



Universidad
Zaragoza

Undergraduate Dissertation
Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Earth Just Moved: An Analysis of Moonlight

Author

David Coma Folguera

Supervisor

Luis Miguel Garcia Mainar

FACULTY OF ARTS
2018

Abstract:

In a time of political and social unrest, in which optimism seems hard to find, stories of hope are few but precious for many minorities. One of these stories is the Academy Award winner, *Moonlight* (2016), a film about Chiron, a gay black man who finds redemption in intimacy after being scarred for life by toxic masculinity. This dissertation will try to examine the film's formal aspects, after which they will be related to broader socio-cultural concepts. In order to do that, the structure, visual language, the use of music will be analysed, and the film will be placed in its socio-cultural context.

Resumen:

En tiempos de inquietud política y social, cuando el optimismo parece difícil de encontrar, las historias que inspiran esperanza en minorías son pocas pero valiosas. Una de estas historias es la ganadora del Oscar a mejor película, *Moonlight* (2016), que cuenta la vida de Chiron, un hombre gay y negro que encuentra redención en la intimidad después de que la masculinidad toxica cambie su vida. Este trabajo tratará de examinar los aspectos formales de la película, después de lo que serán relacionados con conceptos socioculturales externos a la película. Para lograr esto, se analizará la estructura, el lenguaje visual, el uso de la música, y la película será localizada en su contexto sociocultural.

Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Analysis	8
3. Visual language	12
4. Analysis II: Sound	18
5. Moonlight's wider cultural context	27
6. Conclusion	31

1. Introduction

For a long time, black and queer representation in mainstream cinema was either non-existent or reduced to harmful stereotypes, but a tradition of self-representation for both black and queer people can be traced back to the 1970s, with films like *Pink Flamingos* (1971) which became a cult classic in the LGBT community, or *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1972), which can be seen as the first Blaxploitation film. After this, directors like Gus Van Sant or Todd Haynes have released films dealing with queer issues, and directors like John Singleton or Spike Lee are considered influential Afro-American filmmakers. More recently, films about Afro-American people like *Get Out* (2017) or *Black Panther* (2018) and about queer people like *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) or *Carol* (2015) have been culturally relevant, be it for critical acclaim or economic success, which might be a sign of increasing acceptance of queer and black people. *Moonlight* can be considered an example of this tendency, as it explores the life of Chiron, a gay Afro-American man.

Moonlight is a 2016 film directed by Barry Jenkins, who adapted *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, an unpublished play by Tarell Alvin McCraney. The film deals with issues of toxic masculinity, identity and race. The main aim of this dissertation is to analyse and contextualize the film.

In order to do that, the main formal aspects of the film will be analysed and related to the main themes which will be analysed using Cultural Studies. The analysis will be built upon concepts proposed in Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: an Introduction*. In the book there is a differentiation between several types of meaning. These are: referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic meaning. This dissertation will implicitly use this distinction in the analysis.

Referential meaning is similar to a very simple summary of the story and it could be said to be everything that happens in a movie plus what can be interpreted as a reference to something outside the film. Explicit meaning is the result of the first viewing of a film, and, like referential meaning it is contained inside of the film. While the first two meanings are taken from almost exclusively from the film and are based on filmic evidence, implicit meaning requires reading into the film in a more abstract way, with personal analysis as a focus, or as Bordwell and Thompson put it, it requires interpreting. Like implicit meaning, symptomatic meaning is an abstract interpretation of a film from which we infer a larger idea which can be applied to aspects outside the film; for instance, we can say that after analysing *Moonlight*, intimacy and vulnerability are essential concepts for achieving a healthy masculinity, especially queer masculinity.

The purpose of this distinction is to separate different tiers of meaning which can be inferred from different types of analysis. While the first two types of meaning are fairly superficial and only require a simple interpretation of the film (although also relevant for the analysis of the film), the last two, implicit and symptomatic meaning are the focus of this dissertation, as they allow for a deeper reading and interpretation of a text, as well as a contextualization of its themes (46-57).

To extract these meanings, the evaluation of the formal aspects of the film becomes essential. In order to understand how the movie conveys its themes, another set of concepts stated by Bordwell and Thompson (51-56) becomes quite useful. The formal system of the film is comprised of five concepts which can be seen as general for all kinds of films. These are “function, similarity and repetition, difference and variation, development and unity/disunity” (51). Function refers to the notion that everything in a film has a reason to exist. But also important is to note that there might be a distance between intention and result, as some choices might not end up conveying

what they were intended to. Similarity and variation refer to the notion that if something is present in a film several times it might have some importance, as for instance the main orchestral theme of the movie, “Chiron’s Theme”, which is repeated several times in the movie, and can be tied to some of the film’s themes. As stated by Bordwell and Thompson, “parallelism thus requires a degree of differences as well as striking similarities” (53), highlighting the importance of difference as a symbol for change or progress. An interesting outcome of similarity and repetition combined with difference and variation is the perception of development, be it the advancement in the plot of a film or evolution of a character, as happens with Chiron, whom we see going through different stages of life until he becomes his last form at the end of the film. Unity/Disunity refers to whether the formal system is cohesive and has no superfluous elements.

The focus of these concepts is to evaluate the formal aspects of the film. In this dissertation, these aspects are character progression, use of colour, framing, and use of music.

