Andrew Garzon

Alexandra Meany

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On *Seattle is Dying* and *Nomadland*, Two Films with Very Different Views of Homelessness

*Seattle is Dying* and *Nomadland* are two very important motion features that address the topic of homelessness; one in all the right ways, and one in all the wrong ways. Both films take a drastically different approach to the subject; one is a respectable and moving film that accurately takes a look at the lives of the unhoused and portrays them as human just like all of us à la *A Raisin in the Sun*, whilst the other is nothing more than a regurgitation of common right-wing talking points wrapped with a pretty bow that implies “the homeless should be locked up” without actually saying it. The first description applies to *Nomadland*, whilst the second describes *Seattle is Dying*. If I had to recommend the order one should watch these in, I would watch *Seattle is Dying* first, followed by *Nomadland*, because it would be better to follow a bad experience with a good one rather than the other way around.

*Seattle is Dying* was produced by KOMO News, which is a subset of Sinclair Broadcast Group, known for having a substantial right-wing bias according to Media Bias/Fact Check. [1] The documentary uses dehumanising language and rhetoric to describe people experiencing homelessness, such as referring to them as “lost souls” and referring to the crisis as a “disease”. They completely ignore the fact that most of the homeless population is considered temporarily homeless, and focus on the visible minority that make up those on the streets. I’m not even sure if they had permission to record those whom they film, as Washington is a two-party consent state. [2]

On the other hand, *Nomadland* is an expertly crafted cinematic marvel written by Chloé Zhao who has worked on a few other masterpieces that focus on vulnerable groups of people, namely Indigenous Americans. *Nomadland* explores a subset of the homeless population called nomads; they live in their vehicles and travel from place to place looking for seasonal work, oftentimes congregating and sharing their life stories. These people essentially take a home with them, and in the film you see a tattoo that says, “Home, is it just a word? Or is it something you carry with you?” It’s something to ponder.

Something that was glaringly obvious when I watched *Seattle is Dying* is the sheer bias in those they interview and derive opinions from. Many of those whom they interview are either a business owner, a local right-wing politician, a police officer, or what have you; the one thing they have in common is that they’re always white. This isn’t to say that white people are untrustworthy, but that KOMO News either didn’t think to interview a broad spectrum of people and see what their opinions are, or they specifically handpicked the interviews they wanted to show in their documentary. It paints an extremely one-sided view of homelessness. They also only ever interview one person that’s actually homeless, whilst showing what said person has done whilst under the influence, essentially cancelling out everything they had to say and marking it as invalid. If one is going to do a documentary about homelessness, it would be essential to actually interview people experiencing homelessness and getting their input on the situation, letting viewers derive their own opinions instead of trying to force an agenda.

Watching *Nomadland* was like a breath of fresh air. All throughout the film, I felt like I was actually being enlightened on how many people considered homeless actually live (which is travelling from place to place looking for ways to sustain themselves), rather than feeling like some questionable agenda was being forced down my throat. Seeing it for the first time was quite a moving experience for me. An important aspect of the film I found noteworthy is that they actually include cameos of real-life nomads, most notably Bob Wells, who has a considerable influence on the nomad community. It’s quite important that when you want to make a film about a subset of the population, you actually have to shadow people who are part of that population, and Nomadland does just that. The film constantly reinforces the idea that even after all, these people are all still human just like the rest of us, with their own set of emotions, thoughts, ideas, interpersonal connections, and other experiences that define who they are. It goes to show that homeless populations don’t cause places to “die”, but rather they make their own special tight-knit communities wherever they may find themselves.

