# Moonlight: Crash Course Film Criticism #13

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Nlz9CCZSJ5I
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/Nlz9CCZSJ5I

**=====Intro=====**

Some movies are huge spectacles, with stunning special effects and mythic characters who hold the fate of the universe in their hands. On the other end of the spectrum are more intimate films, with complex characters navigating their everyday lives. But just because the scale is smaller, it doesn't mean they're any less powerful. Today we're going to talk about one of those movies, whose fresh subject matter, unique structure, and well-crafted filmmaking made it one of the most celebrated movies of 2016. It's time to dive into Moonlight.

**=====Production=====**

Moonlight was loosely adapted from an unproduced play by Tarell Alvin McCraney called In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue, and it marks the second feature film from co-writer/director Barry Jenkins. His first feature was the 2009 romantic drama Medicine for Melancholy. That film stars Wyatt Cenac and Tracey Heggins as a pair of 20-something black Americans after a one-night stand. It's a rumination on identity, race and intimacy.

For his second film, Jenkins chose to tell a story that tackles similar themes, but with a harder edge and more emotionally torn up characters. Centered around three pivotal moments in the life of a young black American gay man, Moonlight is as much about performed masculinity as it is about growing up gay, and in both cases, it sets out to challenge commonly held stereotypes of black men.

**=====Summary=====**

The film follows its protagonist, Chiron, from boyhood through young adulthood in the dilapidated housing projects of Liberty City in Miami. The first part follows Chiron as an extremely withdrawn young boy, played with expressive silence by Alex Hibbert. He comes into the orbit of a local drug dealer named Juan, who briefly becomes sort of a father figure. The second section of this film picks up the story in high school. Chiron, now played by Ashton Sanders, has become a lanky teenager, and is only moderately less shy than before. His bullies have grown up too, and now seem much more threatening. And in the third and final section of the film, we find Chiron in his mid-twenties, a hulking mass of muscle. Played by Trevante Rhodes, the grown-up Chiron has seemingly hardened, spent time behind bars, and now works as a drug dealer in Atlanta.

**=====Analysis=====**

The filmmaking in Moonlight is is extremely subjective to Chiron's experience. Jenkins doesn't just tell his story, he makes us feel it. Film is an incredibly effective medium for exploring a character's perspective, using the same tools that create the illusion of reality. This happens more directly when a film cuts from a character's face to a shot of what they're seeing. But it can be more subtle as well, using cuts to flashes of a memory as it intrudes on the present, or camera movements to emphasize a character's internal feelings. In Moonlight, Jenkins harnesses everything from the shots and the mise-en-scene, to the editing and the sound to give us access to his otherwise opaque main character.

Chiron needs protection and guidance, and Juan, played with grace and moral heft by Oscar-winner Mahershala Ali, steps into that void. He really sees Chiron without pity and without judgment, and teaches him how to navigate anything from his own identity, to the bullies that terrorize him after school. In particular, there's a moment when Juan takes Chiron to the beach and beckons him to come into the water. The camera stays with Chiron, holding on him, pushing in as he decides what to do. In that hesitation and that subtle camera move, we understand the competing desires in Chiron's head. He wants to join Juan, but is desperate not to make himself vulnerable. Once he's in the water and Juan is teaching him how to swim, the filmmaking turns subjective again, jump cutting between shots as Chiron gets the hang of it and even begins to enjoy himself. It's almost as if he's been freed from the long takes along with his hesitance. Jenkins is also underlying the fact that Juan isn't just teaching Chiron to swim, he's showing how to take charge of himself - how to keep himself afloat. Juan is giving him the confidence to trust, to accept help, and to make human connections. There are ways to shoot this scene where it's simply a man teaching a boy to swim, but through subjective camera work and editing, the filmmakers also show it what it means to the characters.

In addition, the scene challenges several stereotypes of black American men. First, Juan's compassion is the opposite of the harsh, violent depiction drug dealers often get in mainstream films. And second, black Americans have historically been systematically and disproportionately not given opportunities to learn how to swim. As is so often the case in Moonlight, the filmmakers are taking on more than one stereotype at a time.

Now, a film's style can often be broken down into two rough categories: realism and formalism. Realism refers to a style in which cinematic techniques like shots, cuts, mise-en-scene, and sound are meant to be as unobtrusive as possible. The whole idea is that the filmmaking tools go largely unnoticed by the audience, allowing the story and characters to take center stage. Formalism, on the other hand, is a style in which those techniques clearly and deliberately alter our perception of the film's reality. Things like slow motion or reverse photography, obvious manipulation of the film's sound or color scape, discontinuity editing, and using jump cuts in repeated shots - these techniques all draw attention to themselves. In formalist films, the form takes precedence over the content. Think about the wild, operatic camera work and editing in Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull; or the curated, almost caricatured worlds created by Wes Anderson in Moonrise Kingdom or The Grand Budapest Hotel.