These aspects are in turn related to cultural concepts such as intimacy, vulnerability, identity, masculinity, gender relations and sexuality. In order to understand the main points of this dissertation two terms will be defined. First, one of the most relevant notions of the film, toxic masculinity. “While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the concept, generally toxic masculinity is used to refer to a loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviors associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly” (Sculos 3). The other term is heteronormativity, which can be defined more clearly as the idea that each gender is attracted to the opposite gender, which has been historically used to discriminate queer people. Also, a section will be dedicated to the

contextualisation of the movie, within black queerness and outside the mainstream, by analysing common notions of representation, intimacy and acceptance. These concepts will be evaluated through the scope of Cultural Studies, as defined by Grossberg et al. in *Cultural Studies*. It is essential to note that Cultural Studies is not easily conceptualized, but that the different modalities of the discipline “share a commitment to examining cultural practices from the point of view of their intrication with, and within, relations of powers”, as expressed by Tony Bennett. In other words, Cultural Studies is in part concerned with the power dynamics that rule society and culture, thus defining and theorizing about concepts like those mentioned in this paragraph through a critical perspective, while taking into account power dynamics. In consequence, concepts taken from different modalities of Cultural Studies will be used.

Thus, in order to extract the different meanings of *Moonlight*, we have to analyse the formal aspects of the film, which requires the evaluation of the formal system, understood as the combination of the five concepts mentioned. After each analysis, we will be able to relate the film and its main themes to bigger cultural and social concepts. Also the contextualisation aims to place the film in a specific socio-cultural context.

First, the story and the structure will be detailed and related to the creation of Chiron’s identity and, before the analysis the role of women in the film will be discussed. Then the visual style of the film will be defined. Next, the use of different colour palettes in each chapter will be analysed as the filmmakers chose to imitate different film stocks in each chapter, which will be again linked to the creation of Chiron’s identity. Then the music will also be analysed, separating orchestral and popular music. Also, the film will be placed in its socio-cultural context by comparing it with other contemporary artists, films and movements. The film will also be linked to

the drag queen movement in the United States in order to identify a tendency of acceptance of black queerness.

2. Analysis

The film tells the story of a young black man called Chiron and his struggles with, identity, masculinity and violence. Divided in three chapters titled i. Little, ii. Chiron and iii. Black, the film features different actors in each part for Chiron and Kevin, another central character in the story.

The film begins by presenting Juan, an afro-Cuban drug dealer who finds Chiron, an Afro-American boy who suffers homophobic bullying from his schoolmates. The two bond, and Juan takes him under his wing, acting as a sort of male role model, along with his girlfriend Teresa, who acts as an adoptive mother because of the addiction of Chiron's mother, Paula. The child finds solace in the couple and in Kevin, a classmate who seems to like him. In the first chapter we find a distressed and troubled Chiron who is caught between bullying and his mother's drug addiction, which is fuelled by Juan, who is selling drugs to Paula. The next chapter features a teenager Chiron, whose mother's addiction has worsened and who is still being bullied, although this time the viewer learns the identity of the principal instigator, a schoolmate called Terrel. Juan has died, and now he is more alone than ever, and what seems as one of the few happy moments of his adolescence comes when they kiss. The romance is short however, as Kevin is pressured into attacking Chiron by the school's bully. The abuse is too much for the protagonist, and he breaks a chair in Terrel's back. After the traumatic event, the movie skips a few years to show Chiron, who has become a strong masculine man, now dealing drugs in Atlanta. We learn that his mother is in a rehabilitation clinic in the city when Kevin calls him. Chiron visits her and after forgiving her in an

emotional scene, he visits his childhood friend and only lover at the diner in which he works back in Miami. The two sit down and have a long conversation, which is at some times tense and at other times intimate and personal. The two leave for Kevin's house, where the cook expresses his satisfaction with his present life despite it being far from ideal. Then, Chiron confesses that he was the only person that ever touched him, and after Kevin shows a tender smile, the two men embrace. The film ends with a shot of Little on a beach looking back at the camera.

The film's triptych structure acts on different levels, as it allows the viewer to see Chiron's evolution, not only internally but also externally: as Chiron changes physically so do the actors portraying him. The first two actors are tiny and slender, but Chiron in the last part is a hyper-masculine character, so casting a former athlete conveys the protagonist's physical and psychological transformation over the course of the movie.

One of the most interesting aspects of the film is Chiron's character development and how it is caused by events of his life. For instance the first chapter features the first encounter between Kevin and Chiron, which foreshadows the protagonist's later approach to masculinity. Kevin helps Little two times in the scene; the first when he drives the bullies away from Chiron, and then when he tells Chiron that the only thing that should matter to him when dealing with bullies is not seeming soft, regardless of his true identity, which will be referenced later in the movie when Chiron says that he built "himself hard". In the third chapter we see the living representation of that statement: a man who, after being called soft his whole life, looks like a "version" of Juan, the only male role model he had (Kannan et al. 295).

The second act can be seen as the turning point for Chiron, as the events that will trigger his change from Little to Black happen here. The chapter is focused mostly on

Chiron's struggle with his mother and the school's bully on a narrative level and with the search for self-acceptance and the dangers of masculinity on a thematic level. Kevin, now the only man who seems to accept Chiron, is both the source of relief and sorrow for the protagonist. He treats Chiron with care and love, and allows him to be himself, temporally liberating Chiron from the constraints of toxic masculinity, as he turns their relation into a safe haven for the two men. This situation changes drastically after the bully approaches Kevin to assault Chiron. When he punches him, Kevin symbolically breaks their bond, in order to keep a façade of masculinity, just as he told Little years before, to maintain the impression of normality, of belonging, of not being "the other". The masculinity that forces Kevin to punch Chiron is the same force that breaks the protagonist and forces him to become a hyper-masculine character.

