

The Disillusion of American Dream, A Review of Movie Nomadland

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Abstract: Nomadland is a semi-documentary about van life, directed by Chole Zhao, a Chinese-American, and starred by Frances McDormand. The movie has achieved several prizes and big financial reward. Ms. Zhao is the second Chinese director to gain recognition at the Annual Golden Globe Awards after Ang Lee, the first Asian Woman director and the second female director worldwide. The tough and rootless nomad life of the retired the movie presented stimulates hot argument about the existence of the American Dream in the 21st century.

1. Introduction

Nomadland is an adaptation of the non-fiction book *Nomadland: Surviving American In The Twenty-first Century*, rooted in the post subprime crisis of 2007-2009, the film depicts a portrait of an increasing group of older people who, forced leave their homeland, no enough insufficient social security checks and savings to support their last years, they have to hit the road and chase after low-wage gig work to keep wolf from the door. Both viewers and critics are impressed not only by the gorgeous imagery of the American West but also deep sorrow and resilience of the aging nomads depicted in the film.

2. The Elements Make a Successful Movie

Firstly, the combination of professional and non-professional actors' performance. Frances McDormand, who has won the Oscar best actress three times, plays the leading role Fern with exquisite performance, and professional actor, another Oscar winner in this film, David Strathairn, acts his part with consummate skills. As a semi-documentary work, nomadic people, Linda May, Charlene Swankie, and Bob Wells, the non-professionals in this film, they cast artlessly as themselves how they work, live, travel naturally. Both the professionals and non-professionals contribute to a documentary film and possibly one of the truest versions of historical fiction.

Secondly, the crafted film production team. Comparing with the costly commercial blockbusters, *Nomadland* costs less (only \$5m), while grosses over \$39.50 million at the box office. Only 25 creators in the producing team and some wear many hats, for instance, it's been written, directed, edited and co-produced by Chloe Zhao, Frances McDormand takes the leading role and also the co-producer of the film. Cinematographer Joshua James Richards captures the distinctive immensity of the western landscape with his magisterial and healing lens.

Thirdly, the reflection on “American Dream” inspired by the film. *Nomadland* is a sullen portrait of depressed people who fall through the cracks, have no homes, no money, and are forced into bleak survival mode, the nomadic live triggers heated discussion on whether the American Dream is still alive.

3. Discussion on the American Dream

“American Dream”, originated in the mystique early immigrants' exploration of a better life on the American continent, rooted in the *Declaration of Independence*, is a national ethos of the United States. The term "American Dream" was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931, saying that "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of social class or circumstances of birth^[1].

The meaning of the "American Dream" has changed over the course of history. In 18th century colonial period, “American Dream” was the aspiration of the immigrants for the freedoms in the New World, a fairness society without hierarchy and aristocracy; in the mid-19th century, “American Dream” was represented by the “California Dream” of instant success and wealth^[2] since the 20th century, the U.S. has been far ahead of other nations since the World War, leading the world almost in every aspect, and regarded as the paradise of individuals' self-value realization; while in the 21st century, although it is still the super power all over the world, with the rising of social problems, conflicts (housing, unemployment, racial discrimination, gun violence, etc.) in the U.S. esp. the impact of pandemic and the rising of the third world nations, people in the U.S. doubt the existence of the American Dream in the new era.

4. The Disillusion of “American Dream” in *Nomadland*

4.1 Houseless VS Homeless

The core of this film lies on the exploration of the meaning of "home". Fern, once a substitute teacher, a newly widow who has no home, no husband, no children to rely on and begins living in a van, traveling through the vast west to search for gig work and tries to make her life go on. In the Amazon distribution land, she refuses a heartfelt invitation of her friends' to join them and reassures a girl, one of her former students, "I'm not homeless," "I'm just houseless. Not the same thing." In her sister's house, she bitterly questions her brother-in-law, an estate broker, "It's strange that you encourage people to invest their whole life savings, go into debt, just to buy a house they can't afford.", then she declines her sister's propose to stay with her and hits the road again. Another drifter David, has been estranged from his family, but with the arrival of a grandchild, he reconnects with his family and invites Fern to visit his family and join them, Fern can't join in their family happiness even fails to fall asleep in their comfortable bed, so she heads on another journey alone. Single mum Linda May works her entire adult life and has earned just barely enough to afford herself and raise her two daughters, the bigger her family is, the smaller her own space leaves, at last, she heads to join the nomadic group and shelters herself in a trailer.

Based on the consumerism, house ownership is the most outstanding and significant indicator of the “American Dream”, both president Bill Clinton and Gorge W. Bush had given the house ownership top priority during their presidency. *The 2017 Hearth State of the American Dream Report* puts home ownership the first place, and finds that many Americans feel the "American Dream" is fading. While survey finds that homeownership rates have dropped sharply among households headed by young adults, African Americans, and the white-black gap in homeownership is large and growing^[3].

