FIU Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Spring 2024*

Article 2

2024

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Lucas Cicarelli Vieira
Florida International University, 6187586@fiu.edu

DIGITALCOMMONS

FIUURJ (2024), Volume 2, Article 2, pp. 10–18.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25148/URJ.020102

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"The Way to Dusty Death": The Feminist Revision of the Western in *Nomadland* (2021)

Lucas Cicarelli Vieira, Florida International University, lviei006@fiu.edu / lvieira@fiu.edu
Student Editor **Katelyn Wade**, Florida International University, katelyntmw@gmail.com
Faculty Mentor **Dr. Nathaniel Cadle**, Florida International University, ncadle@fiu.edu

The Western film genre is founded upon patriarchal and capitalist conditions embedded deeply within structuralist analyses. The portrayal of the solitary, white male cowboy—with its themes of rugged individualism and phallocentric mannerisms—has affected the depiction of women, people of color, and other marginalized groups across media. These prejudicial structures, though applied throughout the genre, has seen revision in recent productions, most notably by feminist directors of the modern era. In Chloe Zhao's Nomadland, Western narrative elements and cinematic techniques have been amended to favor genuine testimonials from affected individuals of economic collapse caused by the hubris of industrialists and the male-centered world that instigates it. Zhao's cast offer division from gender binaries within the careless wilderness through the presentation of predominantly female and collectivist characters and her utilization of a performative documentarian approach that brings forth neorealist motivations of truthful representations of sidelined groups in this decayed West.

Keywords: *Western, genre, Nomadland, feminist, performative documentary, capitalism*

Introduction

The Western film genre is an icon of American individualism and masculinity, a vehicle in which the image of the patriot reigns free on the frontier during decades of war, political turmoil, and cultural revolution throughout the 20th century. However, within that revolution came rebuttal and reinvention that aimed to shake the very idea of what it means to be American and what it means to be alone on the margins of society. Though most of the genre in film boils down to self-righteous men riding on horseback against villainous outlaws or even the equally righteous lawman, the presence of women as characters with agency and autonomy is notably obscured. As the genre evolved over the decades, so, too, did this representation. Though there has been a substantial history of women directors in early cinema, there has been a prominent rise in those who tackle the Western genre. These women offer a new and, perhaps, more accurate representation of diverse voices in this microcosm of the mythos of America. Most notable in contemporary cinema is Chloe Zhao's recent Neo-Western, *Nomadland* (2021). This film has a revisionist quality like the Westerns of the 1970s and 80s, but recontextualized into the decaying economic landscape that faces Americans today. Zhao seeks a reversal of phallocentric tropes within the Western through modernized and diverse representations of human relationships and practicing verisimilitude across the film's production and release through performative documentary techniques. Ultimately, Zhao focalizes the story of Fern and her fellow nomads to deconstruct the classical cowboy mythology, revoke the male-centered narratives that dominate the Western film genre, and offer an avenue through which diverse bodies may transcend oppressive visual language in cinema.

Structure of the Western Genre

To understand the development of *Nomadland* and modern Westerns, it is paramount to address the very principles embedded within the genre. In Will Wright's novel *Sixguns and Society*, he describes how the Western was born to mythologize American identity throughout multiple contextual events in the nation's history. Wright positions the Western genre within Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory of the mythology in that myth is constructed similarly to language. As with language, myths consist of constituent parts—the mytheme—that generate meaning when bundled. The difference lies in its direct relation to a society's cultural and linguistic development. Together, the meaning of this development—represented through history, art, community, and politics—coalesces into an American myth and can relate to society and its people as a dialogic that is, according to Wright, universal and accessible (12). The Western acts as a communicative transfer of national identity through the representation of mythic imagery and text. However, as the identity of a society has evolved alongside its practiced culture, the myth represented has irreversibly changed as well. With this shifting foundation, Wright observes differing plot structures within the genre that have morphed to better fit the then-changing iconography of America. Principally, there are three major frameworks: the Classical Plot, the Vengeance Variation, and the Professional Plot.

These three narrative forms coincide with the Western genre throughout film history. The Classical Plot is most associated with the Golden Age of the genre, beginning and continuing long after the Great

Depression in the 1930s and well into the 1950s, such as Wesley Ruggle's *Cimarron* (1931) and George Steven's *Shane* (1953) (Wright 31-32). Its focus was on the heroic cowboys of the frontier in the 1800s, with clear moral distinctions between protagonists and antagonists and liberal use of narrative oppositions. These oppositions would lay the groundwork for the conflict design of the Western and revolve around representations of societal change, e.g. settler expansion, industrialization of land, and attempted genocide. These include being inside versus outside a civilization; good versus evil; social/progressive values versus selfish values; those stronger than the society versus those weaker than the civilization; and the distinction between natural land and industrialization (57). The Classical Western is most characterized by pure-hearted cowboys seeking the establishment of "civilization" in the far West. The Vengeance Variation is a revision of the Classical Plot: whereas the classical hero might enter a society because of their individual strength to reinforce order in the community, the vengeance hero abandons the society because of its inherent weakness. This plot structure is most principally seen in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948). The Professional Plot, as an alternative to Classical forms, forsakes clear-cut morals entirely and instead focuses on protagonists as individuals on a job, fighting for their own self-survival, and in a society that has become meaningless to their goals. At present, many of these structures exist across subgenres, most notably regarding the Professional Plot as a staple frame for the Revisionist Western, like Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western films.

