

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
November 2016

Moonlight (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016)

On Camera

“Little”:
Paula, mother:
Juan:
Teresa:

Chiron:
Kevin, teenager:
Terrel, bully:

“Black”:
Kevin, grown:

Alex Hibbert: No previous film credits
Naomie Harris: *28 Days Later* (02); *Miami Vice* (06); *Skyfall* (12); *Mandela* (13)
Mahershala Ali: *Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (08); *House of Cards* (13–)
Janelle Monáe: popular R&B/funk performer; upcoming *Hidden Figures* (16)

Ashton Sanders: *The Retrieval* (13); *Straight Outta Compton* (15)
Jharrel Jerome: two upcoming features, including *Monster* (17)
Patrick Decile: No previous or upcoming film credits

Trevante Rhodes: Tyler Perry’s *If Loving You Is Wrong* (14–); *Weightless* (17)
André Holland: *Selma* (14); *The Knick* (14–15); *American Horror Story* (16)

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Barry Jenkins: *Medicine for Melancholy* (08), a low-key, conversation-driven romantic drama about two African Americans on a date in San Francisco
Original Story: Tarell Alvin McCraney: Playwright, MacArthur “Genius Grant” recipient, and Steppenwolf Ensemble member: *The Brother/Sister Plays*, *Head of Passes*
Cinematography: James Laxton: *Medicine for Melancholy* (08); *Camp X-Ray* (14)
Musical Score: Nicholas Britell: *The Big Short* (15), *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (15)
Costume Design: Caroline Eselin-Schaefer: *Ballast* (08); *The Paperboy* (12); *As I Lay Dying* (13)
Film Editing: Joi McMillon: several Tyler Perry projects; and Nat Sanders: *Short Term 12* (13)

If you liked *Moonlight*, you might also enjoy...

Looking for Langston (1988) – Poetic, 45-minute meditation on the gay life of Langston Hughes
Happy Together (1997) – Two gay Chinese men, exiled in Buenos Aires, endure a stormy affair
Before Night Falls (2000) – Visually rich biography of the exiled gay Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas
George Washington (2000) – A lyrical, beautifully shot portrait of the modern, diverse U.S. South
Brother to Brother (2004) – Homeless black gay teen and Harlem Renaissance poet become close
Three Times (2005) – The “same” man and woman fall in love in Taiwan in 1911, 1966, and 2005
Ballast (2008) – Lushly shot drama of a black man, woman, and child scraping by in the South

Facts about *Moonlight* you may appreciate...

McCraney grew up in Miami with a crack-addicted mother and no stable father figure. He insists that *Moonlight* is not autobiographical but he drew heavily on his life experience. McCraney never intended *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*—the original working title—to be a play, since the writing was so strongly informed by visual images rather than language or structure. The inciting incident was his mother's death of AIDS, after years of addiction. McCraney, graduating from DePaul at the time, was not with her. He started writing *Black Boys* to try to understand how people in families can be so close while also missing each other completely.

Jenkins was born in Liberty City, Florida. His feature projects after *Medicine for Melancholy* never got off the ground. He was introduced to McCraney through mutual acquaintances in the Florida arts scene, who believed they would be able to develop *Moonlight* in tandem, given several overlaps in their upbringing. When McCraney won his MacArthur Grant to finish his play *Head of Passes*, he gave Jenkins the go-ahead to finish and adapt the material himself.

Jenkins worked more than once as part of the seasonal staff at the Telluride Film Festival. In 2013, the year *12 Years a Slave* was the sensation of that festival, he met Brad Pitt and his producing partner Dede Gardner, who saw a draft of *Moonlight* and agreed to finance the project. This year, *Moonlight* played at Telluride as one of the marquee attractions.

The three actors who played Chiron had no access to each other and saw no footage of each other's scenes during the shoot (which lasted less than a month), to keep them from imitating each other. Jenkins counted on his direction and on a similarity in their gazes to link their portraits.

Jenkins listed three films as direct inspirations on *Moonlight's* style and storytelling: the gay Hong Kong drama *Happy Together* (1997), the African-set French drama *Beau travail* (1999), and the three-part Taiwanese drama *Three Times* (2005). Seldom have African American stories been expressed on screen through styles primarily imported from Asian and European art film.