As mentioned, Chiron becomes "Black" in the last chapter, when he mimics Juan's brand of masculinity almost point by point (Gillespie 54). The events in the second part drive Chiron to his performance of hyper-masculinity in the last section of the film, as he is sent to a juvenile detention centre after attacking the bully Terrel. There he becomes entangled again with the underworld and starts selling drugs. The movie implicitly exposes a problem for Afro-Americans in which they become trapped in a never-ending circle of poverty, drugs and violence because of minor offences (Kannan et al. 291). Just as Juan, Chiron is stuck in a shady business which only harms communities and their members. They know the consequences of their activities so they try to calm their guilt by other means. While Juan tries to mentor Chiron, as Kannan et al. put it, playing the tortured saviour (291), Black deals with guilt in a different way. His paternal figure is (or at least seems) a naturally masculine person, who seemingly had no issues with his own masculinity but with the guilt of drug dealing. In contrast, Chiron's biggest problem is his perceived softness and sexuality. He is endlessly abused

for it, so the only way out he finds is imitating the only positive male role model he had, Juan. He tries to solve his issues with identity and self-acceptance by hiding his true self, and becoming an acceptable version of masculinity. He keeps this mask on until he reveals his true self to Kevin, and surrenders to intimacy, which is the only environment in which he can be truly comfortable and free.

A common criticism of the movie is its use of women as devices for male development (Kannan et al. 293) although it is possibly true, it is fair to say that there are some positive aspects to take from the female characters of the film. The most evident example is Chiron's mother, Paula, who embodies the stereotype of a junkie in the first two chapters of the movie (293), disregarding her son's needs as well as her own after being engulfed by addiction. If Paula's part had ended before the last chapter, she could be considered an example of negative representation as she is little more than a stereotype, but the third act serves as a subversion of this idea. She seems to have come to her right mind in Chiron's adulthood, after entering a rehabilitation clinic, and understanding what her addiction meant for her and especially for her son. She breaks the simplicity of the stereotype, and ponders her own actions, which give humanity to a type of character often used as a damned devil or a laughing stock, showing that there's a way out of the cycle of poverty that often traps minorities. Although she embodies a very positive view of a type of person very close to the authors of *Moonlight* as both Jenkins and McCraney had mothers who struggled with addiction (Gillespie 61), it seems that she only exists to change Chiron in some way, and it seems that the same happens with Teresa. The only two female characters are always attached to a male character, and they do not seem to have an independent life at all. So in this sense, women might be portrayed in the same fashion of mainstream cinema, where women are often overlooked as just love interest or relation to a man, although the film tries and

possibly manages to give a depth to Chiron's mother which is often missing in mainstream cinema.

3. Visual language

One of the aspects most often discussed by critics was the film's visual style, which can be traced to the close collaboration between the director, Barry Jenkins, and the cinematographer, James Laxton. After meeting in Florida State University, the two worked together in several of Jenkins' features, in which they developed a close and almost symbiotic relationship (LensCulture). The two discussed at length their ideas for their next work over several months before bringing it to life through Laxton's camera work, as he was the operator for most of the movie's shots.

The film style can be seen as the sum of two visual influences. The first, which could be termed documentary-like style, features a moving camera with an often unsteady and hectic frame, and the second one, which could be named pictorialism, seems more focused on showing a visually pleasing side of the movie through a more fixed, quiet use of framing. On the one hand the baptism scene can be seen as an example of the documentary-like style, as the shot is not set and the frame is shaking constantly, which is a technique often used in genres more concerned with verisimilitude. This realistic effort is present throughout the movie, mostly on exterior locations, which are usually more restless, where Chiron is either harassed or protected. Either way, the protagonist is the centre of events which will deeply change him. The camera moves uneasily, which can be interpreted as a representation of Chiron's psyche. On the other hand, the second, more pictorial style is mostly focused on conveying intimacy and beauty in interior spaces, which are usually the source of the protagonist's personal progression, in contrast with the more aggressive, documentary-

like style. Scenes like Kevin and Chiron meeting on the beach, or the two in Kevin's house, feature a mostly motionless framing, which mostly uses shot and reverse shot techniques. Thus in these scenes, the focus is not on the action and conflict, but on the character's humanity, as the style allows for an intimacy only present in these scenes, where the characters are given space and time to feel comfortable.

As mentioned, framing is a device used to highlight various aspects of the movie, in particular the two visual styles of the movie. The sequence in which Chiron prepares and takes a bath by himself is a great example of the pictorial style. Chiron is alone and there is no action, so the camera is able to focus on the protagonist and his surroundings, which possibly could not have happened if the scene had been shot in the documentary-like style.



In this scene, the slow camera movements and the stability of the frame allow the viewer to focus on what the protagonist might be thinking

Kevin's call in the third act is also an example of the pictorial style. The subtle and calm framing along with lighting and colour correction gives the scene a dream-like quality that conveys the longing for human contact and nostalgia that the protagonist is probably experiencing. A plausible interpretation of the shot could be that Kevin's screen time in the scene is how Chiron imagines Kevin at that moment.



