

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
November 2017

The Florida Project (dir. Sean Baker, 2017)

On Camera

Moonee, the lead: Brooklynn Prince: her feature debut; already signed by UTA agency
Halley, her mother: Bria Vinaite: an aspiring fashion designer, also making her debut
Scooty, her old best friend: Christopher Rivera: another newcomer, tweeting at @flprojectscooty
Jancey, her new best friend: Valeria Cotto: already cast as the lead in a forthcoming fantasy film
Bobby, the hotel manager: Willem Dafoe: *Platoon* (86); *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (14)
Ashley, Scooty's mom: Mela Murder: an actress, dancer, and recording artist; first feature
Jack, Bobby's son: Caleb Landry Jones: most recently the creepy brother in *Get Out* (17)
Narek, the hotel owner: Karren Karagulian: Armenian actor in four of Baker's features
Charlie, the pedophile: Carl Bradfield: Vietnam veteran making a late transition into acting

Off Camera

Writer/Director/Editor: Sean Baker: famously collaborates with new talent and non-professionals
Co-Writer: Chris Bergoch: Baker's friend from NYU; co-wrote his last three features
Cinematography: Alexis Zabe: major talent in Mexican art film; *Silent Light* (07)
Original Score: Lorne Balfe: *The Lego Batman Movie* (17), "The Crown" (TV 17)
Art Direction: Stephonik Youth: Baker's sister, and his frequent collaborator on films

Also directed by Sean Baker...

Take Out (2004) – Co-directed this drama about an illegal Chinese immigrant evading his debtors
Prince of Broadway (2008) – New York hustler of fake "designer" handbags learns he has a son
Starlet (2012) – Touching comedy-drama about old woman's friendship with a young porn actress
Tangerine (2015) – Baker's big breakout, about two black transgender sex workers in Los Angeles

If you enjoyed *The Florida Project*...

The 400 Blows (1959) – French New Wave classic, still the gold standard for child-focused dramas
King of the Hill (1993) – Steven Soderbergh gem about an abandoned boy in the Great Depression
George Washington (2000) – Beautifully shot story about poor children in rural North Carolina
Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012) – Another visually entrancing, kid-centered story about poverty
Life and Nothing More (2017) – Florida-set festival hit; hopefully a distributor will pick it up!

Facts about *The Florida Project* you may appreciate...

Baker has been steadily making his name telling stories about “outsider” Americans, marginalized in terms of class or race or gender or immigrant status, or some combination of these. He has been resourceful and innovative with his meager budgets, famously shooting his breakout film *Tangerine* on a souped-up iPhone. He also works intensively with his actors, including non-professional residents of the regions and communities where his scripts are set, to develop the stories and characters in an organic, collaborative way and to avoid imposing a foreign POV. Baker spoke to *The Guardian* about a heroin addiction in his 20s that he luckily staved off, staying clean for 20 years—so his feel for difficult lives is not about trends or opportunism.

Baker wrote the script with Bergoch six years ago and admits that the movie might have had a darker tone had he filmed it closer to that time. The warm popular and critical reception for *Tangerine*, which approached the lives of hand-to-mouth characters with warmth and humor, inspired Baker to temper the tone of his original concept and make it more easily accessible.

Bergoch’s mother lived in the Orlando area, and her son, a huge Disney fan, visited her often—which is how he came to know about the whole ecosystem of impoverished folks, including families, living in last-resort hotels decorated with Disney themes up and down the highway. Christopher Rivera, who plays Scooty, spent part of his childhood in essentially this situation.

Another major inspiration was the *Little Rascals* series of films from the 1920s and 1930s, depicting the bright, funny lives of creative kids amidst modest-at-best circumstances.

In preparation for the movie, Baker and his collaborators spent a good deal of time with motel managers, Child Services employees, and other women and men who work in the same fields as the movie’s characters. Willem Dafoe lived in the Magic Castle hotel for a week.

Brooklyn Prince booked her first photo shoot at age 2; her mother is an acting coach and former agent. The filmmakers auditioned kids in groups, and Prince happened to be matched with the actors who got the roles of Scooty and Jancey. Their chemistry was obvious to everybody.

After spending two years auditioning more trained actresses and pop stars for the role of Halley, Baker found Lithuanian-born Vinaite through her Instagram account, where she sells clothing she designed with marijuana motifs and included several videos of herself acting silly.

Despite Baker’s notoriety for shooting *Tangerine* so well on an iPhone, *The Florida Project* was mostly filmed on 35mm celluloid, except the night scenes at the hotel and the final sequence.

Baker has also described the movie as having more sociopolitical relevance now, given the huge cuts to Housing and Urban Development under Trump. He has named the Community Hope Center / hope192.com as a worthy community-building project aiming to build affordable housing in the region where *The Florida Project* takes place. (See: theplaylist.net interview)

A24, which released *Moonlight* and *20th Century Women* last year and *Lady Bird* this fall, had not contracted in advance to do an Oscar push for *The Florida Project*, but after critics and festival audiences responded so enthusiastically over the last several months, the game is officially on.

Broad conversation topics...

Eye of the Beholder: Before I saw *The Florida Project*, the reviews I had read implied a more consistently cheerful or heartwarming experience. There seem to be a few different schools of thought or emotional response to the film. Some people describe a buoyant immersion in a child's world, even amid adverse circumstances that only belatedly usurp the charm and energy of the rest of the movie. Other viewers cannot help feeling dismay throughout at the poverty and economic strandedness that have landed these kids and their families in these conditions, spending so much time unsupervised and at risk—with the bright colors of the film only a thin veneer over a tragic circumstance. Did you react one of these ways, or somewhere in between?

