

DESIGN AND CINEMA: an analysis of the role of design in the imaginary of the film Nomadland

DESIGN E CINEMA: uma análise da atuação do design no imaginário do filme Nomadland

DISEÑO Y CINE: un análisis del papel del diseño en el imaginario de la película Nomadland


Luciane Maria Fadel

Post-Doctorate in Narratives supervised by Prof. Jim Bizzocchi at Simon Fraser University, Canada.
liefadel@gmail.com

 0000-0002-9198-3924

Estêvão Lucas Eler Chromiec

PhD student in the Postgraduate Program in Design at the Federal University of Paraná (2021).
estevaochromiec@gmail.com

 0000-0002-2140-4528

Received on: 06.16.2024

Accepted on: 03.30.2025

Published on: 06.03.2025

ABSTRACT

Observing the role of design in cinema often leads to the study of the technical activities of film production. However, this role also occurs through the discursive aspects of the film's visuality. In this sense, this article aims to analyze how design plays a role in the film Nomadland (Choe Zhao, 2020). To this end, the method of close reading and an instrument that observed the film from three lenses were used: social horizon, figural action, and discursive field. Finally, the information obtained was addressed to three ethical and political questions to debate the film's visuality. As a result, it is highlighted that Nomadland establishes a portrait of North American labor relations in the neoliberal context.

KEYWORDS: Design; Cinema; Imaginary; Nomadland.

Introduction

Films are made from a myriad of disciplines and practices that combine knowledge related to the prefiguration of concepts in audiovisual artifacts. More recently, the study of these artifacts has begun to be analyzed from the perspective of the visualities that form visual culture. This perspective does not isolate artifacts to the discipline that produces them and the techniques that delimit a given media or activity, but also encompasses the discursive interrelationship of practices with the regimes that act through artifacts in society. Since, based on the discourses they propagate, the stories, sounds and images that are shown in movie theaters, on television through streaming services, in digital games and on the internet, provide meaning to the relationship between human beings and the world. This context can be understood as a type of education, as it promotes reflections that contribute to the subjective formation of individuals (Almeida, 2014)¹.

¹ Meneses (2003) explains that the study of visualities went through three stages that can be summarized as (1) the study of images, characterized by the study of technique from the 16th to the 19th centuries, which was crystallized by disciplines such as art history; and (2) the study of the social dimension of the image at the beginning of the 20th century, a period in which art history


In the specific case of the relationship between design and cinema, much of the literature on the subject focuses on the technical and management activities that design has been performing within the industrial order of film production — such as production design, art direction, set design, costume and character design, and the development of sequential drawings that anticipate camera positions and the editing of the film before it is shot — known as storyboards. All of these activities are extremely important in the development of a film, however, the technical-scientific focus that generally accompanies them ends up distancing design from the ethical-political responsibility inherent in the visualities that it produces and circulates in society. This happens because much of the theoretical body of design comes from schools such as Bauhaus and Ulm (*Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm*), which crystallized in the field a techno-scientific orientation based on theories of form and communication that marked the beginning of the 20th century².

Under a broader framework, Souza and Laura (2021) research the relationship between design and cinema from the approaches of critical and speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2013). For the authors, since the film designer creates fictional artifacts that enable entry into narrative worlds, the film can be understood as a speculative design that propagates, through its discourse, a set of ideals linked to a certain imaginary. From the same point of view, the work of Fry (2009), which analyzes the theme through the concept of design fiction, where it critically observes how the products and systems that design creates prefigure the future of society. The author presents design from two perspectives, one linear and one relational. In this sense, design is linear when it operates within an industrial production line — as a tool within a commercial structure. And relational when it observes the effects that this linear action can have on society.

Given the above, this article aimed to analyze how does design act through film *Nomadland* (Choé Zhao, 2020). To this end, the method of attentive reading was used, and the film was observed from an analysis instrument that consists of three lenses: social horizon, figural action and discursive field. Finally, the information obtained through

came closer to disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. It aimed to include photography and cinema in the study of images, with the aim of observing their effects on society. Finally, from the mid-20th century onwards, analyses expanded to (3) the study of the regimes surrounding images, which also allowed us to consider the power relations that circumscribe and maintain the meanings given to images in societies. With this expansion, this field of study currently began to use the more comprehensive term of visualities, to account for the multiplicity of artifacts researched.

² In this sense see *Design e narrativa visual na linguagem cinematográfica* (Machado, 2009), and *A imagem cinematográfica: convergência entre design e cinema* (Bungarten, 2013).



these lenses was addressed to three ethical and political questions that allowed us to debate the visibility that the film establishes and maintains in society.

Analysis methodology

The film analysis instrument used in this article follows the method called close reading, as it has been used in film studies by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011)³. The method consists of observing a film multiple times, each time using a different analytical lens, which focuses on a different aspect. The lenses that make up the instrument were adapted from media studies in Kellner (2001), and derive from the concepts of social horizon, figural action, and discursive field⁴.