The shot is an example of the occasional focus on beauty and calmness that allows for the visual representation of the character's thoughts and feelings

The realistic style is used in scenes involving some sort of conflict, which is emphasised by an unsteady frame. In these scenes the focus of the film shifts from the inner world of the characters to a confrontation between characters. For instance, the scene of Juan and Paula's confrontation is filmed with a handheld camera that makes the frame move erratically, conveying the emotional power of the conversation. Both characters have a strong relation with Chiron but both are harming him in one way or another so their conversation is filled with guilt and anger, an energy conveyed by the unsteady framing.



The camera often moves frantically to mirror the energy of the interaction, moving the characters in and out of the centre of the shot

Another example of the documentary-like style is the scene of Chiron's hazing, in which Terrel circles around the camera, as it struggles to keep the bully in focus. Again, the frame moves considerably during the scene, and in addition Terrel is often blurred. These features accentuate the tension and the aggressive environment of the sequence, which will have Chiron beaten by homophobic bullies and his lover. The shot can be interpreted again as the result of Chiron's vision, as the tracking shot ends with Kevin looking directly into the frame, so the blurriness and movement convey a nightmare-like aspect to the scene. The beauty often present in harsh situations is missing because of the traumatic nature of the scene. We see what Chiron sees, so we perceive a threatening and almost surreal situation, caused by one of the few people who seemed to understand him, so the framing reflects the feeling of oppression of the situation by means of unstable framing and the use of focus and blur.



In this scene, the camera follows Terrel and blurring appears, to accentuate the tension of the sequence

Also relevant for the visual analysis is the imitation of three film stocks for each part, which were respectively modelled after Fuji, Agfa and Kodak. To achieve this, colourist Alex Bickel and colour scientist Bill Feightner were recruited to create a series

of 'LUTs' or 'Look up Table', which are computer generated formulas that mirror how film would react to colour (O'Falt). As a result, each chapter has a distinctive look that ties in with the film's themes.

The first chapter features a vivid colour palette which allows for the definition of black skin, helped by the imitation of the Fuji stock, which is warmer than other stocks (O'Falt). The representation of stronger colours is the visual representation of a feeling shared by Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney, the author of *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*: the sense that, despite being a harsh and unforgiving place, Miami still has a deep beauty (Gillespie 55). Thematically this can be linked to the innocence of young Chiron, as he struggles to understand himself and his surroundings, he still can appreciate some positive aspects of his life, for instance the moments he shares with Juan and Teresa, who start the road towards self-acceptance for Chiron, and Kevin, who seems to be one of the few people who cares about him.



The saturated colour palette of the first chapter represents the ambivalence of Miami as a beautiful but unforgiving place

The second chapter is modelled after the Agfa film stock, which gives the movie blue and green undertones (O'Falt). The decision to mirror the retired German stock can be interpreted as an effort to highlight the darker aspects of the most sombre and

depressing fraction of the film. The tropical colours that were highlighted in the first section are still present but now these tonalities are much less saturated, so they seem darker, just as Chiron's life has become. Also, the film stock helps blue tonalities dominate most scenes of this part, which could be linked to Chiron becoming "blue", understood as depressed, as he is harassed throughout his childhood and teen years, until he becomes "colourless" by way of self-repression in the last chapter of the movie.



The second chapter imitates the Agfa film stock, which gives the section blue undertones, while decreasing the intensity of the colours that were so vibrant on the first chapter

The third chapter tries to imitate a modified Kodak stock, which is characterised by Bickel as less "restrained" while providing a shining aspect to the characters' skin (O'Falt), which is a response to the historical tendency in Hollywood to homogenize dark skin tones by not allowing them to physically shine (Gillespie 57). Thus, in response to this trend, the characters are often shiny and sweaty, infusing their physical appearance with a sense of naturalness. This can be interpreted as an effort towards more inclusive representation of blackness, as the film shows Afro-American characters in a positive light, with a deepness of character which is often avoided. Thus, *Moonlight* presents the characters in a profound way, with virtues and flaws alike.



*The stock used in the chapter allows the characters to shine, which is usually avoided in
Hollywood cinema*

One of the main effects of the cinematographic language of the movie is that it conveys an ambivalent sense of beauty, which can be seen as one of the core themes of the film. The binary visual styles can be related to this notion as they each expose at the same time the beauty and the degradation of the characters and the setting. This ambivalence between beauty and degradation is also present in the soundtrack, which combines orchestral and popular music, with the orchestral pieces being the clearest example of this.

4. Analysis II: Sound

Moonlight's characteristic visual style is possibly the most discussed aspect by critics but, while they may not have been as widely treated, sound and music design are essential when trying to understand the film. The soundtrack of the movie can be considered unusual, as it used mostly orchestral pieces, relying on popular music for concrete moments of the film. Several techniques used when scoring the film can be linked to themes of the movie. The soundtrack was composed by Nicholas Britnell, an

American composer. Jenkins approached him and after some discussion it was determined that the soundtrack would feature “Chopped and Screwed” elements, not only on popular songs, but on orchestral scores (Cooper), which remains a highly unusual decision for mainstream filmmaking.

