

CIN105
ESSAY 2

Xinze Zhao
1002897261

My Life to Live

Florida Project as a Combination of the Classical and Art Film

1. Introduction

The Florida Project (2017), made by the renowned independent filmmaker Sean Baker, is an episodic narration of a single mother, Halley, and her daughter Moonee's hard-up but joyful life in a motel named "Magic Castle" near the Florida Disneyland. It is compassionately portrayed and as emotionally affective as its predecessor, drama / comedy *Tangerine* (2015). These two films, both produced and directed by Baker, are unified with respect to the auteur's continuous attempt to de-marginalize the politic and economic Other of mainstream society. Moreover, both of them focus on the *problematization* of individual or collective dilemma that is specific to the United States culturally and socially, hence revealing a certain tendency of contemporary world cinema – local explorations of politics-aesthetics in the age of economic recession and political instability. Therefore, in its essence, *Florida Project* assimilates the European art films' long tradition originated from Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) up to today's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) by Ken Loach, i.e., cares more about the "real problems" rather than carefully telling a "good story" (Bordwell, "Art Cinema", 776), though its narrative structure still pertains to the tight and rigorous cause-effect chain commonly seen in classical Hollywood films.

In this short essay, I will separately show how Sean Baker combines or disregards certain formal features peculiar to the classical or art film in order to construct the narrative and pre-verbal (stylistic) components of the film, and how these elements interact creatively to reflect the living conditions of the marginal under the systematic intervention and colonialization.

2. Representation – Narrative

As mentioned before the main motivation of the classical narrative, according to David Bordwell, is essentially to “give” or “tell” a story as clearly as possible through meticulous manipulation of spectators’ attention (“Classical Hollywood Cinema” 174). In order to attain this, a carefully conceived narrative structure and unified cause-effect chains are required.

A cause-effect chain which is renounced by art cinema (Bordwell, “Art Cinema”, 775) can be regarded as a chain that links separate incidents with the cause on one end and effect on the other. This causally connected linkage is commonly seen in *Florida Project*, just to name a few, Scooty who is one of Moonee’s best friends picked up a lighter with a naked girl printed on it, later in the story it accidentally becomes the trigger for children’s setting the abandoned house on fire; Halley’s being fired from the dance club because she doesn’t offer “extra job” and together with the failed promotion of Ashley who is Scooty’s mother lead to Halley’s lack of stable income which furtherly causes her being refused of any public assistance allowance; the breaking up of Ashley with Halley leads to Halley’s having to take care of Moonee all day and eventually turning to prostitution...

Correspondingly, the film’s narrative structure can be distinctly demarcated into the following chapters: 1) beginning; 2) development; 3) crisis; 4) climax. The beginning consists of the arrival of a new friend Jancey from the neighboring motel Futureland, and how Moonee acquainted with her through the spit contest. The second component, which is development, focuses on the fostering of Moonee and Scooty’s friendship with the newcomer Jancey. Together, they help the

tourists out in exchange of tips, they beg for changes in front of an ice cream stall, and they roam and run around the Magic Castle in looking for fun, novelty and troubles, e.g., sneak into power distribution room to shut down the whole motel's electricity. In this section, spectators are completely immersed into the story and become emotionally connected with the children. The crisis unexpectedly arrives when they accidentally set an abandoned house on fire which causes Ashley to prevent Scooty from playing with Moonee and stop to provide her with free lunch, this leads to Halley's conflict with Ashley and consequently the breakup of their friendship. Halley suddenly becomes much more vulnerable and helpless after losing her only friend, she has to look after Moonee 24/7 now and her only income source is re-selling fake perfumes in front of a local luxury resort. As it becomes more and more difficult to afford the rent, she decides to mitigate the financial hardship by turning to illegal operation that she previously disdained. This eventually results the intervention from DCF (*Florida Department of Children and Families*) and law enforcement that try to take away Moonee from the mother they consider unfit.

So far, the general structure of the narrative indeed resembles the multi-play nature of classical films, but the key difference lies in the function. In classical films, all previous effort of carefully constructing the narrative is to attain a goal in the end, however, this is not the case in *Florida Project*. In the last ten minutes, the story attains its highest tension when Moonee says her final goodbye with Scooty and Ashley just before DCF taking her away and settling her down in a family somewhere in Polk County, Scooty interrupts, "My mom said you're going to another family". Only then, Moonee realizes that DCF's saying that she's going to somewhere really fun temporarily is just a white lie and this finally leads to her outburst. She desperately breaks free from DCF staff's control and runs off. Here, her running away is captured by a low-angle

