

Nomadland:

A Tale of Sharp Contrasts and of Blurry Conclusions

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## **Nomadland: A Tale of Sharp Contrasts and of Blurry Conclusions**

“Humans have a sense of spontaneity and emotion: we have a dichotomy between grief and happiness” says a quote attributed to Morena Baccarin, and its relevance strikes fully through the lens of *Nomadland*. A film full of sharp contrasts, its message instead leads to a complicated narrative encompassing the perceptions of the social formations that its protagonists participate in as well as the importance of a mobile environment.<sup>1</sup> While *Nomadland* is indeed a tale of flexibility and experimentation in an intangible yet ever-present social world, it is purposefully not portrayed in a deterministic good-or-bad light, thus supporting a human genuineness of the pliable middle-ground, reminiscent of the *Dawn of Everything* leitmotifs.

Particularly through the characters of Fern, Linda May and Swankie, the nomad life receives a well-rounded profile along many dimensions. One such confrontation arises between the peaceful environment-oriented attitude portrayed by the desert commune versus the immense risk Fern had put herself in by not being prepared for a flat tire in such a remote location. Another very meaningful contrast stems from the financial hardship through which Fern seems to be going in the conventional sense, opposed to Swankie’s rich life experiences of having seen flocks of pelicans land on water and moose families drink by the creek.<sup>2</sup> What gives this drama a documentary flow is the ethnographically saturated pattern of information provided to the audience. We, the prime examples of members of a society too comfortable to experiment with new modes of interpersonal interactions, both in leadership and in day-to-day matters, are expected to and indeed do resonate strongly with the mother from the convenience store, or the

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<sup>1</sup> That is, instead of a clear-cut esoteric resolution stemming from these contrasts, the film’s message is much more realistic in mentioning that life in *Nomadland* has its own ups and downs.

<sup>2</sup> The choice of the word “conventional” here serves to encompass the modest living conditions that Fern is putting herself through, which by most everyday standards would prompt the motivation for charity.

gas station worker (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 170). It takes an extra effort from us to appreciate the value of the freedom to pursue beauty that Merle described with the analogy of her sailboat in the desert, which deeply supports the DoE concept of the closed mind following the termination of social experimentation (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 181). The casual yet robust support that the members of this nomadic social world offer to each other is thus guided not just by the appreciation of beauty in nature or the freedom to drastically change one's interactions with their environment, but also by the shared struggles and solutions derived from experience.

While the awe-inspiring and idyllic choice of the nomad community members to challenge the yoke of the dollar side by side, as mentioned in Bob Wells' speech, does appear to have traction with potential future nomads around the country, we get to witness first-hand a painful collage of personal struggles that shaped these very people and their everyday lives. While it would not be unimaginable for the producers of the film to have adapted a fully rejectionist philosophy of the nomads avoiding any interactions with the shackled victims of civilization, the complete opposite occurs. The respective subplots involving Dave's and Swankie's sons attest to the sacrifices that an imperfect life in Nomadland demands from the participants, and that being "houseless, not homeless" comes at its own cost with regards to cherished familiar interactions. It thus appears that their unique social world, despite its benefits in terms of never being static but always offering a network of support, remains far from ideal.

As exemplified by the shared struggles of seasonal employment, the lives of the nomads are anything but self-sustainable and remain intertwined with the rest of the country. This aspect faithfully coincides with the DoE argument in favor of political self-consciousness as the nomads are fully aware of what benefits they are giving up, and willfully continue to do so (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 143). This observation concludes the discussion in favor of the socially

“unstuck” nature of Nomadland, but keeping in mind the many, albeit different from urban ones, challenges that remain for the individuals in question. Their mobile life is not idealized, as seen by the toilet-substitute crash course on a seven-gallon bucket, nor is it dismissed as a fantasy, as told by Linda May’s and Bob Wells’ personal stories of avoiding a looming suicide. Thus “getting unstuck” should not be placed on a balance beam against widely held beliefs about civilization and living in a society, as its positive and negative features are as complex as the human nature and the resulting social constructs behind it.

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