Chopped and screwed is a subgenre of hip hop and also a technique used in remixing hip hop which involves slowing down a song’s tempo, so that the pitch goes down and chopping and rearranging the song (Pearce), giving the song a familiar yet strange reworking. The technique developed into a genre, which was mastered at the beginning of the 1990s by DJ Screwed. The genre was instantly linked to a popular recreational drug called “purple drank”, which is usually a cocktail of codeine and promethazine cough syrup mixed with a carbonated drink like Sprite or Mountain Dew which is said to cause a “swooning euphoria.” (“Effects of Purple Drank Abuse”). The genre creates a hazy and polluted sound that is largely unexplored as a cinematographic device.

As related in a New York Times piece, Jenkins approached Britnell with several ideas for the film’s score, among which there was the director’s love of chopped and screwed music (Cooper). Nevertheless, the American composer came up with an orchestral piece just after reading the script, called “Little’s Theme”, which appears in several parts of the film, starting with the ride to Juan’s home the first time he meets Chiron. It appears again later in the scene when Juan drives Leittle home. Several sequences go by, and the theme reappears when Chiron is taking a bath all by himself and the score links the bath scene with Juan and Paula’s confrontation. “Little’s theme” is a track played by a piano and a violin in D major. The song starts with the piano accompaniment of the main melody, which is played once. Then, the melody is played by both the piano and the violin, while the accompaniment keeps playing. The sequence

is repeated a couple of times with little or no variation and the instruments play a closing melody to end the piece. The track is the basis for the different version of each chapter.

A similar track is featured at the beginning of the second act, when Chiron is bullied by Terrell at biology class. Although it is strangely similar to Little's theme, the song has a distinctive character that gives the chapter a sort of uncanny familiarity. The track is "Chiron's Theme", a version of "Little's Theme" which had its pitch lowered by almost two octaves (Cooper). This change renders the piece much more sombre, which draws a link between the first and second chapters. Whereas the first part of the movie features the original theme in scenes in which Chiron and Juan are together (with the exception of the bath scene, in which the song ties a shot of Chiron in a bathtub to Juan driving), the second part presents the song after the title screen of the second chapter. The repetition of the theme, although altered, serves to convey the notion that now the protagonist is growing up alone. Now he does not have a mentor to guide him through life, Juan is dead, and he is not able to protect him from bullies like he did in the first chapter. The lower pitch reinforces the darker turn in Chiron's life from his childhood to his teen years. While he did not understand much of his own suffering as a child, he still found solace in his own ignorance of the reasons of his bullying. But things change in the transition from childhood to adolescence: Juan is dead, and the dangers of homophobia are now physically and emotionally dangerous because of Terrell. As he understands why he is bullied he becomes more depressed. Just as the character's mind becomes darker, so does the music.

Another version of "Little's Theme" appears when Kevin is forced to assault Chiron. The track, titled "Chiron's Theme Chopped & Screwed (Knock Down Stay Down)", is a rework of "Chiron's Theme" slowed down (Cooper), which renders the

original song barely recognizable in the midst of one of the most emotional scenes in the movie. The viewer hears a deep sound which does not resemble any instrument until the melody of the original track appears. In the scene, Chiron's world is falling down, as his only friend is forced to fight with him. Kevin's motives can be probably linked to his necessity to keep a façade of masculinity in order to keep himself safe. When masculinity attacks Chiron, the world seems to stop as the power of homophobia bruises his face. He cannot take the abuse anymore, and while he used to just be depressed, now, like the music, he breaks down; he becomes an unrecognizable version of himself. Also, the scene has a nightmarish quality, which is reinforced by the hazy sound, so characteristic of Chopped and Screwed music.

Then in the third chapter we hear yet another version of the original theme, now titled "Black's Theme" but rerecorded by a string ensemble. Also, Britnell bended the pitch of the instruments to make the piece sound higher, to the point where the cellos playing the track did not even sound like cellos (Cooper). The track plays when Chiron and Kevin reach the cook's house, and Black sees the beach in which he was "touched" by Kevin. This time, the weight of the melody is carried by a cello instead of a piano, making the piece warmer and brighter. This warmth anticipates the final scene, in which Chiron leaves his hyper-masculine façade behind, to embrace the warmth of intimacy. Thus, the variation in the orchestral piece can be interpreted as a symbol for Chiron's development. The first chapter features an unaltered version of the song, just like Little is still innocent and does not understand much of his environment. The second part presents two versions, which sound much darker, mirroring Chiron's teenage years, when he understands the reasons of his abuse. The third chapter features "Black's Theme" on a crucial moment for the character. Chiron sees the beach where he and Kevin met, and as we hear the brighter version of "Little's Theme", we remember

the moments in which the song played and instantly the few happy moments of his childhood come to mind. The only times when Chiron seems comfortable and accepting of his identity are when he is with Juan, and when he is with Kevin. But they betrayed him in one way or another, so he “builds himself hard” and suppresses the vulnerability that tied him to Juan and Kevin. Vulnerability also allocated an abstract space for self-acceptance for Chiron. Without that space he is relegated to isolation. So, the song is a reference to that past vulnerability, which is now attainable by Chiron. Despite his façade, Chiron is ready to be vulnerable again, and in consequence we hear a track similar to the ones playing when he met Juan, and we see the beach in which Kevin touched him, which combined convey the possibility of emotional redemption that will take place in the final scene of the film.

