

Moonlight

(Barry Jenkins, 2016)

Component 1 Section B: American film since 2005

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts of film**

Specialist Study Areas:

- **Ideology**
- **Spectatorship**

Rationale for study: *Moonlight* is a coming-of-age story that follows an African American man as he navigates through three periods of his life, each with a different name: Little (child), Chiron (adolescent) and Black (adult). In each stage he must struggle with his sexuality, his identity and the addiction-rooted problems of his Miami community. *Moonlight* won the Academy Award for Best Film, the only LGBTQ film with an all-Black cast to do so. It also won Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor.

STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings

“Opening: Little and Juan” 00:00 – 7:04

“Floating in the sea” 16:40 – 21:19

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- The film opens with a single tracking shot that

glides along behind Juan, a drug dealer, as he checks in with his employees. The tracking shot shows this is Juan’s natural environment, in which he has comfortable authority.

- When Little bursts into the scene, the camerawork becomes handheld, jerky and anxious, reflecting the protagonist’s fear as he flees the bullies.
- In the final scenes of the film the camera rests on a single character’s face for extended locked close-up. This makes us feel almost uncomfortably intimate with the character. (This is a trademark use of close-up for Jenkins.)
- Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton have won plaudits for the way they light and film Black skin. Part of this is to establish location: “The light and heat in Miami is very specific... Perspiration is inherent in every experience. There’s a beauty to the sheen.” Lighting has been used to sculpt and add tone and texture to the faces of the characters.
- There is also a political dimension to this. The technology of filmmaking has been criticised for being “calibrated to white skin”; but Jenkins and Laxton have challenged this. The events are also seen through the filter of Little/ Chiron/ Black’s view, so the male faces and bodies should appear beautiful to reflect his sexuality.

Mise-en-scène

- Though the narrative may feature drug crime and addiction, the lighting and production design challenges our expectations of inner city ‘hoods’. The houses are painted in pastel colours and there is bright sun and palm trees.
- The beach location comes to represent freedom for Little/Chiron – it is here he can be himself:

relax and float in the ocean, feel the breeze, and have his first sexual encounter.



Image by Allstar Picture Library Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Editing

- In the opening scene, it feels unusual to open with a character who isn't the protagonist, but this is a deliberate ploy to stress the important influence of environment on who Little/Chiron becomes.
- The cut between the tracking shot that follows Juan, and Little chased by the bullies, shows how the former has a relaxed authority in this world, whereas the same environment is terrifying and dangerous for Little.
- There are lots of ellipses in the film: moments where the story cuts away, seemingly missing out key scenes. A good example is in the second clip, where we don't see Juan invite Little to the beach or ask his mother's permission. You should consider this and other ellipses in the film – why has Jenkins done this? What might it tell us about 'missing moments' in the protagonist's life?

Sound

- Silences pervade the film; it is unusual for there to be such extended periods of no dialogue. These are emblematic of the protagonist's trauma and fear. In the opening sequence, Little is too shell-shocked to respond to Juan's gentle questioning. Later, he learns how to censor himself: he cannot, and dare not, speak his true feelings, because this will give away his sexuality and make him vulnerable.

Performance

- For a film with extended close-ups and sparse dialogue, the performances of the lead actors need to speak volumes. Mahershala Ali (as Juan) manages to balance quiet authority and tenderness. Naomie Harris added depth and complexity to what could be a stereotypical 'junkie mother' role by visiting recovery centres for crack addicts. Trevante Rhodes has probably the most difficult role in the final scenes with Kevin, managing to communicate a lifetime of regret and repressed desire, cut off from intimacy or tenderness.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Jenkins grew up in Liberty City, Miami, where the film is set, and he has said he wanted to "bring the arthouse to the ghetto" in his portrayal of the community. Challenging stereotypes of macho, violent gangsters, Juan is a tender figure, happy to play a fatherly role to Little. Though Little/Chiron feels oppressed by this environment, he also finds escape in the beach and sea. By portraying the struggles of a young gay African American, Jenkins has challenged stereotypes about Black lives and communities.

