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DOI: 10.15664/fcj.v18i1.2260



Frames Cinema Journal

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 18 (Jun 2021)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



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Halley and her daughter Moonee – the family at the centre of Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* (2017) – live in the Magic Castle hotel on the outskirts of Disney World Resort in Florida. They survive on the edge of homelessness, vacating their flat every month to avoid establishing the “permanent residency” prohibited by the hotel. Halley makes money via occasional gifts and sex work, and relies on her neighbours for meals and childcare. Moonee spends her days roaming the complex and its surroundings with her friends Scooty and Jancey. Like Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), the film's structure hinges on the clockwork uncertainty of paying rent. And, as in Ken Loach's *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), the regulation of the family, at the hands of child welfare services and the police, hangs over the film. The spectre of state intervention materialises in the final sequence, as a pell-mell of officials attempt to take Moonee into custody. Halley screams and protests. Moonee escapes to Jancey's apartment, but she can only communicate in heaving sobs. At this point, the footage switches from 35mm to iPhone 6s Plus. Jancey takes her friend's hand, and they run through car parks, highways, tunnels, and crowds, to the real Magic Castle in Disney World. The editing is accelerated – 17 shots over an 80 second sequence – and there is the second use of non-diegetic sound – an orchestral version of Kool and the Gang's funk classic, ‘Celebrate’, referring back to the use of this track during the opening credits.

The Florida Project works in the lineage of social realism, with its use of locations, non-professional actors, long shots, and its rejection of non-diegetic sound. Echoing contemporary reviews, scholarly responses to the film's ending have emphasised its departure from this realist aesthetic.¹ The finale certainly constitutes a rupture with the version of realism that precedes it, particularly in its self-conscious use of music; this rupture is intensified by the

shift from celluloid to the infinitely-manipulable pixelation of the iPhone, severing the film's ontological connection to an antecedent reality. Those who dismiss the realist credentials of this scene out of hand are indebted to a reading of André Bazin that connects a set of stylistic conventions typified by Italian neorealism to film's privileged access to the real via its indexical quality.² For Bazin, realism is an "achievement", a moral quality that films attain when their style fully expresses cinema's photochemical foundation.³ This essay is less concerned with the ontological, stylistic, or ethical meanings of realism than with the ways that the final sequence of *The Florida Project* aims towards the illumination of a "social totality", the sum of present relations that constitute the social order.⁴ Designating the scene as realist is a way of rescuing the intimate relationship between this seemingly fantastical, anti-realist moment and the external world of production, circulation, social relations, and technology. The film's ending reaches beyond profilmic reality and speaks to the material conditions of filmmaking while grounding its representational content in the reality of labour, affect, contingency, and media ecology.

Social Reproduction

Critical responses to this finale ranged from disappointment to adoration.⁵ The antipathy can be explained, in part, by how the sequence challenges the typical function of the child character as witness to the suffering and social ills of the adult world.⁶ Moonee and Jancey abrogate their observational responsibilities – denying the audience further insight into the unfolding drama – as they supplant the inertia of looking with the activity of refusal. Their escape returns us to the self-sufficiency that the children display throughout the film: in this respect, the sequence is not a departure from the narrative that has preceded but an intensification of it. The friends' clasped hands, centred for most of the shots, are a foundational image of empowered interdependence, distilling the film's fundamental orientations: towards

roving, under-supervised children and the autonomous social relations of survival that they cultivate. Like the film as a whole, the scene appears, on first blush, to be preoccupied with play, but it is more interested in a neglected form of labour. These children experience a dearth of care, and their itinerant roaming throughout the film is a manifestation of this. The labour of creating and recreating healthy subjects capable of producing value – social reproduction – is in short supply.

The transition to iPhone is preceded (possibly precipitated) by Moonee's tears. The moment is moving but unsettling: as Karen Lury points out, "messy behaviour" like crying always opens the possibility that the filmmakers are exploiting a child's genuine distress.⁷ Regardless of whether Lury unfairly effaces the craft of child performers, the corporeality of Moonee's snot and tears emphasises the actor's labouring body. The subsequent flight to Disney World also gave the filmmakers the chance to underline the work of the child performers. Explaining the decision to let the children enjoy the park for a few days after shooting, Baker said "How can you bring two little children into that park and just have them work and go home? I'm not evil!"⁸ Baker counters the myth of spontaneous, play-based child performance, focusing instead on the work of acting and his status as a manager. Complimenting this paratextual discourse, *The Florida Project's* narrative reveals that child labour is not an aberration of the film industry: Moonee works with her mother on stings and scams, and these survival skills become, in Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman's words, "new forms of public knowledge" that they use and exchange in order to sustain their precarious lives.⁹ Unchaperoned and left to wander freely, Moonee and her friends are also responsible, in part, for their own social reproduction: they provide themselves with food and support, and, in a more long-term process of self-transformation, they socialise themselves towards their future status as consumers and producers within the capitalist economy.¹⁰ The children's escape in this final sequence does not eschew representational realism but, by bringing the film's

promotional materials into contact with the profilmic world, serves to reinforce the film's most trenchant interventions around reproductive labour within contemporary capitalism.