The repetition of the orchestral theme conveys Chiron’s progression as a character. We first find an innocent child who does not understand much of the world that surrounds him, and we hear a conventional piece. Then, when he starts to understand masculinity and homophobia, he starts to sink into grief, and the soundtrack reflects that by playing a lower pitched version of the first song. Later his identity is shattered by the constant siege of masculinity and homophobia, and we hear a destroyed version of the main orchestral theme. Lastly, we find a completely different version of Chiron, who will be transformed a last time, which is reflected by the rerecording of the piece.

The inclusion of Chopped and Screwed music can be related to the notion of ambivalent beauty that is conveyed by the film through various means. The link between beauty and degradation is evident, as the mentioned songs feature orchestral music, considered one of the highest form of art but usually reserved for an elitist minority, and a genre usually paired together with drug abuse and the ugliness

associated with lower classes. The combination is, like the visual language of the movie, a celebration of a beauty in unexpected places and situations, which is often overlooked but still present in the movie.

Although the film's soundtrack is comprised of mostly orchestral tracks composed by Britnell, the popular music used in the film reinforces many of the main themes of *Moonlight*.

For instance, the reason of Kevin's call in the third chapter is that a customer played a song in a jukebox that reminded him of Chiron. There is no mention of the song until the end of the diner scene, when Chiron asks why Kevin called him. Then he plays "Hello Stranger" by Barbara Lewis, and the tension of the scene is defused as the two men observe each other. The lyrics of the song tell the encounter of two lovers who have been separated for a long time. In the scene, the song is prefaced by Kevin saying "He played this song, man..." followed by a long silence during which Kevin looks at Chiron, who is gazing at the floor, until he finally looks at his only lover as the scene ends abruptly. The focus that the scene brings to the song helps the viewer to listen to the song, which brings the lyrics to the forefront. Lewis sings about missing a person who has reappeared after a long time, which is exactly the situation between Chiron and Kevin. However, they do not acknowledge their feelings in any way during their conversation in the diner, and they are even hostile, which brings to attention Chiron's façade. After he "built himself hard" and adopted that hyper-masculine persona, he hid what caused his downfall back at his high school, his vulnerability. The façade is still up during the song, but it serves to highlight Black's true feelings. He longs for intimacy, and a place to be vulnerable, but that is not made explicit until the end of the movie, so the soundtrack has to speak for the both of them.

Another relevant song is “Cell Therapy” by Goodie Mob, which opens the third act. The rap song serves as a presentation of the new Chiron, after going through juvenile detention centre. The song makes reference to the transformation that Chiron suffered during his stay in prison. Although he is not present until later in the act, Kevin was jailed too, but his transformation was different, as he seemed to start to appreciate life after being incarcerated. The movie also makes a point of telling the injustices of the American jail system, which routinely targets black folk, who are trapped in a poverty cycle that is often impossible to escape. Nevertheless the movie features a positive view of the situation, as the ending seems to imply that the two protagonists are able to escape the cycle by relying on themselves.

The music in the diner scene has already been described, but the songs played in the scenes leading up to Kevin and Chiron meeting are also noteworthy. After he forgives his mother, we see the protagonist driving along a highway, some kids playing on a beach and then the shot cuts to Chiron outside Kevin’s diner, where he cleans himself up and enters the restaurant. In that short sequence there are three songs, “Cucurrucucu Paloma” by Caetano Veloso, “Classic Man” by Jidenna and “One Step Ahead” by Aretha Franklin.

The first song starts playing when Chiron and Paula are still hugging, and it lasts throughout the sequence of driving, which is interspersed with footage of children playing in a beach. After one of the most emotional scenes in the film we find some quiet time to reflect on the turning point on the protagonist’s story. Now he starts facing his complete transformation, and we hear a melancholic song while the kids are playing, which links the scene with the symbolic baptism of the first chapter. Chiron has started the healing process by forgiving her mother, and now he remembers his time with Juan, a time before all the bullying, before understanding homophobia. In the context of the

scene, the song allows the pictures to speak for themselves and conveys much of the protagonist's feelings. In the sequence, the viewer is left to ponder Chiron's thoughts after such an emotional moment, and Cucurrucucu Paloma allows that space.

When the location changes from the beach to Miami we briefly hear a version of "Classic Man" by Jidenna which has been Chopped and Screwed. The lyrics of the R&B song deal with the balance between being a gentleman and a more contemporary view of masculinity. In this particular sequence, it could be interpreted as a reference to the protagonist's masculine persona, which has modelled his only male role model. The song is repeated later, when the two men are in the car, and its use is again compelling as Chiron turns the volume of the song up when Kevin asks him where he is staying that night. In this instance Chiron hides behind the music to avoid being vulnerable, just like he hides behind his masculine persona, to keep himself from hurting.

The last song in the sequence, "One Step Ahead" by Aretha Franklin is principally featured when Chiron enters Kevin's restaurant and a bell rings, although the song is also played in the first chapter of the movie, when Chiron gets home and Paula is with a client. The track is about the inevitability of the singer to fall in love with someone, as Franklin sings about the impossibility of escaping her lover. The song is present until Kevin recognizes Chiron, and then it fades quickly until it is barely audible. Although the presence of the song is probably more subtle than the other songs, it conveys the thoughts of the two men, who cannot wait to be redeemed of their different burdens (Kevin's guilt and Chiron's rejection of vulnerability) in order to be together. The two have lived away for a long time and now they cannot go on without the other, but they still have to overcome their personal issues, which is why their longing is only suggested, as the diner scene will convey later the two alternate between moments of true unspoken agreement, and moments of tension because of their past.

