. The movie dwells with its main character in time and space, evoking the 'absolute time' described by American filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky.⁵ We are only interested in narrative as much as it frames the next stop, but then story is left to one side as Fern negotiates her spiritual landscape. Here Zhao's unique editing style is enhanced by Ludovico Einaudi's simple and elegant piano score, which washes over much of the extended sequences of Fern's time alone. People and the places in which she has seen them are revisited as she moves on alone. But we never sense that she is lonely: the movie walks a beautiful line between what it means to be lonely, and what it is to be simply alone.

In her book, Bruder describes the passing landscape in a summary of images that could easily be a shot list for Zhao's movie: "Fast-food joints and shopping malls. Fields dormant under frost. Auto dealerships, megachurches, and all-night diners. Featureless plains. Feedlots, dead factories, subdivisions, and big-box stores. Snowcapped peaks."⁶ This gathering of the pastoral and the suburban image gilds a portrait of America deeply ravaged by financial recessions. When Fern finally travels back to Empire, Nevada, she wanders aimlessly among the forgotten relics of middle-class life: an abandoned, overgrown playground and houses with fading paint. Entering her own old house, she passes through to stand in the back, where we see a view she has previously described to someone as casting out over the plains toward the mountains. The view is still spectacular but the place is no longer Fern's home. The movie goes out of its way to make clear that being 'houseless' is not the same as being 'homeless.'

In the end, Fern understands that unlike the sparrows of Psalm 84, she no longer wants to build her home on the altars of empire. Empire is a ghost town and its houses are empty. Home is on the road.

Notes

1. Bruder, Jessica (2017). *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company.
 2. Interview Eugene Hernandez and Chloe Zhao, “Nomadland, the Gig Economy & the Brilliance of Frances McDormand/NYFF58”, published by Film at Lincoln Center on youtube, September 26, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yPlmWqMeHQ&feature=emb_logo. Accessed on October 29, 2020.
 3. Undated video interview published by ETCanada, found at: <https://etcanada.com/video/7e8b3b92-f5d2-11ea-ae53-0242ac110003/frances-mcdormand-talks-nomadland/>. Accessed on October 29, 2020.
 4. Hernandez and Zhao.
 5. See the discussion of absolute and relative time in Nathaniel Dorsky (2014 [2003]), *Devotional Cinema*. Willits, CA: Tuumba Press.
 6. Bruder, *Nomadland*, p. 73 (Kindle edition)
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