

Toronto International Film Festival 2020: Part 2

Frances McDormand in *Nomadland*—the danger of making a virtue out of necessity—and *David Byrne’s American Utopia* (directed by Spike Lee)

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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-19). Part 1 was posted September 23.

Nomadland, directed by Chloé Zhao (*The Rider*, 2017) and featuring Frances McDormand, is a semi-fictionalized reworking of Jessica Bruder’s non-fiction work of the same title. (To be more precise, the full title of Bruder’s book is *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*.)

Bruder is a journalist who writes for *Harper’s* magazine, the *Washington Post* and other publications and teaches at Columbia University’s Journalism School. (She was also the unwitting recipient of Edward Snowden’s NSA trove in 2013). In *Nomadland*, Bruder set out to examine the condition of older Americans whose lives were dramatically altered by the recession of 2008 in particular—and their various coping mechanisms.

“Many took to the road,” she writes, “after their savings were obliterated by the Great Recession. To keep their gas tanks and bellies full, they work long hours at hard, physical jobs. In a time of flat wages and rising housing costs, they have unshackled themselves from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America.”

Zhao’s film adaptation won the People’s Choice Award at the Toronto film festival, which has often proven a steppingstone to a Best Picture Academy Award nomination. It also won the Golden Lion, the highest prize, at this year’s Venice Film Festival.

McDormand plays Fern, a 60-year-old woman (and onetime substitute high school teacher) at economic and personal loose ends. She lived for decades in Empire, Nevada, a company town owned lock, stock and barrel by the United States Gypsum Corporation, for whom her late husband worked. In 2011, the firm shut the gypsum mine that had operated for 88 years and closed down the entire community. Empire became a ghost town—even its ZIP Code was discontinued.

The film, set largely in 2012, follows Fern as she falls in with other involuntary “nomads”—individuals who live in their vans or recreational vehicles (RVs)—and travels around the western US in pursuit of some degree of economic and personal stability. We see her first at Amazon, where she and many others work as temporary labor during the holiday season. She tells a former student that she is not “homeless,” but rather “houseless.”

Many of the figures in the film are actual nomads, including Linda May, Bob Wells, Charlene Swankie and others. Linda admits she contemplated

suicide in 2008. When she realized her Social Security payment would only be \$550 a month, she “couldn’t believe it.”

Fern is forced by dropping, freezing temperatures to drive south. “I need work...I like to work,” she meanwhile tells someone. She attends, along with thousands of other nomads, the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR), an annual event held in the desert on public land near Quartzsite, Arizona. Wells, its organizer, inveighs against the “tyranny of the dollar.” Moreover, he says, “The Titanic is sinking.” He and others offer tips “on how to live on the road.”

Fern meets younger people too, like Derek, whose acquaintance she makes when he asks her for a cigarette. A second meeting, later on, is one of the most moving sequences in the film. Derek, a quiet, self-effacing young man, explains he has a girlfriend in the “north country,” but his letters to her are not very consequential. Fern suggests he send her poetry and recites one of the most exquisite lyrics in the English language, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? ...”).

A series of dead-end, occasionally back-breaking jobs ensue, at a rock supplier, at Wall Drug (a tourist attraction in the Badlands of South Dakota), at Amazon again. Someone suggests the beet harvest in Nebraska. These are scenes reminiscent of the Great Depression years, when men and women wandered across the country, often in a daze, doing anything to stay alive.

Charlene Swankie announces she has cancer and perhaps seven or eight months to live. She drives off to die on her own in the wilderness. Fern’s van has engine trouble and needs \$2,300 worth of work. She borrows it from her sister, who leads a far more conventional life. Fern meets Dave (David Strathairn) and finds some companionship. He tells her, “I like being around you,” and invites her to stay with him in the home of his son’s family. She has a decision to make.

There are appealing aspects to *Nomadland*. McDormand, as always, is genuine and honest and unglamorous (the actress was apparently pleased in the course of doing research for the film when she was offered a job at a Target store in Nebraska). The real nomads are authentic and dignified.

Zhao has an eye for the western scenery and also directs human beings with sensitivity.