Also, for Chiron it is a reminder of his childhood, of the time when he did not feel any sorrow or pain because he did not understand who he was, so the song is also a reference to his innocence and to the time when he was vulnerable.

Also relevant is the fact that most of the popular music used in *Moonlight* is mostly located in the third chapter. The soundtrack of the first two sections of the film is comprised mostly of orchestral songs, but there's a shift in the last chapter, where popular music is used to accentuate a more personal and subjective side of the characters. This shift allows for a more realist depiction of the characters as the popular music seems closer to the characters than the orchestral music, which is often reserved for a rich white minority. At the same rate that the music becomes more popular and closer to the setting, we see that the characters escape their imposed identities and stereotypes to achieve their personal identity. The first two thirds of the film feature characters constrained and consumed by expectations and guilt, and the music playing on these sections reflects that by using a genre of music alien to the social group. Just like the music, the identities of the characters are at first imposed by external agents. But the last chapter changes this tendency by featuring songs which are closer to the characters. The third section of the movie features characters overcoming their own personal issues to achieve self-acceptance, which is reflected in the presence of popular music that allows for a more subjective construction of characters. The gap between the characters and their identities is now much smaller, and it seems that they are starting to be free from the influence of external factors, which is conveyed through the use of mostly diegetic popular music, as opposed to the orchestral score which is non-diegetic. The characters now find their own identity, as opposed to being shaped by external agents, and in the same way it seems that they are given the control of the music of the movie. The characters began by having no agency over their identities and the music

was imposed by the film, but by the end, they regain the control over both their individuality and the music, as it seems that it is the characters themselves who choose the music in the last chapter, which reflects the subjectivity that the characters adopt and which hints at the identity that they have achieved after escaping “objective” and preconceived ideas of what they should be.

To sum up, *Moonlight* makes use of several devices and techniques to convey its themes. Starting with the division into three chapters, the film emphasises the transformation suffered by Chiron and the forces that caused it, along with the impact that other characters have on him. The movie’s visual language also helps the expression of these issues, with devices like the combination of two visual styles, framing and the use of colour correction in each chapter. In terms of music, the film features both popular and orchestral music, which can be related to the notion of ambivalent beauty also present in the visual style. The combination of orchestral and popular music gives a familiar context to a type of music likely unknown to the setting. Also relevant is the shift from orchestral to popular music that takes place in the third chapter, as it reflects the increased subjectivity that the characters achieve in order to secure their own identity.

5. Moonlight’s wider cultural context

Moonlight was released in the midst of the 2016 American election, at a time when racial relations in the U.S.A. were at a tense point. Race became again an issue after Obama’s post-racial era. Along with *Moonlight*, a tendency towards acceptance of Afro-American LGBT people could be identified, with musicians like Mykki Blanco, Kevin Abstract or Frank Ocean approaching the mainstream, and with television shows like *Rupaul’s Drag Race*. Thus, the discussion on blackness, masculinity and sexuality was

rekindled, with Frank Ocean and RuPaul's show being examples of non-normative black masculinities. These artists explore issues which can be related to *Moonlight*, like intimacy or representation. Also relevant is the comparison of *Moonlight* with *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) in order to understand different representations of masculinity and queer sexualities.

As mentioned, one of the main themes of the movie is intimacy, and it can be argued that the concept is especially relevant for queer youths, who are in conflict with the public sphere and the expectations that society has of men, just like Chiron. For many people, especially queer or people of colour, intimacy may acquire a different meaning, as public places are often associated with racist or homophobic abuse. The intimacy of a friend, a family member, or a lover might be the only rest some vulnerable groups get, as these relations provide safe spaces which might be rare for some people. Thus, instances of artists who build their work around intimacy are often taken as idols, as this intimacy suggests a vulnerability which makes for sincere pieces of art that might resonate with people who feel alienated because of their identity. This is the case of Frank Ocean, an Afro-American R&B singer who came out as queer in 2012, which took the rap industry by surprise, as this male-dominated genre rarely allows for non-normative gender or sexuality manifestations.

Ocean is a great example of the importance of intimacy, and how he uses it in his music can be linked to *Moonlight*. Musically, his songs reject genre boundaries, but his lyrics often deal with themes like depression, unrequited love or heartbreak, which are inherently linked with intimacy. In *Moonlight*, there is a huge difference between private and public spaces, as private spaces are linked with a more contemporary view of masculinity in which vulnerability is not only accepted but even encouraged as the only means for a balanced mental health. In Ocean's music, intimacy and vulnerability

are the rule. Although not all of his songs deal with gender or sexuality issues, those that do are infused with a vulnerability that conveys the necessity for intimacy. In songs like “Thinkin Bout You” or “Bad Religion”, Ocean sings of the conflict that his unrequited love for a man brings him. In these songs he finds a private place in which he can be vulnerable, although he makes them public by publishing them. By publishing music that rejects heteronormative views of masculinity, which are fairly common in R&B and rap music, Ocean highlights the importance of intimacy for young people, especially black and queer. Thus, *Moonlight* can be understood as constructed around a concept of intimacy as central to a healthy masculinity, which is also reflected in Ocean’s music. For both, the only way to achieve happiness in an aggressive society is not to abandon emotionality, as many men do because it is the source of pain and abuse, but to turn inward to reflect on one’s self-image and how one interacts in society. Thus intimacy can be identified as a key element when understanding black queer people.