positioned camera which approximately resembles a kid's perspective, the continuous tracking shots together with helicopter's rumbling roar externalize her frightened and unstable inner state of mind. This technique of externalizing character's mental activity through sound can be traced in both art and classical film, a well-known example is Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) in which the rumble of a passing train externalizes protagonist's nervousness during the assassination. Moonee's running scene also involves crosscutting of additional lines of actions – Halley's heated quarrel with DCF questioning how they can let her child run away so easily and motel manager Bob's bewildering and trying to trace Moonee's whereabouts – which resembles classical films' linear causality with interweaving actions (Bordwell, "Classical Hollywood Cinema", 176). After Mooney flees to the Futureland, cries to Jancey and says her final farewell, Jancey resolutely grabs her hand and the two start to run again. Here the cinematography medium is suddenly switched to handheld digital and nondiegetic string music cuts in unexpectedly, and precisely starting from this moment, the technical and aesthetic paradigm of classical form previously established in the film shatters completely as these digital shots are so unconventionally shabby that intermittent out-of-focus and image distortions can be observed. These handheld tracking shots from different angles and positions of Mooney and Jancey's escaping and passing by different settings and suburban scape are juxtaposed by continuity editing and jump cuts. At last, through a sequence of shot-from-behind tracking takes, we see them entering the Disney Magic Kingdom and running toward the Cinderella Castle tirelessly, tirelessly until they completely blend into the crowds and only the castle in soft focus remains legible. This movingly done ending sequence resembles that of Truffaut's famous *The 400 Blows* (1959) in which the young hero *Antoine Doinel* escapes from the youth detention center and untiringly runs towards the sea, except it ends with a freeze-frame of Antoine's face

while *Florida Project* ends with an out-of-focus Disney Castle in an unsteady long shot emblematic of the contemporary advanced consumer society. However, both of the films end abruptly and lack any clear resolution which is radically contrary to classical films in which the main concern is to conclude the whole story with a definite action which resolves the cause-effect chains into a final effect (Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema”, 175). What is going to happen to Moonee? Is the last sequence shot in Disneyland even real? These questions from the spectators are left dangling and unanswered. This thorough divergence suggests the contrasting end of *Florida Project*’s which is to expose the unavoidable and unescapable difficulties of the marginal who are systematically subordinated.

3. Representation – Pre-verbal

If the narrative in *The Florida Project*, according to the above justification, sheds light on the marginal’s living conditions and everlasting difficulties, its stylistic elements which are pre-verbal in nature make it more convincing and affecting and at the same time leave more room for interpretation.

Architectural space, which is a part of mise-en-scène in cinema, is largely neglected or simplified in classical films, even for those whose stories are exclusively taking place indoor like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Dial M for Murder* (1954) and Billy Wilder’s *The Apartment* (1960). This is both due to the technical limitations at the time and the fact that portrayal of film space is usually not something that is efficient or clear-cut enough for storytelling. By contrast, film space which is instantiated as the daughter’s empty room after her arranged marriage in Yasujiro Ozu’s *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), the seemingly-luxury restaurant in Jacques Tati’s *Playtime* (1967),

and protagonist's quarantine apartment in Tsai Ming-Liang's *The Hole* (1998), serves as an important theme for art films due to the technical advancement and ambiguity as one of the dominant principles (Bordwell, "Art Cinema", 779). However, it's Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) that in my opinion resembles the utilization of film space in *Florida Project* the most as they both treat the depicted living space as an extension and hence an integral part of the subject's emotion and body as well as an external, almost prison-like confinement of the subject's future alternatives. In Akerman's almost three-and-a-half-hour-long masterpiece, the architectural space depicted becomes an extension of the protagonist – single mother Jeanne Dielman – as she virtually spends all of her time in this space cooking, cleaning, bathing, having sex with clients in exchange for her and her son's subsistence, and looking after her son after he comes back home from school, day after day... While in *Florida Project*, Magic Castle is the sanctuary for Bobby when he smokes and leans toward the third floor's balcony railings after sunset, it is a place of exchange for Halley when she goes swimming with Ashley to chat and talk about news in the night, and it's the purple Magic Kingdom for Jancey and Moonee when they roam around, play with friends and descend/ascend the staircase for millions of times a day, they are all so familiar with and attached to this space such that it not only becomes indispensable emotionally but also acts like a certain organ in their bodies – they need it to keep alive. However, Sean Baker mostly applies wide-angle shots that are usually paired with one-point perspective when portraying this architectural space, creating a sense of confinement and sometimes even claustrophobia which suggests a prolonged process of alienation that is going unnoticed, Bobby is always subordinated to the motel owner's orders and Halley is always agonized over the next day's rent...