The main argument that *Seattle is Dying* constantly hints at is the notion that law enforcement officers are not doing enough to keep Seattle’s homeless population “under control” (a phrase I use very loosely), and that rampant drug usage is a main cause of homelessness. The film proposes the idea that Seattle’s homeless population should be swept up off the streets and sent to correctional facilities where they either do time for their crimes or enroll in some kind of program where they become stabilised and are able to find a job, a home, or some other way of getting up on their feet. This might sound good on paper, but really, there are a lot of flaws with this argument. Homelessness isn’t solely caused by lack of law enforcement or drug usage; rather, those are merely side effects of the problem. The real cause for the increase of the homeless population would be the cost of living skyrocketing in recent years coupled with a lack of affordable housing. [3] And not only that, but drug addiction isn’t something that one can really treat with force or punishment, it’s an illness that requires a great amount of care, treatment, and support to overcome. Locking people up won’t solve anything, and frankly, now more than ever, it shouldn’t be police officers that deal with at-risk populations, because they’re not properly trained to deal with it. A solution would be to reduce the funding that police and authorities receive and offset it to a dedicated force of people and resources that are specifically designed to deal with homelessness and the accompanying drug usage, and not only that but fund a program for affordable housing that people can work their way into. There’s already work being done here, but we still have a long way to go. [4]

As for *Nomadland*, the main argument isn’t entirely obvious, and it allows for a great deal of interpretation. But something I did pick up on is that it portrays nomad communities as self-sustaining where everyone is there for each other, and that they’re just like the rest of us in that they want to be able to contribute back to the communities and societies that they are a part of, hence why they look for seasonal work to keep themselves sustained. Something else I’ve picked up on is that grief and loss are powerful mediums that can draw people together and form a sense of community and support in moving forward from whatever’s afflicted them. It’s made quite obvious when Fern opens up to Bob about her husband’s death, and he in turn tells her about his son’s recent suicide, and the belief amongst nomads that goodbyes are never permanent as eventually they’ll see each other again “down the road”. There’s a kind of haunting beauty in that, as if Nomadland is trying to reassure its viewers that no matter what happens to them, everything will be alright, and that’s something we’ve all had to learn after the events of the last twelve months.

*Seattle is Dying* and *Nomadland* both generated great controversy upon their release, but it depends on whom you ask. The first was heavily criticised for its one-sided portrayal of the visible homeless population on the streets of Seattle, whilst the second faced backlash over its Amazon warehouse scenes, when it’s been reported that they’re not the best places to work. [5][6][7][8] *Seattle is Dying* perpetuates the myth that homelessness means being an unkempt person sitting on the sidewalk outside of a Nordstrom as they deal with drug addiction, whilst Nomadland dives into an underrepresented subset of the homeless population, who are not really “homeless,” but just “houseless.” Nomadland gives its viewers a positive view of the American nomads who live in their vehicles and travel from place to place, which is important for fostering a healthy discussion on this topic, but *Seattle is Dying* paints a very bleak picture of homelessness in Seattle and is full of misunderstanding, misinformation, and misinterpretation, and is dangerous in that it spreads a hostile and demeaning view of the situation, which we need less of if we want to solve the issue at hand.

I personally believe it’s important that people watch both films so they can see both sides of the issue and come to their own conclusions about homelessness, and if they wish to refuse opposing positions then they have the information they need to support their argument. Because without a little back-and-forth on this, followed by coming to an understanding and compromise on how to deal with it as it gains more prominence in our day-to-day lives, not much will be done, and it is important that both sides come together and agree upon a set of principles to follow in solving whatever issues people experiencing homelessness face. Because at the end of the day, we all need a sense of home that we can retreat to when we need it.

When I wrote this piece, I decided to create a complex and inquiry-driven argument about homelessness and the two films by analysing the themes and messages of both, taking a position in favour of *Nomadland* and critical of *Seattle is Dying*, and arguing that homelessness is a multifaceted issue that either needs some (but not too much) intervention, or needs tender love and care, and what *Seattle is Dying* proposes might sound good on paper but actually requires much more than they could fit into a one-hour documentary. The first would apply to nomads, whilst the second would apply to the visible homeless on the streets of Seattle. I wanted to make my feelings on both films clear in praising one and condemning the other, whilst keeping my use of vocabulary safe-for-work and supporting my arguments with evidence and a little bit of critical thinking.

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