Perspective: Moonee is in almost every scene of the movie. Also, the cinematographer kept the cameras quite low while filming, so that the kids' vantage on the world is the visual "norm" of the movie, rather than the viewer looking down on them from an adult vantage. The brightness of the colors might also reflect this child-centered perspective; the cinematographer has said that he and the production team thought of ice cream as the inspiration for their palette. How much did you feel like you were experiencing the whole story through Moonee's point of view? What were the effects of including the few scenes in which she does not appear?

Setting: Baker has said that, even though the project originated in a sense with his co-writer's first-hand experience of the Orlando/Kissimmee area, the problem of "hidden homelessness" extends everywhere in the U.S. In a sense, *The Florida Project* could have been set in almost any state. What difference, then, does it make that the story unfolds in this specific region? Were you thinking all the time about the proximity to Disney World and Epcot (which were referred to jointly as "The Florida Project" in Walt Disney's original land-purchase documents and construction plans)? Do you have other associations with Florida that felt salient here?

Déjà Vu: Speaking of Florida, we have seen two movies in the last couple of years that overlap with some of the ideas and themes in *The Florida Project*. One was *99 Homes*, the drama where a broke single father (Andrew Garfield) wound up working for the Mephistophelian real estate developer (Michael Shannon) who was responsible for his own eviction at the start of the film. That movie saw Florida as an exemplary location for thinking about the broader U.S. housing crisis, following the 2008 crash, but also as an emblem of American dreams (of money, of home ownership) masking more sinister realities. And of course there's *Moonlight*, with its young protagonist and his troubled single mom, eking by with virtually no support. Does *The Florida Project* feel different to you when held up alongside these companion texts?

Structure: With a few exceptions (the sudden series of scenes with Moonee alone in the bathtub, the gathering tension in the climactic sequence when the DCF agents arrive), much of the film feels almost listless in structure, more concerned with character and environment than plot. Did you sense a method within the seemingly casual structure? What scenes are touchstones or turning points for how you experienced the film at the time, or how you think about it now?

The Finale: Baker has admitted to feeling surprised that the final sequence is so polarizing to viewers. What is your interpretation of what happens, and from whose perspective? Why does it matter that the sequence is shot differently than the others, with different editing and music?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Dicky: The movie starts with Moonee and Scooty getting looped into a dastardly plan by their young friend Dicky, racing across the parking lot. The fallout from their spitting prank kills off this friendship. Dicky's removal from Moonee's orbit is even more obvious in retrospect as the first major turning point in the film. Midway through the film, Scooty gets taken away. At the end, Moonee herself is on the verge of being shipped off—a tale of three withdrawals.

“Celebration”: The title appears over the Magic Castle's violet wall, while Kool & the Gang's disco-R&B chestnut swells over the speakers. This marks the movie's first stab at selling itself as cheerful and bright, despite the grim milieu—a style Baker calls “pop vérité.” I also took it as a joke about the setting, since Celebration, Florida, is the artificial community designed to surround Disney World—a myth of cartoon-colored optimism that the film largely debunks.

Perspective: Repeatedly, as showcased in the movie's trailer, kitschy buildings (Orange World, Twistee Treat, the Gift Shop with a giant sorcerer for a roof) are shot dead-center in the frame, with a lens and perspective that makes them look colossal, like the monoliths in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Did you understand this motif as a way to conjure the kids' point of view, since only they could see these edifices as grand and imposing? Did you see them as a kind of running jibe at Florida's expense, where crap buildings and fast-food hovels are like local monuments?

Fakeouts: I knew there'd be a bad turn eventually, and I got nervous when Halley hitched a ride on the highway for herself and the kids, only to get dropped off in a pitch-black parking lot, with only a single, jarringly bright lamppost in the middle of the void. This is a classic visual setup for a horror-movie scenario, and I braced myself for the worst... but it turns out Halley has a plan. She's taking the kids to a dark spot, from which the nightly Disney fireworks will look even brighter. When else did the film imply a dark twist but avoid it, or do the reverse?

Jack: How did you understand the tiff that erupts between Bobby and his son as they are moving the ice machine? Why is Bobby upset that Jack is delivering messages “from” Bobby that he never spoke or sent? Why does *The Florida Project* clarify so little from Bobby's private life?

Details: In the scene where Halley hawks those four Disney passes outside the licensed store, she tells her mark that he'll wind up paying \$600 if he goes inside; she's thus giving him a steal at \$400, but can't go lower. A few scenes later, when the irate “family man” who was clearly a recent customer comes to demand his stolen park passes, he tells Bobby that their combined value was \$1700, which qualifies the theft as grand larceny. *If* Halley has lowballed herself, it's a poignant hint that even when scheming she's prone to childish and costly miscalculations.

Straight Truth: The scenes where Halley and Moonee sell perfume to strangers walking to or from their cars were filmed surreptitiously; the people “playing” Halley's targets did not know at first they were in a movie. Other scenes in *The Florida Project* stand out as barely disguised improvisations, including Moonee's responses to all the food she gets to eat in the final buffet, during which Prince essentially plays straight to the camera. I suspect Dafoe and Bradfield invented the dialogue between Bobby and the pedophile as they walk toward the soda machine. What does it do for the film to include unscripted scenes, without trying to polish them?