Affect and Contingency

The ending is an extension of the partial, fragmented, child's eye perspective present throughout the film. Except for two brief pairs of smile, the audience is denied Moonee and Jancey's faces, the usual vector of affective transmission from the sovereign character to the sovereign spectator; instead, we have what Eugenie Brinkema calls the "forms of the affects", emotional states that reside not in spectatorial embodiment but in the "details of specific forms and temporal structures".¹¹ The plenitude of movement, sound, and colour articulates the form of joy: joy is the excess of form itself, the fulness of music and image. The glut of edits provides a plenitude of perspectives and vistas, each cut conjuring the joy of the new. Images of bodily touch – the compositional centrality of clasped hands (fig. 1), the children jostling past tourists (fig. 2), the camera brushing against blades of grass (fig. 3) – express the form of neediness, the sense of fragility that comes from a realisation of dependency on others. Touching bodies always underscore this fundamental capacity to be affected. The iPhone photography also provides the impression of contact between all the onscreen bodies, as the lower resolution creates a more porous border between objects than 35mm. In bringing these forms together, the film draws our attention to the transcendental relation between them: neediness is the necessary condition for the possibility of the experience of joy. Francesco Stichhi identifies this as the film's "affective integration" of happiness and precarity.¹² Similarly, Jennifer Kirby sees the co-presence of a "utopian feeling" with a "seemingly hopeless environment".¹³ This



Figure 1, 2 and 3: Images of bodily touch

binary that Stichhi and Kirby locate throughout the film can be extended into more material terrain when considered in relation to the denouement. On one side is the state, represented by social workers and police, that via the “organized abandonment” of certain (often racialised) populations metabolises neediness into a vulnerability to violence and premature death.¹⁴ On the other side, represented by Moonee and Jancey’s escape, is the possibility of the mutual recognition of neediness in autonomous social relations of care and joy. The realism of the finale rests, then, in its aspiration to present an *affective totality*. By entering the walls of Disney World, the film opens up to the chaotic possibilities of contingency. This realm of unpredictability is constituted via the crowd, a body stubbornly opposed to orchestration or mapping. It is this recalcitrance to authorship that grants contingency its key role in classical theories of realism. For Bazin, contingencies of production and profilmic reality are the greatest markers of realism. It is the haphazard fact of Louis the XVI’s skewed wig in Jean Renoir’s *La Marseillaise* (1938), for example, that definitively indexes the medium’s privileged ontological relation to external reality – a rupture with scenic or narrative determinism that refers back to the material foundation of the film.¹⁵ Kracauer’s account of realism, on the other hand, centres the contingent moment in film, not for its relation to indexicality, but for its deep affinity with the lived experience of modernity.¹⁶ Images of the “incalculable movements” of crowds represent, for Kracauer, cinema’s unique capacity to capture the contingencies of “transient material life”.¹⁷ It is significant that the final shot ends, not when the children enter the Magic Castle, but when they are subsumed into the crowd (fig. 4). The hope of this ending lies in this process of assimilation: Moonee and Jancey enter an aleatory world in which things could be otherwise. This is why Kracauer’s vision of the inherently contingent crowd opens a “tiny window of survival”.¹⁸ The close of *The Florida Project* delinks contingency and indexicality, sacrificing the photochemical reference to film’s material foundation embedded in 35mm, while, from shot 11 onwards, venturing to a site of extreme contingency, the clandestinely

filmed crowd. This move not only imbues iPhone footage with the quality of the real by virtue of its capacity to capture the contingent; it also proffers a definition of realism that emphasises *access* over reference. The scene is a totemic instantiation of what Mary Anne Doane has called cinema’s “ongoing structuring of the access to contingency”.¹⁹ By virtue of its ubiquity and consequent capacity for accessing otherwise proscribed spaces, the iPhone is automatically a technology of realism. Lucía Nagib notes that digital cinema can capture “risk, chance, the historical contingent and the unpredictable real” in part because it enables shooting in locations that would be otherwise impossible to reach.²⁰ Again, this frames the question of realism around the edicts of access.