As a whole, however, *Nomadland* alternates between an implied criticism of the deplorable conditions it touches upon and an inappropriate celebration of the nomads’ resilience, “stick-to-it-iveness” and “pioneer” lifestyle, with the latter approach unhappily winning out.

The overall feeling and sensibility of the film correspond closely to one

of the dictionary definitions of the idiomatic expression, “to make a virtue of necessity,” i.e., “to recast or portray an action or situation in which one has no alternatives as an action or situation which was deliberately chosen on its merits.”

The comment of a reviewer, and it is a typical one, inadvertently catches at the film’s most grievous weakness: “As much as *Nomadland* is haunted by death (one character tells a heart-wrenching story about a near-suicide), really, it’s about life, about living, about moving forward. Even faced with the crushing reality of economic despair, as so many experienced in 2008, there is always another road you can take.”

Another review suggests that Zhao’s work is “a chronicle about something quintessentially American: life on the open road. A film about the beauty of the land, of the road, and of the people travelling along it, nomads who find a community out there in the deserts and the hills and the mountains of the American West. By necessity, but also by free will.”

This is pretty disgusting, in the face of the deprivation and hardship depicted. Why not revise the hitherto standard approach and present John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), focused on the suffering Joads—a family of poor tenant farmers—during the Depression, in a new light, as a “chronicle” about “life on the open road,” a novel “about the beauty of the land, of the road, and of the people travelling along it,” etc.?

It is a serious mistake, a terrible irresponsibility, to treat life in this manner, to turn the social into the “natural” and inevitable. Deliberately or not, one becomes an apologist for the existing state of affairs. However much the various nomads in Zhao’s film may embrace—or attempt to embrace—their new lifestyle and endow it with valuable qualities, they remain, first and foremost, victims of America’s social catastrophe.

Bruder begins her book in this manner: “In Drayton, North Dakota, a former San Francisco cabdriver, 67, labors at the annual sugar beet harvest. He works from sunrise until after sunset in temperatures that dip below freezing, helping trucks that roll in from the fields disgorge multi-ton loads of beets. At night he sleeps in the van that has been his home ever since Uber squeezed him out of the taxi industry and making the rent became impossible.

“In Campbellsville, Kentucky, a 66-year-old ex-general contractor stows merchandise during the overnight shift at an Amazon warehouse, pushing a wheeled cart for miles along the concrete floor. It’s mind-numbing work and she struggles to scan each item accurately, hoping to avoid getting fired. In the morning she returns to her tiny trailer, moored at one of several mobile home parks that contract with Amazon to put up nomadic workers like her.”

Bruder’s work, which valuably details the brutal treatment of the vulnerable elderly, is also not exempt from efforts to find the uplifting “silver lining” in these conditions. She can go on like this: “And there is hope on the road. It’s a by-product of forward momentum. A sense of opportunity, as wide as the country itself. A bone-deep conviction that something better will come. It’s just ahead, in the next town, the next gig, the next chance encounter with a stranger. ...

“When someone’s van breaks down, they pass the hat. There’s a contagious feeling: Something big is happening. The country is changing rapidly, the old structures crumbling away, and they’re at the epicenter of something new. Around a shared campfire, in the middle of the night, it can feel like a glimpse of utopia.”

For a sobering look at the nomads’ situation, it is worth viewing CamperForce, a 16-minute film from Brett Story and Field of Vision (with Bruder’s participation), which details Amazon’s decade-long program through which it recruits and exploits thousands of RVers for its seasonal labor unit. The picture is not a pretty or “inspiring” one. It is grim and revealing. As a title explains, “Today one in five Americans older than sixty-five is working, almost double the rate from 1986” and “Nearly a third of households headed by people fifty-five or older have no pension and no retirement savings.” The short also notes that Amazon’s Jeff

Bezos “became the richest man in the world in 2017.”

Nancy Utley and Steve Gilula, the chairmen of Searchlight Pictures, a division of the multibillion-dollar Walt Disney Company, tout *Nomadland* as “a true cinematic discovery.” Zhao “reminds us,” the studio executives continue, “that film has the power to connect us no matter how far apart we might seem. We hope this special film can move audiences across the world and further support global cinema.”