Because of scheduling and visa issues, Naomie Harris filmed all her scenes as Chiron's mother in three days. Heightening the challenge, she had to play her scenes in Part 1 on the first day, in Part 3 the next, and Part 2 the next. She had never met Trevante Rhodes, who plays the oldest Chiron, until ten minutes before they shot their intense scene at the rehab center. (Also, Harris is a British woman of Caribbean ancestry who does not drink or smoke. This was a *stretch*.)

André Holland is a longtime friend of Tarell Alvin McCraney and had acted in several of his plays. He is the only member of the cast who followed the project in the years it took to finance it.

Much of the hip-hop and R&B on the film's soundtrack has been remixed or adapted through a technique called "chop and screw," where songs are played much slower than how they were recorded. The remixer further adds repetitions, record scratches, skips and glitches, and other embellishments. As the movie continues, the original music composed for the film and even the classical pieces by Mozart and other composers also get subjected to these techniques.

Ali and Monáe will both appear in the drama *Hidden Figures*, opening at Christmas, about a group of female African American mathematicians who worked at NASA during the Apollo years.

Broad conversation topics...

Structure: McCraney's material initially braided the story of the three Chirons into each other—sort of the way a film like *The Hours* (2002) weaves amongst three storylines at different times that nonetheless reverberate with each other, tonally and plotwise. One of Jenkins's major changes was to compartmentalize the piece into three coherent, successive "chapters." How does this structure shape our viewing experience, in ways that make sense with the piece?

Composite Identity: Some of you may have seen the recent Steppenwolf play *Mary Page Marlowe*, in which six actresses played the title character—an alcoholic divorcée and sometime accountant in Ohio—at different stages of her life, from early youth to her deathbed. As in *Moonlight*, the play did not attempt to iron out every difference in how Mary Page looked, sounded, and acted at different times. Both pieces presume that, while some threads in our lives remain stable, other parts of our personalities transform dramatically across time. What was most consistent about Chiron for you from chapter to chapter? What was least so?

Medium: Speaking of theater, one reason McCraney never developed this piece as a play is that it would have required the characters to express themselves much more directly in dialogue—even those defined by their silence or reserve. In your experience, by what nonverbal means did the film express itself most powerfully, including through images, sounds, and close-ups?

Place and Context: Reviews of *Moonlight* refer to the film as taking place in Liberty City, in Miami more broadly, in Florida, and in the South, all of which are true (especially in light of the third-act scenes set in Atlanta). What seemed most distinctive about this story in relation to these settings? How would it have been fundamentally different if located elsewhere? What knowledge or stereotypes about Miami, Florida, or the South did the film challenge?

Sexuality: The shorthand description a lot of people hear about *Moonlight* is that it's about a gay black man at three different stages of his life. In some senses, this seems perfectly true. In other ways, Chiron's sexuality seems much more ambiguous than this, as does Kevin's. What actions or information in *Moonlight* would give you pause before labeling the men's desires?

Finale: The penultimate shot of *Moonlight* is a two-shot of Chiron and Kevin sitting side by side, apparently clothed, with arms around each other's shoulders. The color palette of that shot is a kind of sepia or twilight burgundy—very different from the deeper blues, reds, and blacks or the almost blinding whites and yellows that dominate the rest of the film. What did you read into this shot, including its visual difference from the rest of the movie? What about the only shot that follows: of Little's back in profile, staring at the blue ocean, before he turns around?

A Plea: Starting this Friday, November 18, the Siskel Film Center will present a documentary called *Raising Bertie*, which follows three black male teenagers in rural Bertie County, North Carolina, as they struggle to flourish amid very difficult circumstances, to include deficient public schooling, the cancellation of afterschool programs, absent fathers and overworked single mothers, rural gang violence, romantic and reproductive travails, and limited economic and cultural opportunities. Please see it, and compare these boys' experiences to Chiron's. How are race and class colluding in related but non-identical ways to limit their possibilities?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Music: The first words we hear are the lyrics of a doleful 1973 soul ballad called “Every Ni***r Is a Star” by Boris Gardiner. Even if you don’t know the full song, how does that sentiment speak to the characters in the movie? What does this starting-point suggest about the film?

Dialogue: “We’ll empty the register on the weekend,” Juan tells his seller in the street, meaning he will collect all the cash later. Then, right away, “How’s your mama?” Juan’s combination of soft-spoken even-keeled criminality and solicitude for people’s private lives is instantly clear.