Figure 4: The children are subsumed into the crowd in the final shot

Media Embeddedness

Writing about realism in contemporary art, Gail Day argues that a totalising picture emerges from three distinct registers of historically situated engagement: “the dialectics of the materiality of the image qua image, of materiality in the image, and the materialism of representation’s own embeddedness”.²¹ The first two “materialisms” are familiar: roughly,

indexical correspondence and representational verisimilitude. The third is thornier: the imperative to engage with the cultural and technological context that produces the image's meaning. *The Florida Project's* finale is an engagement *par excellence* with (post)cinematic representation's embeddedness in a material ecology of image production. The idea of embeddedness was expanded and nuanced through the discursive materials around the film. A mythology emerged around the film's conclusion which highlighted the necessity of employing iPhone footage to circumvent the prohibition against filming inside Disney parks – a discourse that underscores the question of access. In this context, it was easy for some commentators to trivialise the formal shift as a merely functional consequence of particular production circumstances. Without falling into a crude intentionalism, it is worth noting that the creative team chose to use the iPhone 6s Plus, with its distinctive rolling shutter, because it produced a more obviously “jarring” aesthetic shift than the iPhone 5.²² As such, the spectatorial experience of a formal disjuncture does not emerge purely from circumstantial problem-solving. Nevertheless, the discourse of necessity seeped into reviews, interviews, and other promotional materials, creating a platform to discuss The Walt Disney Company in the register of securitisation, surveillance, and cultural enclosures. Through the paratextual realm of press junkets and director profiles, *The Florida Project* casts Disney, not as a joyous dream-weaver, but as secretive and authoritarian. The film positions itself in the *banlieues* of an image economy in which Disney, with its increasing monopoly on distribution and intellectual property, is at the core, mirroring the characters' residency on the periphery of the amusement park.²³

The Disney corporation is present throughout the sequence, well before Mooney and Jancey cross the gates of Disney World. The children run past the Disney Souvenir Gift Shop



Figure 5 and 6: The presence of the Disney Corporation and the Disney Gifts Outlet Store (figs. 5 and 6). In the seventh shot in the sequence, the camera is positioned low in the grass as the children rush past, and the camera tilts upwards to reveal a metal sculpture of the Mickey Mouse silhouette (fig. 7). The sculpture is positioned along an axis that contains streetlights and pylons, analogising Disney's fundamental embeddedness within the cultural economy to the infrastructural primacy of electricity. Once Moonee and Jancey arrive inside Disney World proper, the brand iconography is omnipresent: in shot 12 they walk past a man on a mobility scooter wearing a Disney logo shirt; three cuts later, they

squeeze past two women wearing matching Mickey Mouse t-shirts (fig. 8). Here, the radical contingency of the crowd meets the flattening necessity of corporate imperialism. “Huge crowds always transcend the given frame”, writes Kracauer.²⁴ These tourist masses do suggest an outside to the profilmic world, but it is not the unrepresentable social movement and its attendant horizon of alterity, but rather the insuperable cannibalism of Disney in its acquisition of endless new companies and consumers. This is the best way to read the introduction of the music, which distorts an immediately recognisable funk classic into something other yet familiar. This familiarity is the form of the Disney ballad—the kind of melody that would play during a montage of self-discovery in a Disney cartoon. The music is not an arch moment of oneiric fantasy but a further inscription of the insatiable monopoly of Disney.

