

## Films about homelessness and transience

There are a couple of new films out depicting issues of migrancy or street homelessness.

In similar style to the 2000 documentary 'Dark Days' (Singer) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark\\_Days\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_Days_(film)) – 'IWOW: I walk on water' (see <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/feb/22/iwow-i-walk-on-water-review>) depicts street homelessness in New York. And there is the much more mainstream 'Nomadland' (Zhao 2020), up for multiple awards, which looks at a less acute form of semi-homelessness and marginalisation. Sight and Sound magazine covered other films about vagrants and migrants in their feature in the March magazine which is worth reading, that accompanies their feature on Nomadland.

Nomadland is interesting in that it covers people who don't fit the stereotype of the rough sleeper, who has been covered so poorly in mainstream film. Cinema struggles with these issues - mainstream cinema particularly – read <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/05/portrayal-homelessness-film-lady-in-the-van>. Some homelessness cinema wants to see the homeless as either morally carefree layabouts (eg 'Boudu saved from drowning' (Renoir 1932), brilliant though it is) or challenging but emotionally engaging – such as Maggie Smith in Hytner's 'Lady in the Van' (2015). Like Spottiswoode's 'A streetcat named Bob' (2016) most modern cinematic views of homelessness are mainstream, heart warming as well as sad films – a trope of 'concerned' but ultimately populist cinema. There *are* good dramatised studies of homelessness, but you have to look beyond English language cinema for some of the best examples (although Wendy and Lucy (2008 Reichardt) with Michelle Williams is a good one). Agnes Varda's 'Vagabond' (1988) is probably the very best study of street homelessness, with its balanced perspective on its ultimately doomed lead character.

But street homelessness is only part of the much wider picture of what could be called semi-homelessness and which is gradually being recognised in film. Nomadland is about low wage, transient workers living on scraps of work, in vans: people who don't fit the crude 'own a house', 'worker' stereotype nor its binary opposite, the 'rough sleeper' that we can shed a tear for in Lady in the Van or Streetcat. It is part of a lineage of recent American films including the remarkable 'Leave no trace' (Granik) from 2018, that recognise that it is much more complicated than the 'on the street'/'ordinary working person' binary opposites that cinema likes.

To see good discussion of these issues on film, it is worthwhile also to look at documentaries. The Sight and Sound article missed a few brilliant pieces, including Gianfranco Rosi's 'Below Sea level' (2009), a study of American semi-homeless van dwellers in the desert. This film recognises how disordered the lives of the people it shows are, but never judges. It overlaps with Nomadland in its milieu, but is a much more detailed and incisive picture of similar people.

'This train I ride' (Bitschy 2019), is another great recent documentary. (Incidentally its magnificent score by Warren Ellis of Bad seeds fame is also discussed in April's 'Wire' magazine). This film covers three women who catch rides by jumping trains in the states, or used to, and its characters are far more powerful than cinematic interpretations of such people, without needing to be polished into the simple stereotypes dramatized cinema requires.

It's the case that there are few UK documentaries capturing this group of people who are below the radar, but above the street – perhaps because hitching a ride from Northampton to Long Buckby on a train has little overt romance! Nor do we have woods big enough to roam in, as in Granik's film. But there are people out there, waiting to be filmed, to tell their stories.