Wright's study, however, retains significant gaps as a result of its timing and focus: *Sixguns and Society* was released in 1975, decades too early to explore essential developments of the late 20th century, such as in postcolonial theory, gender theory, and the feminist movements. Much in the same way Wright's observations on the major advances of the genre can be attributed to polemic changes across the world—such as World War II, the Cold War/Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War—the drastic changes to the American psyche following 9/11 and wars across the Middle East have affected the proliferation and interpretation of the Western, as a product of American iconography in the modern era. As a result, Wright's study does not account for the genre's split across a spectrum of niches which has allowed its forms to exist within multiple new contexts without the conditions of his dictated plot structures. Most grievous is his minimal attention to the presence of women across the genre that has been illuminated by recent scholarship, of which this analysis intends to contribute.

Though Wright's survey criticizes a handful of Westerns in their portrayal of women, his study, unfortunately, stops short in evaluating this representation as having a negative effect on intellectual consumption by audiences. According to Wright, Westerns solely offer women characters more agency when they act on their own accord against society or traditional morals. However, this action still relegates their position as co-protagonists or as symbols of rebellion when kept into the binary of male and female structures, seen in Wright's dissection of gender roles in *Johnny Guitar* and Professional Plot films like *True Grit* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (84, 87, 172). Additionally, this underrepresentation of women can be seen across Wright's research in which he persistently uses male pronouns to generally describe a Western's protagonist regardless of the placement of its women characters alongside the men.

Indeed, many of the most prototypical Westerns subjugate the iconography of the woman within their

plot structures to continuously utilize them as symbols that "range from schoolteacher and conventional wife to prostitute and which are secondary to a male protagonist" (Pheasant-Kelly 123). In the Classical Plot, women are often portrayed as signifiers for the ordered and morally just society; when the cowboy decides to eventually promote himself to protecting the society, it is often influenced by the pure-hearted virgin character, unspoiled by the evils of the wilderness—as a representation of Native American hatred. In the Vengeance Variation, women are insignificant fodder through which the male protagonist makes their decision to leave the society, such as being representative of the evils of civilization and promoting the goodness of being free—which is portrayed by butch barmaids or prostitutes. Occasionally, women in the Professional Plot will deviate from both civilization and the wilderness in favor of whichever provides them a closer venue to the male protagonist, who signifies freedom from any structure.

Across all these Western narratives, we do not experience a true representation of a woman relinquished of her symbology and ties to men, at least according to Wright's categorization. If the mythos of American individualism is to be represented across these films, the language being produced and reproduced by the visual and narrative elements in these Westerns instead bolster the suppression of the woman as existing "only in relation to castration" and unable to "transcend it," acting solely as an existent object of the male-female binary (Mulvey 7). However, in modern Westerns, there has been an explicit claim by female directors to revise this binary and open the narrative structures away from this phallocentric cinema. Recent films by feminist auteurs like Jane Campion, Kelly Reichardt, Debra Granick, and many others have begun to introduce new forms to the genre canon, many of which have received recognition for their work in defying its masculinist heritage (White 23-24). *Nomadland*'s Chloe Zhao is one director who is refuting these misogynistic tropes across multiple dimensions of narrative form and cinematographic techniques.

Patriarchy in the Wastes

In subdued fashion, *Nomadland* is introduced with a somber epigraph and the image of the destroyed homestead: we are met with the decaying and closing of the company town, Empire, Nevada, and the ruins left behind. Fern, our protagonist, is deserted in the wake of the community's sheetrock production plant shutting down following the 2008 American Recession as well as the recent death of her husband. Seeking her own survival, she decides to venture on the road in a van and live by traveling from seasonal job to job while resisting the buffeting of freezing snow to extreme heat in the abandoned wilderness of the Midwest. The film revises the conventions of the Western by forgoing the classical, epic image of a male cowboy with a hardened woman wage earner, who, in substituting the iconic white horse for a white van, is represented as having as much freedom and power as a man (Coelho 113). Additionally, the film dilutes the binary between male and female characters by focusing on sets of conditions. We are primarily shown the living scenarios of these characters, the hardships of their environment, as well as the capitalist structure that keeps them reigned to the system for support even when on the frontier. These relationships reject the "male" linear narrative in which "male characters 'master' their environment" and the stereotypical "female" narratives that utilize "passive, suffering heroines" (Williams 3).