Aesthetics

- The film employs contrast and colour to create an almost dreamlike aesthetic. It combines elements of realism (e.g. locations, performances) and the expressive.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social

- The writer of the original play, Tarell Alvin McCraney, based the story on his own formative years. He said he spent many of these avoiding the 'alpha' masculinity of most of the boys, finding sanctuary with a caring father figure. Stereotypical representations of young African American men from 'the hood' focus on exaggerated machismo, and McCraney wanted to tell a different story.

Cultural

- To identify the style with which to portray Black male faces and bodies, particularly from the perspective of a gay man, Jenkins and Laxton looked at the films of Spike Lee (particularly *Clockers*, 1995), and the photography of Henry Roy.
- Some critics have categorised the film as part of a new wave of Black filmmakers and representations in Hollywood.

Institutional

- Moonlight* cost a mere \$4 million dollars to produce and achieved a global gross income of \$65.3 million. The film's success at the 89th Academy Awards, scooping three Oscars including Best Picture, contributed considerably to its distribution. In October 2016, it played in only four theatres in the US, whereas the weekend after the Oscar ceremony, it played in 1,564 theatres and grossed \$2.5 million. Consider the impact of major award nominations on a film's success.

Political

- André Holland, who plays Kevin, said this shortly after the film's release: "While the movie is not overtly political, it has a lot to say... Between this election (2016) and the Brexit vote and all of the things in the news, the motivation seems to be to further marginalize people who we don't think of as being integral to the society that we want to be a part of. I think this movie has a lot to say about that because it takes those who have been marginalized — poor people, Black people, gay people — and it puts them front and centre."
- Consider Holland's comment – how could the film's narrative be a good example of "the personal becoming the political"?

How does the film add complexity to these stereotypical ingredients?

- The characters of Paula (the mother) and Juan (the local dealer who becomes a father figure to Little) are particularly nuanced. How does the writing and performance of these characters challenge our expectations?
- Consider the scenes, especially towards the last part of the film, where the camera rests in extended close-ups on the characters' faces. What is the emotional impact of these shots? How does it create a sense of intimacy with the characters?

Ideology

- You could look at the film as an example of 'intersectionality' – the protagonist is oppressed by his race, his sexuality and his economic background.
- McCraney, the co-writer, has spoken about the expectations of Black masculinity, from both within and outside their community, to be hyperaggressive and sexualised. A young gay man growing up in this environment needs to adapt his persona in order to conform to these expectations to avoid becoming a victim. In *Moonlight* we see this transformation take place as Chiron becomes Black, a hardened gangster. Unfortunately, this also involves rejection of the intimacy he craves and his true identity – often represented in the film by blue lighting.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Starting points

Spectatorship

- Consider the narrative of *Moonlight*. It features many of the tropes of the social realist 'ghetto' drama: drug dealers, crime, addiction, violence.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

“Opening scene: Juan and Little”
00:00 – 7:04

- The opening tracking shot follows then circles Juan, his employee and an addict. There is no threat or tension in the scene, and the camera seems to establish a peaceful atmosphere and even a sense of community in this environment. This is unusual in social realist urban dramas.
- This rotating single shot also shows a sense of intimacy and community in other scenes in the film, e.g. during a boy’s ballgame, or when they secretly compare penises. Later, the shot is also used when Tyrell bullies Kevin into beating Chiron. Consider how this ‘closed circle’ of community has now become restrictive and threatening to the protagonist’s identity.
- Consider the use of sound design when Little hides in the abandoned drug den – how does this express his fear and anxiety?
- In the scene in the diner, Juan tries to get Little to talk. How is the protagonist’s refusal to speak a foreshadowing of how he will have to stay silent later in the film’s narrative?
- Throughout the film, food is used by other characters to try to form a bridge to Little/ Chiron/ Black. Compare Juan’s attempts in this scene, with his girlfriend Theresa’s attempts, and finally Kevin’s (who is a chef). Consider what role food plays in the film, particularly in its effect on the protagonist.