Camera: In Juan’s first scene, the camera circles elegantly around the actors, observing them from all sides and precluding the need for many edits. When we cut to Little being chased by his classmates, the camerawork couldn’t be more different: fast-paced and jostled, with several high-speed cuts. What purpose does it serve for the movie to adopt such different styles in quick succession? And why do you think the film adopts the perspective of the bullies, chasing Little from behind, rather than *his* vantage, or a more quickly sympathetic focus on his face?

Sound: If you aren’t listening closely, you might not hear one of the offscreen bullies shouting “Get his gay ass!” as they pursue Little. Without that clue, it might not be obvious right away why he is a target—setting a precedent, too, for having to use your ears *and* eyes in this film.

Props: Temporarily insulated inside the abandoned apartment, Little holds a broken crack pipe up to the light coming through the window, producing a prismatic refraction. Finding color and beauty amidst ugliness, and specifically from poverty’s ugliness: that’s what the film is about!

Costumes: Juan is wearing the same outfit when he finds Little in the apartment as in the first scene on the street corner. As low-key as the movie’s energy often feels, a lot happens to these characters within individual days. This is even more obvious during the movie’s last chapter.

Camerawork: In the first diner scene (one of many where Little uses food as both comfort and shield), the camera executes a very slow, subtle zoom on Juan and the little boy, adding some visual tension to what, on the surface, is a genial and even charitable encounter. The first time I saw *Moonlight*, this detail and others led me to believe that Juan was being set up as a sexual predator. Did you feel similarly? Why might the film stoke this kind of unease around him?



Colors: As Little sits in the car, awaiting his introduction to Teresa, the blue car and blue sky are made even bluer by a filter on the camera or tint in the image. Blue is unquestionably Chiron’s signature color across the film, culminating in the final shot. When else was the use of blue most striking to you, or when did it seem suddenly conspicuous in its absence? All of the movie’s emphasis on bruisey, jewel-toned blues, reds, purples, and blacks is also quite a departure from Barry Jenkins’s first feature *Medicine for Melancholy*, which had a very distinctive palette: *almost* black and white, but with subtle traces of colored tint.

Dialogue: When Juan tells Paula he found Little in the abandoned tenement, he quickly adds, “Yeah, *that* one.” He clocks right away that she is a user, even if he doesn’t recognize her.

Music: As the boys play soccer with a ball made of shredded newspaper, the soundtrack emits two contrasting notes: shrill blasts of a passing train and the swells of Mozart's *Laudate Dominum* from his *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore*, a liturgical work derived from Psalm 117. There is so much contrast here: the "high" classical music with the "low" economic milieu (though these are biased terms), the profane and the sacred, the harsh and the delicate. Note how these paradoxes apply to Chiron's life and to *Moonlight*'s telling of his story, and how many other times the soundtrack or the sound/image relation points simultaneously in different directions.

Camera and Costume: As Kevin and Little circle each other and get ready for their tussle on the ground, the camera films from *quite* far away, with both boys utterly out of focus, then steadily closes in on them and starts orbiting them. These are two strategies *Moonlight* often employs: taking pretty distant views of a character to whom it nonetheless has an intimate relationship, and going in and out of focus to suggest the characters are visible and vague at the same time. This may account for some of our feelings that we have a pretty close hold on Chiron *and yet* he continues to elude us. Notice, too, that Kevin's and Little's outfits are mostly red, white, and blue in this scene. Once they start wrestling, they look like a flag fighting with itself.

Tone and Allusion: Juan's scene teaching Little to swim is such a tender baptism, but the musical score foregrounds some harsh, slightly manic strings. Once again, *Moonlight* refuses to settle into just one tone. The lens stays *right* at the waterline, so it's hard to tell if Little is swimming or drowning (and, indeed, if the camera is). Once we're back on the shore, as Juan recalls his Cuban childhood and insists there have always been black people everywhere, the shots recall a famous scene in *Boyz n the Hood* when Tre's father takes him out of South Central and teaches him how to fish while giving lessons about how to be a man. Juan, though, has a more global view of blackness beyond the US, and is acting as something like *and* not like a father.

Context: Little stumbles into a room where his classmates are looking at and commenting on each other's penises, and assuming that they imply something about their budding masculinity. This scene, including the fact that we do not see the boys' bodies, recalls an article that Pulitzer Prize-winning culture commentator Wesley Morris published last month about the ongoing taboo about black male nudity in American TV and film, and about his own coming-into-being as a gay black man. *Moonlight* figures heavily at the end of the article. Read it at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/30/magazine/black-male-sexuality-last-taboo.html>.