The film utilizes conventions from the Professional Plot: there is no care given to moral standing as these

nomads are left to simply live for their own sakes by accepting whatever job is available, which is usually moot following the recession. Additionally, the nomads are in opposition to society, believing that their status as modern "cowboys" gives them the drive to go further into the illusion of the frontier. Fern, Linda May, and Swankie's placements as primary nomads reject the passivity associated with civilization—and feminine genre roles—as they seek recourse from the society that denied them the necessary spiritual and medicinal support they required. However, there are issues with their status as "modern cowboys." Little, if any, of the nomads were not given the choice of venturing out onto the road but were instead forced into their positions. The capitalist superstructure failed them and left no resources for these retirement-age individuals to survive on their own once they had been proven useless to the machine. Many retain a connection to family or friends outside of their "van life," but others stake out as true outlaws of the system, such as Fern, who relinquished that part of herself long ago when she first married young and began her travels abroad, or Dave, who has abandoned his son in search of some greater purpose.

Throughout the film, capitalism acts as a symbolic stand-in for the suppression of women under the male gaze. As reified bodies, these nomads are choked out of equal wages and consistent healthcare by the patriarchy to maximize profits over physical autonomy. When Fern lacks the necessary funds to repair her home—her van—she relinquishes her pride. The short taste Fern finds of the "inside world" is through her visit to her sister to request her assistance. Instead of total comfort in the presupposed order of civilization, and, thus, capitalist reward, Fern must endure discussion by her brother-in-law and real estate agents on their desire of having bought more homes before the 2008 recession—caused, in part, due to the real estate bubble popping—so that they could sell even more in its aftermath to struggling working-class citizens. Notably, this discussion is approached exclusively by men, an explicit visual sign connecting the broken mythology of the genre through the patriarchy exploiting oppressed groups and commodifying them—Native Americans once the primary subject, now all bodies. When Fern argues against such a tactic, they admonish her for "[chucking] everything and [hitting] the road," disregarding the circumstances in which Fern and other nomads had been forced into their new form of living as a result of these businessmen's manipulations (Zhao 1:13:05–1:13:51).

Though the film lacks a broadly diverse nomad population, Zhao's presentation of Black women and white men as part of the cast indicates the wholeness of capitalism—and the patriarchy's—effect on everyone within and beyond society. The system implements total objectification and commodification of these aging bodies with a combination of subliminal and explicit control over their workers. Much in the same way—as Mulvey has examined—the male gaze poisons the female icon under pretenses of scopophilic lust and power, except in corporate America where this oppression has grown to encompass all capable, vulnerable groups. As a result, these nomads must escape from the clutches of economic collapse forced upon them by the hubris of Wall Street, hoping to establish a new American—or, rather, human—identity in the power of nature, an opposition in line with the Professional Plot tradition (Lindemann 30).

The patriarchy is still present in this "wilderness" as a consequence of the nomads' constant dependency on corporations like Amazon or the annual beetroot harvest. We never lay witness to the faces of employers throughout the film, which points towards the inhumanity of these businesses exploiting their defenseless

employees, but their influence still follows them to their campsite, their desert, and their only place of comfort within a tiny van. Every New Year's Eve, Fern buys trinkets and hears fireworks others have bought to celebrate the end of the year. She is left alone and silent, however, in the small confines of her van; Fern copes with her isolation through the empty promises of bountiful consumerism. These instances are in the backdrop of Amazon, which helps pay for the nomads' stay in the campsite, exploiting these traveling workers instead of the wealthier consumers in the public that reside within civilization, both ends of the classes falling into capitalist alienation. With Fern abandoned by U.S. Gypsum in Empire, Amazon is a new purveyor of a civilization-wide company town that she and other vulnerable bodies must contend with to survive.

In more intimate situations, male domination seeps through, especially in Dave, a fellow nomad, and his interactions with Fern. At first, he seems docile and plain, offering Fern his can opener, perhaps to start some rapport with a fellow nomad. However, later in the film, following Fern's outpouring of love towards her late father's graduation gift of decorative plates, Dave insists on assisting Fern against her will. Dave ultimately breaks the last physical connection to Fern's father by dropping the entire box of plates, purely for the self-interest of taking over the personal material of another nomad. As a man, Dave holds the image of the protective cowboy in the Western and is poignantly shown his hubris in attempting to domineer control over a woman's property. Dave oversteps his boundaries as a man and nomad, evoking the same control over Fern as the businesses that hire them.

