

American Neorealism? Sean Baker's *The Florida Project*

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Many neorealist films included children: for example, Bruno (Enzo Stajola) in Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* (1948) or the half-naked infant crying desperately towards the end of Roberto Rossellini's last episode for *Paisà* (1946) which was set in the marshes of the Po Valley. The postwar period was the great season of casting non-professional actors, and especially very young children due to their notorious lack of self-consciousness in front of the camera. During the 2017 New York Film Festival, the most refreshing film was Sean Baker's *The Florida Project*, a history of children from homeless and fatherless families living with their destitute mothers on the margins of Disney World in Florida.

Shot in real locations, Baker's *The Florida Project* unfolds in one long-term rental motels in Kissimmee, east of Eden Route 192. These pastel colored buildings with endless rows of parked cars, a little swimming pool, and fast food restaurants nearby, become the playing ground of a few wild kids: Moonee, the leader of a band of

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rascals (Kimberly Prince), Scooty (Christopher Ruvera), and Jancey (Valeria Cotto). Together, they run around incessantly, spit-bomb on cars, demolish and burn an abandoned house, bum ice cream money from tourists, shut down a whole electricity system, haunt motel corridors with their hide-and-seek games.

As the title of the film suggest, *The Florida Project*, refers to an early name for Disney World used by Walt Disney during the construction of his theme park which opened in 1971, twenty years after the launching of Disneyland near Los Angeles. For his narrative, Sean Baker relies on DayGlo buildings as well as verdant fields, with cinematographer Alexis Zabe shooting both on digital and 35 mm. The result is an electrifying story of joyful freedom which coalesces into moments of natural beauty. Moonie and Jancey, for example, embrace in front of an open vista commensurable with their dreams of running and playing forever. The magic bonds of youthful friendship shape the relationship between Moonie and her mother, Hallie (Bria Vinaite) as well. The two of them dance freely in the pouring rain with a sense of abandonment and complicity that is sincere and touching.

In comparison to the sad, emaciated, and struggling children of *Rome Open City* (1945) or *Shoeshine* (1946) who quickly dropped out of the spot-light after the brief neorealist season, Bakers' young non-professionals have become celebrities over-night. American audiences have been energized by their relentless speed and challenged by their irreverent sucking of ice-cream cones, licking and dropping of strawberry jelly, not too mention their wild gorging over waffles, syrup, whipped cream, bacon, and scrambled eggs.

Whereas Rossellini's and De Sica's children had grown up too fast by facing war and politics, Baker's little monsters quickly learn how to lie to adults and destroy real estate. Meanwhile they are never taken seriously by their helpless single mothers who barely manage to survive themselves and put food on the table.

In the motel with customers on vacation coming and going, the only exception to this out-of-control-state of affairs is motel manager Bobby (Willem Dafoe). He not only reports the children's transgressions to their mothers, but he is the only one who protects them from a potential pedophile. Promiscuity hovers over the Magic Kingdom motel repeatedly framed in long static shot by Baker's camera, as if it were scrutinizing the secretes hidden behind its festive concrete walls drumming with cable TVs, ACs, and ice-machines. By relying on a restrained, slow, albeit vigorous acting style, Dafoe is never condescending, nor judgmental. He stands out as the only thoughtful human being who can set an example of paternal, patient behavior. He reprimands a topless, elderly female client lying by the poll next to children playing, but he also empathizes with the life-struggle of single mothers. Thus he ignores Hallie and her waitress girlfriend smoking joints at night. From time to time, the fireworks go up and even this run-down motel begins to look decent and romantic.

In keeping with an Italian neorealist tradition critical of cold and pragmatic institutional solution, *The Florida Project's* narrative climaxes on Bob's contrite facial expression when Moonie's and Hallie's life together comes to a screeching painful halt. Well aware that Hallie has been prostituting herself to make ends meet, some motel neighbors have called Social Services. The separation of Moonie and Hallie is emotionally so unfair that the little girl refuses to surrender. While Hallie screams in revolt, Moonie runs to Jancey who offers solidarity. Albeit temporarily, the two little girls manage to escape the law, by entering a nearby Disney World filled with vacationing and allegedly normal families.

The Florida Project explores the relationship between social solidarity and isolation due to poverty in a world dominated by profit, envy, anger, and consumption. It calls attention to how children imitate adult behavior by constantly using foul language and breaking every possible rule. In comparison to the adult world grounded in competition and status, these children do stick together and never tell on each other. Like a bunch of little animals exploring a wondrous world of traffic signs, trash-cans, security systems and hotel lobbies, they cherish loyalty to the group. Television does not interest them. They run outdoors and are determined to surpass each other in imagination and irreverence. In a thoughtful fashion, Baker's film questions exposes children's vulnerability to institutional mechanisms.

Well received by the critics, *The Florida Project* is a timely contribution to an explosion of interest in children through books and media in the United States. Such an intense and recent focusing on childhood might be due to how new generations of children face an uncertain future in the decades to come. In a country with less and less of a middle class and an increasingly amorphous population of illiterate, unemployed youth, the so-called American dream has vanished from the horizon. Only in the trashy periphery of Disney World, Moonie and

Jancey manage to see a real rainbow after a summer storm. While American liberalism has proven impotent in front of urgent social realities, European audiences watching this film are likely to interrogate themselves on children endlessly moving from one refugee camp to the next, during our epoch of massive migrations.