Allusion: As Little pours bubble bath (or is it dish soap?) into his tub and creates a poignantly downscale version of his ocean swim with Juan, the shot reminded me of *Gummo* (1997), a cult film well-known to directors and cinephiles about white kids in an impoverished, tornado-wrecked Ohio town who largely try to get by without adult supervision. The link to this iconic image puts *Moonlight* in dialogue with white films about poor childhoods.

Music: As we look at Little in his tub, the soft piano makes the moment oddly tender. As we cut to Juan's drug-selling corner, the solo brass sounds both military and funereal. In the dream scene of Paula screaming in the hallway, all we hear are violins. Beyond how each sound works at each moment, what does it mean that *Moonlight* keeps switching among instruments?

Production Design: The details in Juan and Teresa's house are probably our best indicator of how much money he pulls in from his drug sales. How cushy or not is it? What does it mean to know that all these relative comforts in Chiron's life depend on ill-gotten cash—unless Teresa is pulling in some unspecified income? What does she know or not know about Juan's work?

Framing: In the already-famous moment when Juan explains that “A ‘faggot’ is a word used to make gay people feel bad,” *Moonlight* elects to film Juan's face in close-up rather than Little's, as he absorbs this information. What do we learn about Juan here from his face *and* his words?

Sound: Early in the middle section, when Chiron has his nighttime dream about Kevin having sex outside with his (barely seen) girlfriend, the image is filled with the loudly-mixed sound of the ocean waves, as the camera moves through the dark house. What does this sound invoke for you? The day in the sea with Juan? An early signal of where Chiron and Kevin will connect?

Point of View: When Chiron returns home the next day and meets his mother in the yard, not yet realizing she has locked herself out, she stares directly into the camera. This is a classic point-of-view shot, directly from Chiron's perspective. This is not the first or last time the movie adopts Chiron's perspective so fully. It happens again, for example, in the scene where Kevin is forced to beat him outside the school; we await his punches from Chiron's perspective. Why do you think the film goes so far out of its way at times to see the world as Chiron does—even though other parts of the movie keep us *and* the characters so frustratingly outside his head?

Privacy: Kevin and Chiron's sexual contact on the beach is quite frank *and* somewhat closeted. With the camera behind the boys and an edit in the middle of the scene, we cannot determine exactly what is happening (though we have a good idea!), how long the episode has lasted, or how one-way or mutual the sexual attention has been. Like the night on Brokeback Mountain, this is both the pivot on which the protagonist's life will hinge forever afterward *and* a semi-closeted memory whose full details are kept from us. How does this affect the way we take the rest of the movie? How consistent is it with *Moonlight's* storytelling tactics in general?

Cinematography: In successive scenes, the kitchen in Paula and Chiron's home and the school cafeteria suffer under the same over-bright fluorescent lighting—a symmetry that serves to link the spaces, reminding us that neither of them is a safe space, or one where Chiron can hide.

Sound: In many movies, Chiron's assault would be delivered as brutally as possible, with all the emphasis on Kevin's landing punches. *Moonlight*, though, especially in its soundtrack, makes the moment layered, almost dreamlike. Sometimes voices are loudly audible and sometimes they drop out completely. Sometimes a lonely woodwind (not an instrument we have heard in any other scene) floods the soundtrack, which at other instants goes completely silent. What is at stake in making this scene so sonically slippery, even a bit abstract?

Costume: When Chiron shows back up at school, intent on breaking that chair over Terrel's back, he wears a short-sleeved, collared, turquoise T-shirt we haven't seen him in before—though it's a close match with the one Kevin wore while he beat up his friend. It's as though the mantle of violence has directly passed from one boy to the other, with awful consequences. (The chair, incidentally, explodes into pieces. This school cannot afford sturdier furniture.)

Editing: Though this episode will have a decisive impact on Chiron’s life, the scene cuts twice to a shot of Terrel on the ground, after being clobbered with the chair. We never see his face—again, the film is cagey about getting directly intimate with the characters’ feelings—but his broken, defeated pose is hard to look at. Did you feel sympathy for Terrel in this moment?

Props: As the third act begins, we zoom out from a close-up on the gold fronts that “Black” wears over his teeth. Why might the film make this detail so important to our sense of his character? What all does this one prop suggest, in common with or in contrast to earlier Chirons?

Symmetry: Black has no idea at first that Kevin has called, because his mother is the only person who ever seems to ring him up. The whole third act is devoted to two reconciliations, both long in coming: first with Paula, then with Kevin, both of whom profess to have mended their ways. What would it mean to see Paula and Kevin as “doubles” for each other in this part of the film? What is most similar and most different in Chiron’s relationship to each character?