The social horizon refers to the historical and social aspects that accompany the cultural imaginary of a film, and are observed through three categories: production, period, and reception. These categories can be analyzed by consulting newspaper articles, interviews, box office and sales of products related to the production, and criticism and praise that the film received during its release, from political groups in power and opposition (Kellner, 2001). It is important to say that the analysis of the social horizon does not necessarily need to lead to an original contribution in relation to what has already been said about the film. What we are seeking at this point is to contextualize the film within the historical-social aspects in which it is inserted.

Figural action is understood as the form of the film, which concerns the space where the representation takes place. To observe this space, this research uses the categories proposed by Mauad (2005). These are the frame space, which refers to the limits of the two-dimensional image, the geographic space, which refers to the location where the image was created, the figurative and object space, which concerns the actors and objects on the scene, and finally, the space-time category, which refers to the movement of the camera and the editing, fundamental elements of cinema⁵.

³ Close reading is a method of analysis that comes from literary theory and has been adapted to analyze other media, such as photography, film, and digital games. Close reading is a detailed examination that deconstructs an artifact using different lenses that allow it to be observed from multiple perspectives, which can lead to new possibilities for interpretation. Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) use this method to study cinema.

⁴ In this sense, it is important to note that Kellner's analyses were carried out in the 1980s and are similar to the perspective of British cultural studies, guided by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Such studies introduced a multicultural approach to cultural analyses that observes political conflicts from the perspective of class relations, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. This article made use of Kellner's studies, insofar as the concepts of social horizon, figural action and discursive field allowed us to observe the labor relations that mark the film *Nomadland*.



The discursive field corresponds to the symbolic relationships that occur between the observers and the film. These relationships promote processes of hermeneutic interpretation that have formative potential. To observe such relationships, Almeida (2014, 2017) proposes the categories cognitive, philosophical, existential, anthropological, mythological, poetic, and aesthetic. It is not necessary that all categories be found in the analysis of a given film. They serve only as a starting point, and generally one or another category will be predominant, depending on the objectives of the research.

After a pilot test of the instrument, a fourth stage was added to the lenses, which consists of directing the information obtained by the lenses to three ethical-political questions to debate the visuality that the film proposes. They are: (1) What imaginaries predominate in the film? (2) What meanings do the imaginaries propose? (3) How does the design act?

The theoretical basis for these questions followed the approach given by Bosi, in the book *ideologia e contraideologia* (2010). In it, the author presents two categories that can be used to represent the imaginary of political thought from the Renaissance to the contemporary era: ideology and counter-ideology. Ideology can be understood as the set of dominant ideals of a given historical period and counter-ideology, the direct opposition to these ideals. A third category was added to them, whose focus followed the work of Foucault (2002, 2004), which treats ideology and counter-ideology as regimes of truth⁶. From this perspective, such regimes operate as techniques of domination that surround subjects based on the practices and knowledge in which they are inserted. To deal with this issue, the author proposed an ethics of the self, which consists of a constant evaluation, carried out by subjects, in relation to the regimes that surround them, so that they can construct their own political subjectivity. In this context, visualities can be understood as participants in the construction and crystallization of such regimes. Each of these categories was treated, in this article, as a specific imaginary. In effect, the instrument allows us to observe the imaginaries in films — (1) ideology, (2) counter-ideology and (3) regimes of truth. Table 1 presents the instrument and summarizes the main concepts contained therein:

⁵ Mauad's research focuses on photography, therefore, the space-time category was an adaptation of the author's theoretical framework to account for the characteristics of time and movement, which are specific to cinematographic film, the object of this article.

⁶ Foucault's thought is aligned with a current known as post-structuralist that emerged in the 1960s and problematized some fundamental concepts of modern political thought. For example, the concepts of ideology and counter-ideology (Foucault, 2002, 2004).



Table 1
Film analysis tool

ANALYTICAL LENSES	
Social horizon	Period, production and reception
Figural action	Framing, geographic, figurative and object, time
Discursive field	Cognitive, aesthetic, philosophical, existential, anthropological, mythological, and poetic
	Ethical-political issues What imaginaries predominate in the film? What meanings do the imaginaries propose? How does the design act?

Source: prepared by the authors, 2023.

Nomadland movie analysis results

The film *Nomadland*, by Chloé Zhao, released in 2020, tells the story of Fern, a middle-aged woman who is faced with the bankruptcy of the company she worked for, and as a result, the closure of the industrial city in a rural area of Nevada, in the United States, where she lived. After losing her job and her home, Fern realizes that her Social Security plan, as the American pension system is known, is not enough for her to buy a property in a conventional city. To find work, she sets out on a nomadic life across the country in search of temporary jobs.

Social horizon

The premise behind the film reflects, at least in part, a period experienced in the US between 2007 and 2009, which became known as the great economic recession of 2008⁷, in which some middle-aged Americans adopted a nomadic lifestyle, giving up their homes and traveling around the country in search of temporary, often precarious, and non-employable jobs, forming a subculture that became known as — modern nomads. The fact was documented in the book *Nomadland: Sobrevivendo à América no Século XXI* (2021), originally released in 2017 by journalist Jessica Bruder. The author became interested in the subject after reading about an Amazon program⁸ called CamperForce, which offered seasonal jobs that were filled largely by workers who, like

⁷ The Great Recession was a period of economic crisis that marked the first decade of the 2000s. Its origins date back to the collapse of the North American real estate market, a fact known as the subprime mortgage crisis (Borça Junior & Torres Filho, 2008).