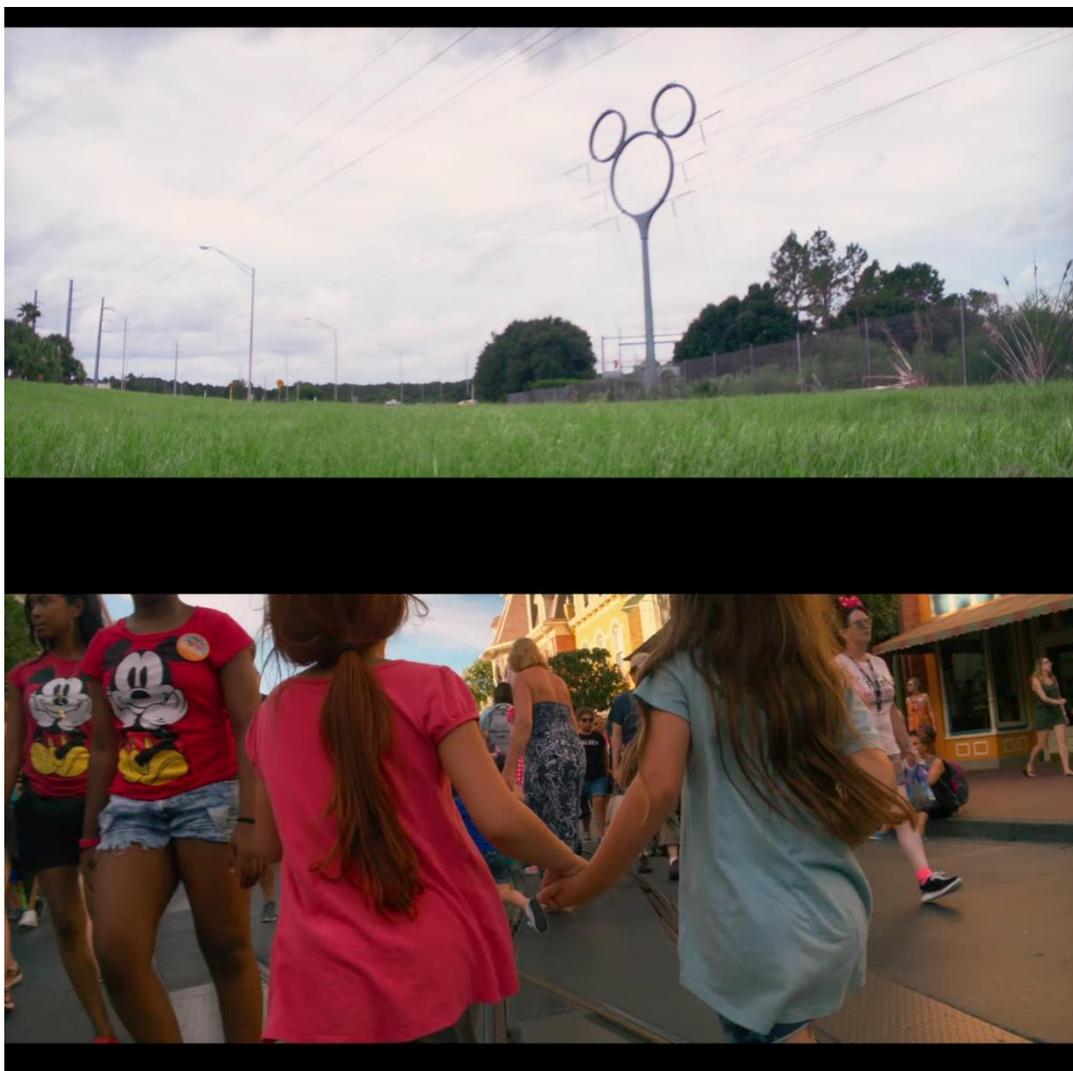


Figure 7 and 8: Disney’s fundamental embeddedness within the cultural economy.

The shift to iPhone also reveals the film's embeddedness within an image ecosystem that is increasingly dominated by and dependent upon the material infrastructure of mobile phone technology. In his discussion of the *iconomy* – the smooth regulation of the image economy – Peter Szendy justifies his focus on the cinematic image with the claim that cinema is merely the “name for a generalization without limit of the economic equivalence between image and money”.²⁵ Often mediated through mobile technology, social media is an equally valid candidate for this tendency towards the collapsing of the image form into the money form. Or, in a more provocative formulation, the moving image is now under the financial fiat to translate into Tik-Tok virality, rather than a motion picture. In his critique of plenitude, Christopher Pavsek berates GoPro footage for containing a familiar, paralyzing immediacy: it is a “constitutive a priori of experience today”.²⁶ While the claim to ubiquity is overblown for the GoPro camera, it could be more reasonably made for the iPhone. However, the use of the iPhone as a formal disjuncture in *The Florida Project* does not have this anti-interpretive effect. From the iPhone's everyday imagery an *iconomic* totality unspools: the absolute mediation of modern life through images; the infamous chains of commodity production involved in Apple products; and the place of data extraction, gamification, and surveillance within contemporary platform capitalism.

Any film that makes the material context underpinning its production transparent is also working to destabilise its own realist authority. Ironically, this movement in *The Florida Project* is what ensures the film's realist status: to repurpose Marxist philosopher Karil Kosík, realist art shows itself to be “determining while being determined... exposed while being decoded”.²⁷ The conditions of contemporary image production are exposed through the shift to iPhone footage, making it a key node in this strategy of destabilisation. Cinematic realism cannot be reduced to correspondence, verisimilitude, or even indexicality. Rather, a film qualifies as realist when it critically “raises the question of realism, whether to problematize it

or to attempt to reinvent it”.²⁸ Like *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* (1975), *The Florida Project* arrives at the constitutive limits of realism— affect divorced from story— presenting realism as the dialectical form *tout court*.²⁹ A rigorously realist approach is pursued until the last moment, when the form that went before is globally undermined. The iPhone camera’s “access to contingency” transforms the film from a declaration to a question, and the answer lies in affect, crowds, and the empowered interdependence of clasped hands.