Props: The long close-up on Kevin’s phone cord when he calls, well before we see his face, drives home that he and Black use different technologies, with all the status difference they imply.

Production Design: After their call, Black seems to have a fantasy of Kevin smoking in romantic slow-motion in front of his diner, looking into the camera (which, once again, seems to imply Chiron’s gaze). Unexpectedly, the restaurant in this dream vision looks very similar to the one where Kevin actually works, as though the Kevin he made up in his mind and the real Kevin he hasn’t seen in ten years are closely matched. Or is a line between reality and fantasy blurring?

Framing: At the start of Black’s scene with Paula at the rehab center, the shot is limned on two edges by the branches of a tree, as though literally “framing” the image. This was a convention of 1950s Hollywood movies: Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson, for example, were forever being filmed amid branches and foliage, tastefully framing the shot. By citing this old visual cliché, the highly contemporary *Moonlight* forms a relationship with classical Hollywood melodrama. (Lest this image seem too delicate, though, the sound of screeching birds roughens it up a bit.)

Framing: As Black and Paula converse, we see two well-dressed, long-haired blonde women strolling and talking in the back of the shot. It’s a nice way to ensure that the film doesn’t perpetuate a stereotype of only people of color or obviously working-class people as addicts. It’s also worth noting that these two are the only other people in the shot. Often, in fact, the shots in *Moonlight* include nobody beyond the main characters. This is a pretty empty world.

Music: Black’s long drive down to Florida features Caetano Veloso’s “Cuccurucucú Paloma” on the soundtrack, the same gentle ballad that Pedro Almodóvar featured in a key scene in *Talk to Her* (2002), though again mixed slower and lower here. Once more, *Moonlight* draws links to a diverse array of film traditions but also presents Black as a character who enjoys listening to Spanish-language music. (Blackness and Latin culture are not fully separate in this movie.)

Costume: Black’s wardrobe and general look are so understated, aside from those gold teeth, that it might have been possible to neglect how carefully he constructs his casual image—but Jenkins gives him a moment to carefully dress and brush his hair before entering the restaurant.

Point of View: We get one more chance to fully inhabit Chiron's point of view as Black gazes into Kevin's face, once they finally make eye contact at the counter. This moment is different, though, because even as we hear Kevin's voice, the character's lips don't move. Beyond just seeing what Black sees, we seem to share his heightened, poetic sense of this crucial instant.

Cinematography: Seldom in this last act does *Moonlight* pass in and out of focus completely, but several shots in the Black/Kevin scenes are pristinely focused in the center of the image while subtly blurring around the edges, giving them an understated visual fragility, like memories.

Music: Barbara Lewis's 1963 R&B hit "Hello, Stranger" is the song Kevin plays for Black on the jukebox, and which another male customer recently selected, apparently prompting Kevin to call his old friend. For a film that is often so elliptical, the lyrics address the plot and theme of *Moonlight* pretty directly ("Hello, stranger / It seems so good to see you back again / How long has it been?"). The song is a full decade older than what Juan plays in his car in the opening scene, as though *Moonlight* has gone sonically *back* in time, while the story pushes forward.

Production Design: One of my favorite props in the movie is the pegboard Kevin has on his wall in his apartment, because it stands so empty—just four tacks, with nothing pinned up. How does this square with Kevin's testimony about "having a life" for the first time? How full or empty does his life appear, based on his living space? (To be fair, the walls sport several of Kevin Jr.'s drawings. They in fact fill the space between Kevin and Black in the shot.)

Foreshadowing and Misdirection: So many cues in the final scenes and especially in Kevin's behavior suggest that these two are headed into a romantic evening: Kevin brushing his brows and hair in the car and slipping into something more comfortable once they're in his apartment; Black coyly turning up the radio rather than answering Kevin's question about where he will spend the night in Miami; the image Black sees from the parking lot of a bridge leading to a beach, plus the sound of rolling waves, which also prefaced that night he and Kevin indelibly spent on the beach long ago. Do you think these men were initially going to make love, but something about their conversation shifted their plans? Was the night always meant to end as it does? How much do we know or can we assume about how this evening may still go? What are the many things Black is saying, or *might* be saying, in confiding to Kevin, "You're the only man that ever touched me. The only one. I haven't really touched anyone since."