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One of the most prominent trends this year, which has occurred in many of the films we watched when putting together our programme and quite a few we selected as well, is the blurring of boundaries between documentary and fiction.

For a festival such as the Luxembourg City Film Festival, which has separate competitions for fiction and documentary features, this trend is both fascinating and the starting point for some soul searching. What does this sometimes artificial-feeling separation really mean? And who knows if we'll still have separate categories a few years down the line?

@FILMBOYD

Our opening film, Chloé Zhao's Golden Lion-winner *Nomadland*, is a perfect example of fiction and documentary coming together to create a powerful hybrid. The film's star, Frances McDormand, plays Fern, an American woman living in a van on the margins of society after the death of her husband and the loss of her steady employment. She survives on odd jobs and the newfound joy of what she perceives as the freedom to go anywhere and do anything she wants. Most of the people Frances-as-Fern encounters are actual nomads, who "play versions of themselves."

Does this make *Nomadland* grittier and more authentic than a film that would feature only professional actors? That's another debate entirely, as actors are, of course, people who specialize in playing different kinds of people. If you'd need any kind of proof actors can do this, just look at McDormand here. How well she disappears into the role becomes especially clear when, some time later, the only other famous face in the film shows up, which momentarily breaks the film's rough-hewn spell.

However, it is undeniable that one of the main reasons that *Nomadland* feels realistic, weathered and lived-in is because of the people that Fern meets while on the road — and these people are (almost) the kind of people a person like Fern would meet in real life. Like in Zhao's previous films about the unassuming inhabitants of the American heartland, *The Rider* and *Songs My Brother Taught Me*, her latest feature depicts the ramshackle and oft-invisible margins of U.S. society in a way that looks for the beauty in the sunsets but isn't blind to the dirt under the fingernails.

One of our out-of-competition offerings, Bill and Turner Ross' *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets*, also looks at marginalized people in the U.S., though here they are boozehounds celebrating the final 24 hours of their favourite hangout. The film is a docu-fiction

hybrid as well, because while the story is set in a Las Vegas bar, it was actually shot in New Orleans and all the habitués, who are real barflies, were actually cast from all over the U.S. and brought together specifically for this production. They too play "versions of themselves," though this time there is not a famous person in sight.

It is entirely possible to be unaware of the production history of this film and enjoy it as either a documentary or a fiction film. It digs deep into the specific subculture of (former) blue-collar workers who count the passage of time in downed glasses of whiskey or wine instead of hours, while they reminisce about the glorious country that has cast them aside or forgotten them or about the opportunities they were offered but maybe didn't take for whatever reason.

But knowing that the film is populated with authentic characters but that they find themselves in a fictional context — a bar that isn't where it's supposed to be, with their fellow drinkers not people they've necessarily met before — raises the stakes in interesting ways because it raises so many questions about the way in which we look at and understand movies.

Which part is really fictional? And what is actually authentic? Where is the supposed truth and how would that truth have been different if the film had been made in a different way or in a different place? Is fiction automatically less truthful than documentary films or more truthful because chance plays less of a role when trying to get a message or an idea across? Or are there simply many different ways to arrive at truths about the human condition in general and some people's specific reality in particular?

Both *Nomadland* and *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets* arrive at their complex truths about little-seen realities in contemporary America in unconventional ways but arrive they do. **BOYD VAN HOEIJ**

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