⁸ Amazon.com, Inc. is a North-American multinational corporation that operates in the e-commerce and other technology-related sectors.

Fern, were unable to retire or find traditional employment, leading them to adopt a nomadic lifestyle, moving from job to job across the country. This was the trigger for an investigation that showed that similar situations existed throughout the United States (Nassif, 2021). Bruder spent six months living in a van and documenting the phenomenon of nomadic Americans in the US. The book has won several awards⁹ and Fox Searchlight Pictures was interested in adapting it for the cinema in 2019.

In terms of production, the film version of *Nomadland* was directed by Chloé Zhao, a Chinese-born American director who has gained recognition in the independent film scene. The film cost around \$5 million to make and grossed R\$39.4 million at the worldwide box office. It won 254 film awards between 2021 and 2022, including the Oscars for best picture, best director, best actress, and was nominated for best adapted screenplay, best editing, and best cinematography¹⁰. Bruder participated in the production as a consulting producer and some of the nomads who inspired the book acted in the film. In terms of reception, the use of the nomads – not actors – mentioned in Bruder's book was seen positively, on the grounds that they brought veracity to the subject matter addressed in the film (Rottenberg, 2021). Another topic that was highlighted at the reception was the ideal of a free life that exists in modern American nomadism. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, nomad Swankie — who participated in the film — describes how owning nothing but what you carry and reducing the size of your properties does not mean that you are “suffering, starving, dirty, eating poorly,” and reports that she feels “healthier now at 78 than I was at 40. I am [...] lighter, completely free of all medications, and I have never been happier or more financially secure” (Swankie *apua* Rottenberg, 2021). This same discourse appears in advertisements for companies that hire nomadic workers, with slogans such as “retirement has never been so much fun. [...] We are healthier than we have been in years” (Bruder, 2021, p. 20).

The book, however, has a critical tone towards this ideal of nomadic freedom, as it can hide difficulties. An article published in *The Guardian* reports that, at first, most of the nomads mentioned in the book were “interested in fitting their lifestyle into the growing rhetoric of the old west, [...] as [...] cowboys, pioneers. They spoke of freedom and opportunity, individualism, and self-sufficiency.” (Brooks, 2021). However, a closer look at the matter reveals that it was “lost jobs, ruinous divorces and foreclosed homes that put

⁹ The book was a winner of Barnes & Noble's 27th Annual Discover Awards and a finalist for the Helen Bernstein Book Award (Barnes & Noble, 2017; Glazer, 2018).

¹⁰ Data obtained from the film's IMDB page. Available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9770150/>, accessed on February 7, 2023.



them on the road” (Brooks, 2021). Which begs the question: “How successful is the nomadic existence in the long run? Eventually you run out of gas, you run out of money. Your health starts to suffer. You can’t work like you used to” (Brooks, 2021).


In another publication of The Guardian, Horton (2021) explains that behind this rhetoric of freedom, there is a symptom of an economic model called the gig economy, which can be translated as a job economy. In the thesis *Empresariando a informalidade: mercado de trabalho e carreira na gig economy* (2020), Vaclavik explains that the term gig comes from the music industry and refers to an employment relationship with the characteristics of “simple and quick service, of little importance; occasional occupation or service, of short duration and not regular; secondary work or employment [...] that someone carries out in order to increase their income” (Vaclavik, 2020, p. 20). Taking on seasonal jobs has always been a common practice for some labor categories to supplement their income from conventional work. The new feature brought by the gig economy, which has been institutionalized since the 1970s due to economic crises and technological innovations, is the process of outsourcing the corporate workforce, the adoption of new intermittent work regimes that refer to seasonal workforce contracts, and finally, the mediation of labor relations through digital platforms. These aspects of the gig economy are understood as a flexibilization of traditional labor relations. In other words, instead of work with a fixed place and time, whose employer-employee relationship is governed by labor laws, these new labor relations have flexible time and place of execution, with intermittent contracts that do not characterize an employee-employer relationship and relieve the employer of the costs required by labor laws. In this category, the employee is treated as an independent contractor, usually a freelancer or self-employed professional, and therefore assumes the responsibilities of his/her practice, such as the acquisition of equipment to carry out the work, the payment of taxes, health insurance, social security, etc. In this type of relationship, since there is usually no employee-employer relationship, the laws that protect the rights of employees generally do not keep up with the pace of technological innovation, which leaves gaps for informality, insecurity, instability, and the loss of rights and benefits. Finally, Vaclavik also reports that “although many authors consider labor flexibility” as an “expression of modernity and a manifestation of the entrepreneurial capacity of individuals, these forms, in general, mask situations of precariousness in life and work.” (Vaclavik, 2020, p. 25). This is because it is not uncommon for the job offer by the employer, especially in times of crisis, to imply terms that ultimately become compulsory. In other words, they must be adhered to as a condition for the worker to carry out his/her



work activity. Thus, the discourse of freedom and flexibility that exists in the ideal of the nomadic life contains at least two facets. The first reveals that many of the people who loved this lifestyle became nomads by adhesion, because they found themselves in a dead end due to intermittent jobs with a salary that could not cover the rent and other essential expenses for family, food, medicine, etc., or retired people with a pension amount that also does not cover such costs. The drama of this situation reveals the failure of the dream of part of the North American middle class who, through the crisis and age, as in the case of *Nomadland*, did not find space and social support in 21st century America. The second reveals the road as the idealization of life, health, and liberation from a society that leads to depression and debt.