Yet, Zhao indicates a change in this cowboy icon: as the film progresses, Dave begins to respect Fern's boundaries. He does not come near Fern unless she is open to it, and he calmly advises from a social distance. When Dave offers Fern a job at Wall Drug, he does not insist; similarly, Dave invites Fern to his home to meet his son's family but does not reiterate his position and opens Fern to make the independent commitment to reenter society in a similar degree that he can. When Fern accepts, Dave opens further and invites her to stay but again allows her to make that decision on her own. As Fern enters her van once more and drives away from the family home, Dave does not drive after her but respects her choice as he must now accept his choice to reintegrate into the family that he had once abandoned.

This development of the leading male figure in the film indicates the possibility of change within the male mind as poisoned by the patriarchal system. Additionally, the film produces dialogue that focuses on women nomads and their relationships while also allowing their agency to be actively recognized by male characters, a factor that scholar Maureen T. Schwarz considers to be a baseline requirement for a feminist Western (67). Comparably, Zhao reverses the role of the cowboy in her other films, like *The Rider* (2017), by opening new choices and enacting true autonomy against the system which is embedded within the genre conventions (Kisner).

Veracity in Human Interaction

Nomadland's use of a documentary style is also instrumental in processing a feminist perspective into the genre through a form of truth and naturalism in cinematic form. By leaning on realism, Zhao takes advantage of the figurability of her text in its capability of providing a freshly iconic representation rather than

simply indexical (Nichols 100). Taking a note from Italian neorealism, Zhao maximizes the authenticity of the common, everyday people involved in this lifestyle. This focus on the ordinary characteristics of real people throughout the film—such as Linda May and Swankie, who were interviewed for the original text by author Jessica Bruder—allows their genuine motivations and personalities to shine through the film's more artificial components of the structured plot. For example, Linda May's goals of beginning an "earth ship" that is entirely self-sufficient, as well as eco-friendly in its use of recycled materials, beckon to concrete goals that these nomads wish to achieve before either their funds or lives expire, as well as their desires to rid themselves of the self-destructive nature of capitalism (Zhao 51:42). Swankie's last and quite spiritual objective before death is to travel to Alaska once more and watch the swallows fly up into the sky, capturing a penultimate image of freedom before it is lost forever (38:09). Even the short interactions between Bob Wells, Swankie, and Linda May are framed as documentary-like interviews with tight, close-up portrait shots that enclose these individuals within their aspirations, allowing genuine nuggets of realism and humanity to inform the film.

This technique, performative documentary—as coined by documentarian Bill Nichols—combines components of observational documentary and interactive documentary through their use of trained actors, like Frances McDormand in this film, for presenting this adaptation of non-fictional beings as go-betweens (Nichols 100). The real-life nomads truly inhabit these scenes beyond the camera and script but allow their stories to be told within a narrative structure through the eyes of Fern, utilizing a blend of what Frederic Jameson champions as "personal fantasy, collective storytelling, [and] narrative figurability" (Jameson 845). Instead of commercialization and artificiality seeping into these frames in the same way capitalism does in the lives of the nomads, Zhao empowers these individuals to dictate their stories free from those prejudices and create a morally just cinema that produces "living" stories instead of an indoctrinating cinema that reinforces patriarchal structures (Minh-Ha 78–79). Furthermore, the cast and crew utilized these ideals in the film's production, like living in vans and the director of photography focusing on natural lighting on the characters to capture the "lines that come with very specific experiences that are true only to them" (Tangcay). The actors also included real-life elements like clothing and McDormand's own "Autumn Leaf" plates that eventually break upon Dan's hands (Feeney 46: Zhao 04:01). These techniques call forth a visual veracity not seen in other Westerns in the past, significantly contrasting the explosive exaggeration of violence found in Professional Plot films like Sergio Leone's *The Man with No Name* trilogy or the censoring of the real-life treatment of women and Native Americans in the frontier within Classical Plot films. These predispositions of the genre must be overturned by these techniques to reorient these narratives towards more realistic stories that decenter oppression and, instead, prefer intimate, human interactions rather than exploitation of the ordinary individual.

Through *Nomadland*, we are facing a revision of the Western genre and its mythologized plot structures, whose identity has historically been bent towards for male audiences. The Western has been poisoned by the toxicity of the male gaze and its benefactors, the capitalist system, in producing films that call for nationalist and misogynist visual language that is thusly etched into American iconography. With *Nomadland*, Chloe Zhao rejects these possibilities and opens the door towards naturalism and the dissolving of binary

divisions that this genre, and cinema as a whole, seems to hold ever tightly. Without these discriminatory and prejudicial structures in place, cinema may evolve to encompass a more accepting and diverse language that breaks down the barriers that held it back before.

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