While some films lean heavily into one style or the other, most mainstream movies contain elements of both. And Moonlight is no exception. Jenkins captures much of Chiron's experience with realist techniques: handheld shots follow Chiron as a young boy as he runs away from his tormentors, natural lighting fills the scene when Juan finds him sitting outside his house. The movie cuts traditionally back and forth between a teenage Chiron and his mother Paula, fiercely portrayed by Naomi Harris, as she demands money during her tragic downward spiral into drug addiction. In these moments, Jenkins tries to keep the filmmaking out of the way to give us a sense of being there in the room with the action, watching it unfold. But then, especially at pivotal emotional moments, the film moves into a much more aggressively formalist style.

As a teenager, at least one other kid seems to get Chiron and has known him for years. Kevin, played by Jharrel Jerome, presents himself as confident and gregarious. He's as at home in his own body and persona as Chiron is awkward in his. Chiron and Kevin share an intimate moment one night on the same beach where, years earlier, Juan had taught Chiron how to swim. Chiron opens up to Kevin for the first time and the scene turns intimate. They kiss, then Kevin takes things a step further. During this romantic

encounter, the shots become almost impressionistic. The camera captures their profiles and silhouettes leaned in close, Chiron's head on Kevin's shoulder. Chiron's hand grips the sand, and Nicholas Brittel's wondrous score takes over. Again, the movie is challenging how cinema usually presents black American men - usually macho or brutal, but not vulnerable. Here, Chiron and Kevin open up to one another, sharing fears and hopes, then engage in a tender sexual relationship.

Back at school, one of the bullies taunts Kevin into beating up Chiron to prove his own masculinity. Afterward, Chiron sits in an office, listening to the principal lecture him. He cries, breaking for the first time, then tunes her out. The sound of her voice literally drops out of the scene, and the camera moves low to catch Chiron's hardening glare as the sound design ramps up in intensity. In moments like these, Jenkins breaks the realist tendency of his film, masterfully drawing us into his character's heart and mind. It's an especially smart decision given how interior the film is. Jenkins uses many of the tricks of cinema to help us understand Chiron's constant struggle to reconcile his identity with the world around him. And it's his struggle to be himself, a gay black man in America, that drives the emotional narrative of this film.

Cinema scholar J.Ken Stuckey argues that "masculinity in its various forms is the main antagonist of this film. One of the most difficult aspects of being gay is the way in which one's sexuality can telegraph itself against one's will, even before puberty." We see Chiron strive to fit in with the other boys his age, all playing a makeshift soccer game in the movie's first part. The camera gives us Chiron's point of view as the boys stare at him - and therefore, us - we feel the weight of their eyes. It's off-putting, menacing even. In fact, among these boys, it's only Kevin who truly sees Chiron as a person rather than some kind of other to be made fun of. And when Kevin and Chiron wrestle on the ground, Jenkins revels in their connection. The film takes its time with this moment, giving us dislocated shots of their hands and legs; bodies grappling with one another. They seem somehow both trapped and free. It's a powerful visual metaphor for Chiron's central struggle, pushing and pulling against the expectations of his community and the stereotypes attached to his gender and sexual identity, and it sets up what's to come.

As an adult in the third part of the film, Chiron's taken on so many signifiers of traditional masculinity, he's almost unrecognizable. In addition to his muscles, he wears gold grills over his teeth, carries a gun, and banters easily with one of his drug-dealing underlings. He even has a miniature crown on his dashboard, just like Juan had in the opening. Chiron visits Paula in rehab where she begs his forgiveness, blaming herself for the way his life has turned out. Then, after an out-of-the-blue phone call, Chiron drives down to Miami to surprise Kevin at the restaurant where he works. The two haven't seen each other since their altercation back in high school. Their conversation shifts in tone from awkward to inquisitive to intimate and back again as they catch up on the past decade. But, more importantly, the re-negotiating the terms of the relationship. Bit by bit, Chiron's masculine posturing falls away. He's the same complex, vulnerable character we've come to know throughout the film. And, once again, he breaks away from the stereotypical black male that's portrayed in a lot of media. In the end, the two return to Kevin's house where Chiron shares that he hasn't been touched by a man since the night on the beach with Kevin. The film ends with an intimate scene: Chiron cradled in Kevin's arms and a brief shot of Chiron standing on the infamous beach looking back at us. And, at himself.

=====Wrap-Up=====
So, there's no denying that Barry Jenkins's Moonlight is as thoughtful as it is elegant and compassionate. You might appreciate it as an exquisite coming-of-age story told in a unique way. Or as an exercise in how formalist cinematic techniques can root us in a character's point of view. The film takes on all sorts of stereotypes and assumptions about black American masculinity as well as complex themes of sexuality and self-acceptance, and it does it all with a skill and immediacy most films ten times times its size never get near. Sometimes its the little movies that pack the biggest punch. Next time, we'll travel to the heart of Africa for the tale of a child soldier struggling with his own larger-than-life father figure in Cary Fukinaga's Beasts of No Nation.

**=====Outro=====**

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