The film has received criticism for its ambiguous stance, whether for or against the work relationships in which nomads find themselves. In an article published in *Jovem Pan*, Petrucelli highlights Hollywood's problem in trying to make "cinema engaged, pamphleteering and party politics". For him, at first, "the film makes us want to believe that Fern [...] is a victim of a society, led by a cruel and unjust type of government, which does not give her opportunities". However, as the film progresses, in the author's opinion, "it becomes quite obvious [...] that it is just about choices; not about the circumstances in which the character finds herself and much less about an imposition by the system". And he concludes that "in an attempt to [...] denounce a supposed inequality in the face of the lethal villainy of a corporatist and capitalist world", the film "ends up only transforming a secular habit into an empty socioeconomic political discourse." (Petrucelli, 2021). However, reserving the issues presented in the film to the scope of free choice when it comes to labor rights may be a simplified way of looking at the problem. As a principle, labor rights seek to grant protection to the worker, who generally finds himself in an "inferior position and financially dependent on the employer", so that labor law functions as a "tool to provide balance between the hired subject and the contractor" (Oliveira, 2022).

Unlike the book, which is a strong critic of the business models that exploit the nomadic workforce in the US, the film, in turn, does not take sides in this situation, which makes its discourse ambiguous. Kermode, in an article for *The Guardian*, reports that the film "avoids conflict in favor of a quiet humanity" and "fails to unearth hope from the seething darkness of Amazon warehouses" (Kermode, 2021). *Vanity Fair* questioned the Oscar for best picture, pointing out as controversial the stance of the Hollywood Film Academy that, when consecrating productions, seems to do so based on ideological merits as a kind of "character test of the film industry", so that the film may have received



its awards more for the fact that it was “directed by a Chinese woman, an immigrant [...] who casts a loving and charming eye on the oppressed people who live on the margins.” (Lawson, 2021), then for the critique that the minimalist lifestyle of modern nomads directs at the American consumer structure. In the same vein, Vulture magazine reported that the film “swaps Bruder’s sharp indignation about capitalist exploitation for a muddled message about individual freedom that downplays the real risks of temporary work” and leaves out precisely what makes the discussion so urgent (Chan, 2021). Finally, an article by Žižek published in *Folha de São Paulo* reports that the film has a “decaffeinated critical stance” and places itself alongside other “falsely progressive” films that take a stand for a cause, “but deal with the subject in a way that neutralizes its critical bias.” (Žižek, 2021). For him, although the film shows the poverty and difficult situations faced by precarious workers, it seems to focus on the “modest happiness” that exists in the lifestyle of nomads. So that “the subtitle of ‘Nomadland’ could very well be”, for Žižek, “enjoy your condition as a nomadic proletariat!” (Žižek, 2021).

Figural action

As figural action, the framing space in the *Nomadland* often shows wide shots of landscapes where the characters and their vehicles, vans, pickup trucks, or recreational vehicles, occupy a small part of the frame in relation to the sky and vegetation. In this way, it creates an isolated and reduced aspect of these elements in relation to the nature that surrounds them. The close-ups are reserved for dialogue and the camera is positioned as if the observer were in the scene and observing it from a distance. The film was shot in anamorphic format, that is, a format whose width is greater than the height, and creates a visual aspect that is reminiscent of classic oil landscape paintings. Another aspect that refers to landscape painting is the lighting of the scenes, almost always lit by natural light. This type of lighting is known as naturalistic because the point of light is usually the sun, or a campfire, or a lamp inside the vehicle, and so on.

In terms of geographic space, the film features national parks, deserts, roads, and campgrounds. *Nomadland* was filmed in the western United States, specifically in the states of Nevada, Nebraska, California, and South Dakota. In the latter, in a desert region formed by erosion and rocky sedimentation, known as the Badlands (Medd, 2021). The iconography of this region evokes North American western films, largely crystallized in the cinematic imagination through the films of directors such as Edwin Porter, David W.



Griffith, and John Ford¹¹, starring actors such as William S. Hart, John Wayne, Tom Mix, Roy Rogers. The genre, as Vugman explains (2006), helped portray the ideology that accompanied North American colonization since 1903. In it, it is common to find oppositions between culture versus nature, the individual versus the community, the city versus the wild lands, the cowboy versus the Indian. From the 1940s onwards, the metaphor that supports these oppositions was exhausted since the urban and industrial North American scenario had already become hegemonic. In fact, the ideology was updated, giving way to oppositions such as that of the solitary hero versus the corrupt, capitalist city, largely explored by actors such as Clint Eastwood, in his partnership with director Sergio Leoni, in the 1960s. *Nomadland*, however, causes a strangeness in the iconography generally found in this genre, because, instead of the North American cowboy, a young, solitary and free man who wanders through the desert on his horse, what we see are middle-aged people who wander through the desert in their vans in search of jobs and community ties so that they can defend themselves (Wilkinson, 2021).