Back to the film, Fern lost her husband, her house, her town, while keeps her wedding ring,

decorates her Vanguard, keeps the photo album to memory her roots and past life, her friends and she admire the luxurious RV and dream to build up an Earthship (a totally self-contained house built out of recyclables), all the plots just express her longing for home, and she is just the one who has to depart.

4.2 The Rise of the Internet industry VS the Fall of Manufacturing Industry

When “Nomadland” opens, Fern’s town of Empire, Nev., has vanished off the map, the sole employer, US Gypsum, has closed its mining operations after 88 years.

Comparing with the sinking of the manufacturing industry, the rising of the new internet industry draws much of the investment, labor force. Amazon, one of the bellwethers of the internet industry, has made rapid expansion at the price of thousands of businesses insolvent and forces their workers to default on their mortgages then lose their jobs and houses. In the Amazon peak season, the senior nomadic people are their best choice, they are “plug-and-play” labor and appear where and when they are needed. They bring their own homes--- They aren't around long enough to unionize. On jobs that are physically difficult, many are too tired even to socialize after their shifts^[4].

Amazon’s has made headlines for its harsh and merciless treatment of houseware gig workers since 2011. The workers work under a strategy known as “management by stress” suffer from mental pressure and physical challenges, they walk from ten to miles a day on concrete and do monotonous repetitive work in the peak season^[5].

The restructuring of the industry has enhanced the rising of the financial, high-tech industry in the U.S., actually, it's the nature for capital to seek profit and pour money into more profitable industry, while many traditional manufactures like Empire vanished, and people like Fern are out of jobs have nowhere to go, the rich-poor gap has further widened.

4.3 The So-called Perfect Social Security Can’t Cover Its Seniors

It is significant and likely to be long lasting that most of the older people who are working after retirement because their pension income and retirement plan wealth is nonexistent or very low.

The U.S. has been regarded as one of the society with “perfect” social security system. American people used to be proud of OASDI (Old Age Survivor and Disability Insurance” funds, 401(k) plans, 403(b) plans, now, the “perfect” IRA (Individual Retirement Account / Annuity) has been questioned by the aged^[6].

Nomadland interprets this so-called Perfect Social Security system in a different way through the story of real nomad Linda May. She says, “I was getting close to 62 and I went online to look at my social security benefit. It said \$550. Fern, I had worked my whole life. I'd worked since I was 12 years old, raised two daughters. I couldn't believe it.”

Almost one in five Baby Boomers have less than \$5,000 set aside for retirement, many older Americans aren't working by choice, but rather to make ends meet.

4.4 The Aging and Waning Generation

The film portrays people's loss in a silence way, the nomads hide their personal tragedies, grief and loss, while the viewers get deeply touched by the patience and resilience expressed in this film.

Something unlike traditional road film in *Nomadland* is its nomadic perspective is female. Fern is plain, bearable and masculine, she works as a picker in the Amazon warehouse, she looks soundly strong, actually, she fails to stand straightly by herself for arthropathy when she recites the poem used for her wedding vow to a young drifter; Linda May suffers a repetitive motion injury from repetitive work; Swankie is diagnosed with cancer, but choosing to forgo hospitalization in

order to pursue her dream to live out her last days in nature (maybe for unaffordable medical cost). Fern, Linda May, Dave, all the aged people in this film, they all work while suffering from different diseases.

The West Health Institute and NORC at the University of Chicago conducted a survey in 2018 found that 1, more Americans are afraid of paying for healthcare for a serious illness than they are afraid of getting sick in the first place; 2, Americans often make healthcare decisions based on costs; 3, The cost of healthcare negatively affects Americans' financial decisions; 4, the vast majority of Americans think healthcare access for older adults should be a priority for Congress^[7].

5. Conclusion

Dubbed the modern *Grapes of Wrath*, a Pulitzer-prize winner of 1940 written by John Steinbeck, *Nomadland* is another seeking-better-life story, they two shares many things in common and the core of the two is pursuing the "American Dream", however, from *Nomadland*, we see more of the waning fading of the "American Dream". Firstly, *Grapes of Wrath* depicts some stories of family members, all the members work together for a better place to live, there are old generation maintain family bonds and younger generation bring the hope for the all, while in *Nomadland*, full of stories of broken families, the passed relatives leave deep scars and the survivors live with past memories and roam on the road; The next, *The Grape of Wrath* has very clear destination--California, while *Nomadland* has unknown future, nomads have no destination and make ends by gig work; last but not the least, both of the two pieces portray impoverished people help each other to fight against tyranny, characters in *the Grape of Wrath* fight with powerful counter blow while *Nomadland* present another scenario, no mighty to fight , then getting used to it and hitting the road.

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