It is not the director’s fault that Disney rules so much of the film and entertainment world. However, it is a matter of Zhao’s own “free will” that the Beijing-born, Mount Holyoke College-educated “independent” filmmaker (“one of the most important new voices in American cinema,” according to the Toronto film festival) has now directed a superhero film, *Eternals*, the 26th entry in the wretched Marvel Cinematic Universe (now also Disney property), set to be released in early November.

David Byrne’s American Utopia

Directed by Spike Lee, *David Byrne’s American Utopia* is a largely delightful musical presentation, a filmed version of Byrne’s 2019 Broadway show. It is set to be released later in the year, debuting on HBO.

The former lead singer of Talking Heads eventually shares the stage with two dancers and nine other musicians, including percussionists moving and dancing with instruments some of which seem to have been developed just for this production. No one is moored to a location on the stage, everything they play is portable. Byrne describes it as “kind of what a marching band would do or a second line group in New Orleans or something like that.”

In addition to performing songs for which he is best known (co-written in numerous cases with Brian Eno), “Burning Down the House,” “Once in a Lifetime,” “This Must Be the Place,” Byrne and the talented group of musicians and dancers play a number of new pieces.

Occasionally, the singer-songwriter addresses the audience directly. The show pays tribute to activist-football player Colin Kaepernick, and also honors a number of the African American victims of police shootings. Furthermore, “Most of us are immigrants,” Byrne says at one point, “and we couldn’t do it without them.” The group launches into “Everybody’s Coming to My House.”

Inevitably perhaps, Byrne reveals his own limited perspective when he chastises the US population for not voting in sufficient numbers in 2016, and more generally.

As for the title of the piece, *Democracy Now’s* Amy Goodman asked him about it in early 2019. Byrne explained that it was perhaps “the last thing you expect to hear, the words, especially connected with me and at this particular time, with everything that’s going on, it’s kind of like, ‘Is he serious? Is he being ironic? Is he — does it have some other kind of meaning?’ And I thought, ‘No, let’s be serious about it. Let’s be sincere about this. And although utopia may never exist, may never be achievable, let’s think about what it is we want and what it is we would like to change and what we would like to—where we would like to be, how would we like to be, that kind of thing.’ And I thought, ‘That’s part of what we’re—part of what the show is.’ It shows people an alternative way of being.”

Lee has done a fine, economical job of filming the performance.

Shiva Baby, written and directed by Emma Seligman, a Canadian director living in New York, is an amusing, mischievous work about the predicaments of a New York college student. Danielle (Rachel Sennott)—and this is not amusing—has a “sugar daddy,” Max (Danny Deferrari), to help pay for her expenses. She rushes from his presence to a family *shiva* (Jewish mourning ceremony), only to find Max there too, in

the company of his overachiever wife, and their baby. Also present is Danielle's former lover, Maya (Molly Gordon). Danielle's caring but neurotic parents don't necessarily help matters.

Seligman explains that *shivas* "always amused me because despite the fact that someone just died, people still ate bagels, complained, showed off their children, asked nosy questions and crossed personal boundaries." *Shiva Baby* may not be much more than a glorified situation comedy, but it is a knowing and sensual one.

Talented actor Viggo Mortensen, unfortunately, has chosen a narrative directly out of a recipe book for his first directorial effort, *Falling*. Mortensen himself plays a gay airline pilot, living in California with his partner, Eric (Terry Chen), and their daughter. His homophobic father, Willis (Lance Henriksen), "a headstrong man from a bygone era," as the production notes explain, "lives alone on the isolated farm where John grew up."

Willis's mind is beginning to go. John brings his father west so the latter can be closer to his children. Tensions mount, accusations and curses fly. The "best intentions" of John and his sister, Sarah (Laura Linney), "ultimately run up against Willis's angry refusal to change his way of life in any way." There is something both condescending and arrogant about this description, whatever the drama's final outcome.

Falling is intended to offer a picture of a confrontation between a California "progressive" and a stereotyped denizen, presumably a Trump supporter, of "the Heartland." Based on a largely superficial grasp of American social life, the stock in trade of Hollywood liberalism, Mortensen's film is neither terribly convincing nor terribly perceptive.

To be continued



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