In terms of figurative and object space, in *Nomadland*, objects are very important to the characters, whether they are items they bring from their pre-nomadic lifestyle or the repairs and decoration items they make to their vehicles for life on the road. Fern, for example, has a set of plates that her father gave her when she graduated from high school. This item reveals that she has some level of education, and yet she cannot find a long term job. At one point in the film, her friend Dave drops these plates and breaks them. Afterwards, Fern simply glues the pieces of the plates together, but does not get rid of them, as they are an emotional link to her pre-nomadic past. Other important objects are the vehicles used by the characters, which become the personal expression of the nomads in the film. They contain flags and codes that must be known and respected in the community. In one scene, after Fern's van stops working, she discovers that the repairs will cost her almost four times more than the value of the vehicle. In this sense, she reacts by explaining that her relationship with the van is priceless, because the van is her home. As a figurative space, most of the people portrayed in the film are people over sixty years old who deal with different situations of loss, health, employment, parents, children, husband, and social life.

Finally, in terms of space-time, *Nomadland* is a film that offers, through its editing, moments of pause during its narrative. The film has cuts that resemble a documentary, especially when filming the testimonies of the nomads who participated in

¹¹ In this sense, see productions such as *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin Porter, 1903), *America* (David W. Griffith, 1924) and *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939).



the film. The editing often positions the observer inside Fern's vehicle, as if following the journey through the North American West. Often, the camera moves away from the dialogues and focuses on nature as if to say — look. The film was shot without a storyboard plan; Richards, the director of photography and Chloé made a list of shots and followed it as a filming script. Richards, in an interview published in Cine D, reports that he found inspiration for moving the camera in video games that have an open world, since in these games the camera is almost always continuous and seeks not to disrupt the player's immersion in the world presented (Deikova, 2023)¹². Furthermore, in *Nomadland*, the camera movement has a conceptual effect. In the scenes where the nomads are in the parks and on the roads, Richards opted for a continuous camera movement, that is, the image is never fixed to increase the feeling of freedom sustained by the nomadic discourse. When Fern spends a few days living in other people's houses, as in the case of Dave and his sister, the camera becomes, for the most part, static as if it were a moment of non-freedom. In this way, the camera in *Nomadland* serves as a metaphor for the character's emotional state in relation to the situation she faces — just like the metaphor of movement and freedom of the American cowboy — and corroborates the minimalist discourse that the nomads attribute to their lifestyle (Deikova, 2023).

Discursive field


In relation to the discursive field, the aesthetic foundation appears right from the start in Zhao's directorial choices. By framing the natural landscapes and vegetation in long scenes, the montage offers pauses that propose reflections on the urban lifestyle and the aesthetic, cognitive and existential relationships about life in society, work, consumption, and the nomadic lifestyle with its minimalist proposal. In a post-modern scenario, marked by the neoliberal economic system where consumption has become a type of rule by which people give meaning to their existence (Groys, 2016), Minimalism provides a contrary ideal, a type of opposition that resides in the adoption of a counter-consumptionist life. It is important to emphasize that, as Figueiredo explains (2022), The counter-consumption that exists in minimalism is not an opposition to capitalism, but rather the adoption of a more conscious stance in relation to what is consumed. According to the author, followers have generally gone through some kind of trauma that made them rethink their relationship with consumption and that is why they chose

¹² Open world games are a concept applied to digital design, which refers to an environment, a world, that gives the player considerable freedom to come and go, and to achieve or not certain objectives (Santos *et al.*, 2020).



the minimalist life. It is important to note that people who chose minimalism as a critique of the “American dream” of consumption generally had the means to consume and, at a certain point, chose not to do so. Therefore, it cannot be said that people who have never had the means to consume are minimalists; in this case, they are people who simply do not have such means (Figueiredo, 2022). In short, although minimalism is cited as an ideology in *Nomadland*, it cannot be said that the American nomads portrayed in the film are minimalists, since most of them adopted the lifestyle after the crisis, as they did not have the necessary conditions to buy a new property. In this case, minimalism is presented more as a discourse of acceptance, and this is reflected in the affirmation of freedom and health as standards of a life against consumption. It is in these terms that the existential foundation becomes apparent, since the discourse against consumption becomes a way for these people to give meaning to the new social space they have come to occupy after the crisis. Of course, not all nomads find themselves in this situation; after the book and the film spread the minimalist ideology worldwide, sympathizers adopted nomadism of their own free will, driven by the ideology proposed. In this sense, Figueiredo explains that in postmodern society, feelings of stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and lack of purpose become a shared feeling and the anti-consumption discourse becomes seductive. In a scenario where people work hard to keep consuming, “who wouldn’t like to have more time to dedicate to what really matters?” (Figueiredo, 2022, p. 20). The answer to this question is a subjective question that each viewer is invited to answer in *Nomadland*. Indeed, the pauses offered by the editing allow time for the narrative to be filled with the desires and knowledge of each viewer.