Notes

1. Jennifer Kirby, “American Utopia: Socio-economic Critique and Utopia in American Honey and The Florida Project”, *Senses of Cinema*, 92 (October): sensesofcinema.com/2019/feature-articles/american-utopia-socio-economic-critique-and-utopia-in-american-honey-and-the-florida-project/; Francesco Sticchi, *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television: Chronotopes of Anxiety, Depression, Expulsion/Extinction* (Palgrave Macmillan, London: 2021), 223.
2. See, for example, André Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration”, in *What is Cinema? Volume One*. Translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) 154-163.
3. Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics”, *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 32, Number 3 (Spring 2006), 457.
4. For the canonical discussion of literature as the medium capable of grasping the “social totality”, see György Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”, in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays: Georg Lukács*, edited by Arthur D. Kahn (New York: The Merlin Press, 1970), 111-148.
5. Corey Atad, ‘The Florida Project Has the Most Perfect Ending of Any Movie in Years’, *Slate* (Oct 19, 2017) Accessed: 15.4.2021, slate.com/culture/2017/10/the-florida-project-s-ending-is-perfect.html; Kate Stables, ‘Film of the Week: *The Florida Project* Paints a Hardscrabble Wonderland in Candy Colours’, *Sight and Sound* (November 2017)
6. Giovanna De Luca, ‘Seeing Anew: Children in Italian Cinema-1944 to the Present’, in *The Italian Cinema Book*, edited by Peter Bondanella (London: BFI, 2014), 101.
7. Karen Lury, *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears, and Fairytales* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 182.
8. Ashley Lee, “The Florida Project: Director Sean Baker Explains Why and How He Shot That Ending”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 10.11.2017. Accessed: 15.4.2021: hollywoodreporter.com/news/florida-project-ending-director-sean-baker-explains-meaning-how-he-did-it-1047215
9. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, “Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis”, *Public Culture*, 7 (1995), 340.
10. Susan Ferguson, “Children, Childhood, and Capitalism: A Social Reproduction Perspective”, in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017) 113.

11. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 33.
12. Sticchi (2021), 223.
13. Kirby (2019)
14. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 2017), 178.
15. André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, edited with an introduction by François Truffaut, translated by W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971–73), 67.
16. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 279.
17. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47, ix.
18. Hansen (2012), 265.
19. Mary Anne Doane, “The Object of Theory” in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, edited by Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 88.
20. Lucía Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (London, Continuum, 2011), 7-8.
21. Gail Day, “Realism, Totality and the Militant Citizen: Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do with Contemporary Art?” in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetics, Politics, Literature*, edited by Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (London: Continuum, 2011), 217.
22. Lee (2017)
23. After its acquisition of Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm, and 20th Century Fox, Disney represented nearly 40% of US box office share in the last (normal) year of releases: Sarah Whitten, “Disney Accounted for Nearly 40 Percent of the 2019 US Box Office”, *CNBC.com*, 27th December, 2019 (Accessed: 4.4.21)
24. Kracauer (1997), 218.
25. Peter Szendy, *Supermarket of the Visible: Toward a General Economy of Images*, translated by Jan Plug (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 8.
26. Christopher Pavsek, “Leviathan and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography”, *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 33, issue 1 (2015), 9.
27. Karil Kosík, *Dialectics of the Concrete* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1976), 24.
28. Fredric Jameson, “Antinomies of the Realism Modernism Debate”, *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 73, issue 3 (September 2012), 478.
29. See Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996)

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Filmography

The Florida Project. 2017. Dir. Sean Baker

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels. 1975. Dir. Chantal Akerman

Ladybird, Ladybird. 1994. Dir. Ken Loach

Umberto D. 1952. Dir. Vittorio De Sica

Author Biography

Sam Thompson is a PhD student at Concordia University (Montreal), where he researches the relationship between social reproduction and media, and organises with the teaching and research assistants' union. He holds an MPhil in Film and Moving Image Studies from The University of Cambridge and a BA in Philosophy from University College London. Sam has engaged in political struggles around housing, childcare, and work. His popular writings on film and politics have appeared in the *BFI*, *Little White Lies*, and *The Baffler*. In 2019, he co-programmed the film strand of The World Transformed, a festival of politics, art, and ideas that takes place alongside Labour Party Conference.