

Golden Globe Winner Chloé Zhao Nominated For Several Oscars, Is Becoming Next Famous Auteur

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On Feb. 28, Chloé Zhao became the first woman of Asian descent to win a Golden Globe for best director.

In addition to this being an amazing victory for the Asian American community, mainland China takes pride in the win since Zhao is a China native. Zhao completed her undergraduate and graduate school in the United States, where she majored in Political Science and then Film. Performing was a family passion as Zhao's mother used to be in a performance troupe for the People's Liberation Army, and her stepmother is a beloved Chinese actress.

Chloé Zhao's childhood in mainland China deeply influenced who she is today. Many interviews that mention her childhood explain how Zhao has always been drawn to the romanticism of the American West. This is seen in the three films she has made: "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" (2015), "The Rider" (2017), and "Nomadland" (2020).

Each film takes place in the American West, and Zhao's interest in romanticism is depicted throughout each. Zhao wrote, directed, produced, and edited "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" and "Nomadland", while for "The Rider", she did everything except edit. Through her efforts and the amount of work that Zhao spends with her projects, she is constantly demonstrating auteur theory and proves that her films are truly her vision.

Auteur theory is the idea that the director of a film is the 'author' of the work -- that everything that happens in the film is their intention. Well-known auteurs include Spike Lee, Wes Anderson, Wong Kar-Wai, and Quentin Tarantino. Something that all of these filmmakers have in common, aside from being men, is that they write and direct most of their films. Auteur theory demonstrates how viewers expect a familiar voice and vision from a specific director's films, but these expectations make it hard for the director to break from their mold that follows them from each film. Another problem with auteur theory is it ignores the total number of people involved in making a film and only puts the acknowledgment on a single person.

It's hard to overlook the similar themes, techniques, and visuals that are present in Zhao's short filmography when compared to other auteurs. The use of the American Midwest and West as settings, the theme of identity, the use of the color blue and nature, and her choice to cast non-actors for her roles are all examples. Considering that Zhao did not grow up in America, it is interesting that her films achieve a verisimilitude of the contemporary West.

Theme of Identity

Zhao's first film "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" is about an indigenous teen named Johnny that lives on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation with his mom and younger sister while his older brother is in jail. Johnny wants to leave Pine Ridge to move to LA with his girlfriend when she goes to college. The film is a conversation about what it means to be American indigenous and how that identity is affected by the culture of reservation life. This theme is also present in "The Rider" which follows a rodeo cowboy, another Lakota Sioux that lives on the Pine Ridge reservation, who suffers a severe injury that becomes aggravated if he continues to ride. The central conflict of the film surrounds the theme of loss of identity. For example, if a cowboy cannot ride, then who is he? This theme is found again in "Nomadland", which contains elements of relatable scenarios and moments of reality from its characters.

These themes of identity relate to Zhao's life. After her Golden Globe win, an interview may have misquoted her on her citizenship status in China, which sparked a debate among mainland Chinese citizens if she still holds a Chinese passport or identifies as a Chinese citizen.

The Motif of the Color Blue

Zhao's cinematographer, Joshua James Richard, has worked with her for all of her films. They have created a motif of the color blue that usually presents itself in the lighting. A common visual in Zhao's films is dawn over the plains-- the sky is a pale blue by the end of the scene as morning breaks. The color blue is also heavily present in costumes and props in "Songs My Brothers Taught Me". Ironically, this color is associated with her films which all take place in the American Midwest and West since blue is a cooler tone that often contradicts how we view those settings.

This choice to use a cool color palate could relate to the theme of identity. Her first two films were about American indigenous people and the various problems they face, such as alcoholism and "Nomadland" briefly mentions the conditions an older person faces in a society that does not prioritize the elderly. These topics mentioned in the film can be difficult to think about, but the color blue is a reminder to the viewers that the image of the West that they have become familiar with is completely gone. Since the West is emblematic of America as a whole, the viewers should then ask themselves, "What does this mean for what America has become in the twentieth-first century?"

Oscar Buzz and What's Next for Zhao

Oscar nominations came out on March 15, and Zhao's film "Nomadland" received several nominations, including Zhao becoming one of seven women in Oscar history to be nominated for best director. The other six women nominated include Emerald Fennell, also nominated this year for her film "Promising Young Woman", Greta Gerwig for "Lady Bird" (2017), Kathryn Bigelow for "The Hurt Locker" (2009), Sofia Coppola for "Lost in Translation" (2003), Jane Campion for "The Piano" (1993), and Lina Wertmüller for "Seven Beauties" (1976). Bigelow is the only woman to win an Oscar for best director. There is talk that Chloé Zhao might be the next woman to win "Best Director" coming off her Golden Globes win, along with the buzz of positive things critics say about her work. The nominations that "Nomadland" received include Best Picture, Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Film Editing, and actress Frances McDormand received a nomination for her role as Fern.

Chloé Zhao's next work will be the Marvel film "Eternals" which is still slated for a 2021 release. Considering that all of her past films have been independent films and that Marvel films follow a traditional Hollywood narrative, many viewers familiar with Zhao's work are looking forward to seeing what elements of her style are present in this film.