Another important aspect of *Nomadland*'s discursive field is the metaphor of the road. In the film, the road becomes synonymous with freedom, not just a geographical freedom, but a type of symbolic freedom in relation to a society that has become sick with consumption. This scheme evokes a mythical space, generally found in the discourses that accompanied the conquest of the American West, very present in narratives of the Western genre. Xavier (2014) reports that in the conquest of the western United States, an imaginary was constructed that not only explored the military conquest of nature and material goods, but added to it a type of “nationalism of singularity of character” that founded the notion of a new man, “able to overcome the “diseases of civilization” that would have affected a Europe permeated by religious wars and persecutions from which the Puritans fled towards the promised land” (Xavier, 2014, p. 172). The road as a promised land embodies a type of transcendent ideal and becomes the path that connects the experience of life beyond poverty, illness, and death. The



themes addressed in the American western film genre worked on this concept through the notion of the frontier, a type of heroic subject who occupies the mythical space because he possesses virtues that were lost with the constitution of the nation-state. In this space, the frontier engenders in the pioneers — the myth of formation, and in the cowboys — the myth of conquest.

The myth of formation is linked to the caravans that took on the mission of colonizing the American West through agriculture, and the myth of conquest is based on the premise of always moving forward to conquer new territories. In the formation of North American society, these myths served to select the values needed to strengthen the ideology of modern colonizers. As Xavier explains, it doesn't matter if the good guy is a fugitive from prison, what matters is that he accepts the good principles of the social pact. And if modern society proves corrupt, he retreats to an idealized nature where he will live a simple but justified life. In this way, the metaphor of the road has the meaning of knowing, exploring, and colonizing new territories, it is linked to the myths of formation and conquest, because it means leaving a society that exists, and is corrupt, towards an idealized one (Xavier, 2014).

Finally, the information obtained through the three analytical lenses was addressed to the proposed ethical and political questions: (1) what imaginaries predominate in the film? (2) what meanings do the imaginaries propose? And (3) how does the design act? Based on the first two questions, it was clear that *Nomadland's* discourse is polysemic. On the one hand, the film exalts the myths of the founding and conquest that helped colonize the United States; on the other, it elaborates an ambiguous critique of the North American consumer society. In effect, all imaginaries were seen in the film, with ideology and counter-ideology being predominant.

The counter-ideological imaginary emerges when nomads recognize the vulnerable situation in which they find themselves and the need to organize themselves into a community. This is represented by the camps and bonds they build with other nomads who are in the same situation because they do not have sufficient social security and who have had to deal with the loss of health, property, loved ones, etc. The recognition, bonds and organization indicate a type of attempt at unionization. In this way, both the book and the film reveal a situation that has formed on the margins of post-crisis North American society: the weakening of the counter-ideological imaginary as an organized political and union force in the context of the neoliberal economy.



Although Nomadland's discourse highlights this issue through the idea of counter-consumption, the film deals with it by celebrating the idealization of North American myths under idealized notions of freedom and autonomy, which are personified by the metaphor of the road. In this discourse, the ideological imaginary that gave the subject the option of adopting a nomadic and minimalist lifestyle as a type of free choice is maintained. However, upon closer inspection, one realizes that the nomads' counter-consumptionist position may only be functioning as a support base in the process of accepting the condition imposed by the context of the gig economy. Thus, the ideological imaginary remains, even though the criticism is placed from a counter-ideological point of view. Finally, it is in the idea of resistance that the third imaginary is found — regimes of truth. By moving away from idealized notions, one realizes that the lifestyle adopted by nomads is, therefore, an attempt to construct an ethic of self, in the face of the power relations that have been established in some work practices in the contemporary world. This is perhaps the discourse that inspires and proposes, albeit ambiguously, a portrait of North American work relations in the neoliberal context.

Based on the analysis carried out, it was finally possible to answer question (3): how does the design act? It was noted that design, and Nomadland, acts by prefiguring a contemplative image of nature and creating purposeful pauses for subjects to reflect on life and work relationships in contemporary society. In effect, design in Nomadland creates a visuality that allows subjects to be affected and reflect on the themes addressed there, which contributes to the formation of their political subjectivity. Table 2 summarizes the main results obtained in the analysis of the film.



Table 2
Nomadland movie analysis results

NOMADLAND (CHLOÉ ZHAO, 2020)	
Social horizon	Modern US nomadism post-2007-2009 crisis Gig economy
Figural action	Framing space: contemplative landscape and natural light Geographic space: iconography of the American Western Figurative and object space: attachment to the vans and the objects inside them Space-time: reflective pauses, camera as an emotional metaphor for the character
Discursive field	Aesthetic: montage with pauses for reflection Cognitive: reflection on contemporary consumer life Existential: minimalism as a way of giving meaning to the new post-crisis social space Philosophical: road as a metaphor for freedom lost in work relations in the neoliberal context Mythical: consumer society as a disease and the road as a search for a promised land
ETHICAL-POLITICAL ISSUES	
What imaginaries predominate in the film?	All the imaginary appeared Predominance of ideological and counter-ideological imaginaries
What meanings do the imaginaries propose?	Nomadism as a free choice Union weakening and membership nomadism Nomadism as an act of resistance in the neoliberal context
How does the design act?	It prefigures a portrait of North American labor relations in the neoliberal context, allowing subjects to reflect on life in contemporary society.