As mentioned above in the analysis of narrative, another salient formal stylistic element featured in this film is the cinematography. Most of the graphical representations are largely conformed to the classical system in the sense that no camera movements or compositions are void of any narrative motivations, and the following sequence embodying Deleuzian *affection-image* combines both this narrative motivation and the ambiguity principle found in the art film. It's an approximately fifteen-second-long stationary take (01:07:20 ~ 01:07:35) in which Halley is shown smoking while watching sunset, occupying the left part of the frame with her back turned away from the spectators, the middle ground and background are both out of focus while the view of her back though in focus is hardly legible due to the setting sun's backlighting. This medium to close shot of her smoking functions as an affection-image since this is the scene of affect after being humiliated by the neighboring motel's owner and getting busted for selling fake perfumes by the resort's security, namely following the perception of losing her only source of income. Meanwhile, it's prior to Halley's action of turning to prostitution which means this narratively motivated sequence belongs to movement-image which is commonly seen in classical films during the first half of 20th century. However, it's divergent from the classical aesthetic norm in the sense that it avoids unambiguously showing the affection which can easily be done by portraying her face or frontal view directly, instead only the view of her from behind is perceivable to perceivers and her emotions seem to be hidden away. Still, this take is equivalent to a direct shot of face according to Deleuzian conception of close-up/face as two poles with "immobile receptive plate" on one end and "micro-movements of expression" (90) on the other can be perceived in this shot. Silhouette of Halley's stationary body and several trees scattered in the middle ground together with the radiance and its aura remaining over the horizon constitutes

this immobile surface as a reflecting unity, sacrificing their *motoricity* (Deleuze 87) to give rise to the expressive micro-movement of Halley's hair being gently brushed by wind and her gestures of picking up and holding down a cigarette which amount to the affection. Hence preserving the affective quality of frontal view while generating an additional layer of ambiguity.

4. Conclusion

From the above limited analysis of narrative and stylistic aspects of *The Florida Project*, it's not difficult to see that although Sean Baker approximately retains some basic characteristics of the classical film like cause-effect chains and play-like narrative structure, he renounces the classical principle of attaining a goal and clearly telling a story in which compositional unity has a higher priority over the realism. He adopts the principles from art films in which characters are free, that is, no longer subordinated to the story, by implementing the episodic nature instead of a clear-cut goal, focusing more on portraying characters' living space rather than meticulously creating a situation to put them on trials, and veiling with ambiguity in order to create a sense of alienation between perceivers and the perceived. In the end, the result is undeniably affecting and thought-provoking as it unveils the very nature of system as the government of the living.

Works Cited

- Am Autumn Afternoon*. Dir. Yasujiro Ozu. Perf. Chishu Ryu, et al. Shochiku Co., Ltd. 1962.
- Bicycle Thieves*. Dir. Vittorio De Sica. Perf. Lamberto Maggiorani and Enzo Staiola. Produzioni De Sica. 1948.
- Bordwell, David. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." Brandy, Leo and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 774-782.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 1985.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Dial M for Murder*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Grace Kelly, Ray Milland and Robert Cummings. Warner Bros. Pictures, First National Pictures. 1954.
- Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles*. Dir. Chantal Akerman. Perf. Delphine Seyrig and Jan Decorte. Paradise Films, Unite Trois, Ministere de la Culture Francaise de Belgique. 1975.
- Playtime*. Dir. Jacques Tati. Perf. Jacques Tati and Barbara Dennek. Jolly Film, Specta Film. 1967.
- Rome, Open City*. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. Perf. Aldo Fabrizi, et al. Minerva Film SpA, Excelsa Film. 1945.
- Tangerine*. Dir. Sean Baker. Perf. Kitana Kiki Rodriguez, Mya Taylor and Karren Karagulian. Through Films, Duplass Brothers Productions. 2015.
- The 400 Blows*. Dir. Francois Truffaut. Perf. Jean-Pierre Leaud. Les Films du Carrosse, Sedif Productions. 1959.
- The Apartment*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Perf. Jack Lemmon and Shirley Maclaine. United Artists, The Mirisch Company. 1960.
- The Florida Project*. Dir. Sean Baker. Perf. Brooklynn Prince, Bria Vinaite and Willem Dafoe. Cera Film, Freestyle Picture Company, Cinereach, June Pictures. 2017.
- The Godfather*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Al Pacino and Marlon Brando. Paramount, Alfran Productions. 1972.
- The Hole*. Dir. Ming-Liang Tsai. Perf. Kuei-Mei Yang and Kang-Sheng Lee. Haut et Court, Arc Light Films, La Sept-Arte, Central Motion Picture Corporation, China Television. 1998.