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024.

Final considerations

Based on the analysis carried out, it was clear that design plays a role in films far beyond the technical-scientific space it has occupied in film production. Observing a film focusing only on the aspects of its production, in the sense of listing a set of procedures, techniques or stages of the construction and management of a film, which use design to build sets, costumes and photography, would not capture all the possible performance of



design in the context of the cinematic imaginary. Broadening the horizon of analysis through the concepts of speculative design and design-fiction allowed the film to be analyzed in a relational manner, also considering the discursive aspects that accompany its visuality. The careful reading carried out with the help of analytical lenses allowed us to collect information about the film from different perspectives. Finally, the three ethical-political questions directed at the information obtained allowed us to debate the visuality that the film produces and propagates. In *Nomadland*, by prefiguring a portrait of North American labor relations in the neoliberal context, the design gave visibility to an important issue that permeates contemporary Western societies. Such visuality allows the subjects who watch the film to be affected and reflect on the themes addressed there, which contributes to the formation of their political subjectivity.

References

- Almeida, R. de. (2014). Possibilidades Formativas do Cinema. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos de Cinema e Audiovisual - REBECA*, 6, 1–18.
- Almeida, R. de. (2017). Cinema e educação: fundamentos e perspectivas. *Educação em revista*, 33, 1–27.
- Barnes & Noble. (2017). *Barnes & Noble Announces the Winners of the 27th Annual Discover Awards*. <https://www.barnesandnobleinc.com/press-release/barnes-noble-announces-the-winners-of-the-27th-annual-discover-awards/>
- Bizzocchi, J., & Tanenbaum, T. (2011). Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences. Em D. Davidson (Org.), *Well Played 3.0* (p. 289–316). ETC Press.
- Borça Junior, G. R., & Torres Filho, E. T. (2008). Analisando a crise do subprime. *Revista do BNDES*, 15(30), 129–159.
<http://web.bndes.gov.br/bib/jspui/handle/1408/8344>
- Bosi, A. (2010). *Ideologia e contraideologia: Temas e variações*. Companhia das Letras.
- Brooks, X. (2021, abril 9). 'It's an utter myth': how *Nomadland* exposes the cult of the western. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/apr/09/its-an-utter-myth-how-nomadland-exposes-the-cult-of-the-western>
- Bruder, J. (2021). *Nomadland: Sobrevivendo aos Estados Unidos no século XXI*, tradução: Ryta Vinagre. (1a). Rocco.
- Bungarten, V. (2013). *A imagem cinematográfica: Convergência entre Design e Cinema* [Tese de Doutorado]. Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.
- Chan, W. (2021, fevereiro 22). The Problem with *Nomadland*'s Amazon Warehouse Scenes. *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/article/nomadland-amazon-warehouse-chloe-zhao.html>
- Deikova, M. (2023, março). *Nomadland – A Masterclass in Naturalistic Cinematography with DP Joshua James Richards*. CineD. <https://www.cined.com/nomadland-a-masterclass-in-naturalistic-cinematography-with-dp-joshua-james-richards/>
- Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2013). *Speculative everything: Design, fiction, and social dreaming*. The MIT Press.
- Figueiredo, A. S. (2022). *Minimalismo na Netflix: Uma análise sobre o consumo alternativo* [Trabalho de conclusão de curso]. Universidade de São Paulo.
- Foucault, M. (2002). *A verdade e as formas jurídicas*. NAU Editora.

- Foucault, M. (2004). *Ética, sexualidade e política - Coleção Ditos & Escritos* (Vol. 5, p. 256–287). Forense Universitária.
- Fry, T. (2009). *Design futuring: Sustainability, ethics, and new practice*. Berg.
- Glazer, G. (2018). The Bernstein Awards 2018: Meet the Finalists. *The New York Public Library*. <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2018/03/06/bernstein-awards-finalists-2018>
- Groys, B. (2016). *Volverse público: las transformaciones del arte en el ágora contemporânea* (p. 21–36). Caja Negra.
- Horton, A. (2021, fevereiro 17). How Nomadland shines a light on an ignored America. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/feb/17/nomadland-chloe-zhao-frances-mcdormand>
- Kellner, D. (2001). *A Cultura da mídia - estudos culturais: Identidade e política entre o moderno e o pós-moderno*. EDUSC.
- Kermode, M. (2021). Nomadland review – Chloe Zhao’s triumphant ode to community. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/may/02/nomadland-review-chloe-zhao-frances-mcdormand>
- Lawson, R. (2021, abril 15). Nomadland Is Stirring Up Controversy. Does the Academy Care? *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/04/nomadland-amazon-oscar-controversy>
- Machado, L. A. (2009). *Design e narrativa visual na linguagem cinematográfica* [Universidade de São Paulo]. <https://doi.org/10.11606/D.16.2009.tde-26032010-142901>
- Maciel, L. L., & Souza, E. A. B. M. (2021). O design de produção enquanto design especulativo decolonial: tipografia vernacular e design informal em Bacurau. *Anais do 10o CIDI / Congresso Internacional de Design da Informação, edição 2021 e do 10o CONGIC / Congresso Nacional de Iniciação Científica em Design da Informação, 1830–1837*. <https://doi.org/10.5151/cidicongic2021-149-354982-CONGIC-Sociedade.pdf>
- Mauad, A. M. (2005). Na mira do olhar: um exercício de análise da fotografia nas revistas ilustradas cariocas, na primeira metade do século XX. *Anais Do Museu Paulista: História e Cultura Material*, 13(1), 133–174.
- Medd, J. (2021, fevereiro 9). Nomadland: Where was it filmed? *CN Traveller*. Condé Nast Traveller. <https://www.cntraveller.com/gallery/nomadland-where-was-it-filmed>
- Meneses, U. T. B. de. (2003). Fontes visuais, cultura visual, História visual. Balanço provisório, propostas cautelares. *Revista Brasileira de História*, 23(45), 11–36.
- Nassif, T. (2021). ‘O filme e o livro são criaturas bem distintas’, diz autora de ‘Nomadland’. *VEJA*. Veja. <https://veja.abril.com.br/cultura/o-filme-e-o-livro-sao-criaturas-bem-distintas-diz-autora-de-nomadland>
- Oliveira, V. (2022, junho 15). *Direitos trabalhistas: História, políticas e reformas* / Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto - UFOP. Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto - UFOP. <https://ufop.br/noticias/em-discussao/direitos-trabalhistas-historia-politicas-e-reformas>
- Petrucelli, M. (2021, janeiro 15). ‘Nomadland’ transforma hábito americano em política socioeconômica. *Jovem Pan*. <https://jovempan.com.br/arquivo/marcos-petrucelli/nomadland-transforma-habito-americano-em-politica-socioeconomica.html>
- Rottenberg, J. (2021, fevereiro 25). The nomads of “Nomadland” on real life versus acting. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-02-25/nomadland-hulu-real-life-nomads>
- Santos, G. A. da S., Chagas, A. A. de O., & Silva, E. do N. (2020). A experiência do jogar em mundo aberto: um olhar fenomenológico - existencial. *Revista Científica UMC*, 5(3).

- Vaclavik, M. C. (2020). *Empresariando a informalidade: mercado de trabalho e carreira na gig economy*. Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.
- Vugman, F. S. (2006). Western. Em F. Mascarello (Org.), *História do cinema mundial*. Papirus.
- Wilkinson, A. (2021, fevereiro 19). Nomadland turns American iconography inside out. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/22289457/nomadland-review-zhao-mcdormand-streaming-hulu>
- Xavier, I. (2014). John Ford e os heróis da transição no imaginário do western. *Novos estudos*, 171–192.
- Zizek, S. (2021, agosto 20). “Viúva Negra” e “Nomadland” expõem falso progressismo de Hollywood. *Folha de São Paulo*, tradução de Artur Renzo. Folha de São Paulo. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2021/08/viuva-negra-e-nomadland-expoem-falso-progressismo-de-hollywood-diz-zizek.shtml>

Acknowledgements

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brazil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.



RESUMO

Observar a atuação do design no cinema leva, muitas vezes, ao estudo das atividades técnicas da produção cinematográfica. Não obstante, essa atuação se dá também por meio dos aspectos discursivos inerentes a visualidade que o filme propaga. Nesse sentido, este artigo tem o objetivo de analisar como o design atua no filme *Nomadland* (Choé Zhao, 2020). Para tanto, utilizou-se o método da leitura atenta e um instrumento que permitiu observar o filme sob três lentes: horizonte social, ação figural e campo discursivo. Por fim, direcionou-se às informações obtidas três questões ético-políticas a fim de debater sobre a visualidade do filme. Como resultado, destaca-se que *Nomadland* estabelece um retrato das relações de trabalho norte-americanas no contexto neoliberal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Design; Cinema; Imaginário; *Nomadland*.

RESUMEN

Observar el rol del diseño en el cine suele llevar al estudio de las actividades técnicas de la producción cinematográfica. Sin embargo, este rol también se manifiesta a través de los aspectos discursivos inherentes a la visualidad de la película. En este sentido, este artículo busca analizar el rol del diseño en la película *Nomadland* (Choé Zhao, 2020). Para ello, se empleó el método de lectura atenta y un instrumento que observó la película desde tres perspectivas: horizonte social, acción figurativa y campo discursivo. Finalmente, la información obtenida se abordó tres cuestiones éticas y políticas para debatir la visualidad de la película. Como resultado, se destaca que *Nomadland* establece un retrato de las relaciones laborales norteamericanas en el contexto neoliberal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Diseño; Cine; Imaginario; *Nomadland*.