Although it can be placed on a different level of exposition, black drag culture is also an example of normalization of black queerness. Usually a safe space for gay men, drag culture involves many disciplines, all involving performing usually feminine gender roles in a playful way. Despite being a supposedly inclusive environment, traditionally there was racism in the balls, which is the name given to the ceremonies in which the performers compete. Thus, Crystal LaBeija decided to create a black drag ball in which black gay men and Trans women could be accepted, which was documented in the film *The Queen* (1968). The subculture lasted for many years and its dawn was documented in the film *Paris is Burning* (1990), a documentary that explores the complex culture of black drag in New York, where LGBTQ people of the time could find a safe haven in which they could freely express their sexuality and their gender. A predominantly Afro-American scene, these balls presented a view of queer masculinity

which might seem far from the displays of masculinity present in *Moonlight* but which can be understood as the first step towards acceptance of queer people of colour. Despite this seeming difference, both Chiron and the Drag Queens were the target of homophobic abuse because of their perceived femininity and weakness, both inside and outside their local communities (Drag Queens were mistreated by white queer people, like Chiron was mistreated by Afro-American people). Although films depicting drag culture are fairly common, it can be said that the scene remained underground until 2008, when Rupaul Charles, a black gay man known for his drag queen persona, started the production of *Rupaul's Drag Race*, a reality competition show in which drag queens compete to win the crown of "America's next drag superstar". The show can be considered a renaissance of the spirit of *Paris is Burning*, a celebration of queerness, this time with a more inclusive scope, as the participants are quite diverse. Also, the film is a constant source of inspiration, with many catchphrases quoted extensively, or even sampled in songs used in the show. Like *Moonlight*, these films and TV shows present non-traditional views on masculinity which help toward the acceptance of queerness, particularly in Afro-American environments, as the presence of models of black queerness like Chiron or Rupaul are present for black queer youths to set a positive example, without forgetting their predecessors, as participants of the show take inspiration from or often remember pioneers like Sylvia Rivera or Crystal LaBeija, who were black queer people long before it was minimally accepted.

Although there is a tendency towards black queer acceptance, it can be argued that the group has not reached the mainstream, as opposed to white cis gay men, who are the most represented LGBTQ subgroup in media. Although this group faces their own difficulties, it is evident that these are approached in a different manner. An example of this is *Call Me by Your Name* (2017). The film, appearing in roughly the

same historical context as *Moonlight*, is a coming of age story in which the son of an archaeology professor called Elio falls in love with Oliver, a student who spends a summer with Elio's family, in their idyllic Italian villa. As it is evident, the setting is quite different from Liberty City. Also, the families of the protagonists are extremely different: while Chiron's only family member is a drug addict who cannot support her son for most of the film, the Pearlman family is a cultured and privileged family, who have no issue with his son falling in love with an older man. But perhaps the most relevant comparison is the use of naming in both films. On the one hand in *Moonlight* the environmental pressure is so strong that Chiron cannot name himself for most of the movie. Just as he is not allowed to construct his own identity, he is not allowed a proper name, as people refer to him by reductionist nicknames like Black or Little. The only people who call him by his real name are those who love him, so Chiron has an affective quality. On the other hand, the protagonists of *Call Me by Your Name* are freed from the constraints suffered by Chiron, so they are left the space and time to construct not only their identities but their relation, and accordingly, they choose their own names as indicated by the title of the movie. Although both movies can be considered similar, as they tell stories of men loving men, the scope and perspective is drastically different, as told by the use of names as a symbol for identity.

6. Conclusion

On a surface level *Moonlight* is the story of Chiron, a black gay man who cannot find his place in the world, but the film makes a point of demonstrating how toxic masculinity and homophobia are forces quite hard to overcome and how the recovery of intimacy and vulnerability is the only path leading to healing: Chiron and other characters are able to build an identity only after they get over guilt. The different

characterisation of the protagonist in each chapter shows Chiron as an evolving character who is drastically changed because of toxic masculinity and homophobia. The film also conveys this progression by imitating the three film stocks and modifying the recurrent “Chiron’s Theme”. Also relevant to the movie is the notion of ambivalent beauty, which characterises a Miami in which there is a beauty hidden or mixed with social degradation. The concept is reinforced through visual language and its dual visual styles and through the combination of high and low genres of music in the soundtrack. Two seemingly opposite genres, such as Chopped and Screwed and Orchestral music, are joined to transform the theme song, mostly in the second chapter, thus giving the hazing scene a nightmarish feel. The soundtrack in the third chapter is relevant because it features mostly popular songs, which convey the character’s increasing subjectivity they had been missing, rendering them unable to achieve a healthy identity until this point. Part of the relevance of the film resides in its socio-historical context. The film’s main themes can be seen as shared by young popular culture, for instance, the film’s treatment of intimacy can be related to Frank Ocean’s music. The mention of black drag culture might seem incoherent as *Moonlight* and the drag community perform masculinity in radically different ways, but the two can be considered a part of a bigger movement for the normalization of black queerness. To conclude, it is also relevant to note that despite this progressive acceptance, black LGBT people remain far from the mainstream, which is proved by comparing the film to *Call Me by Your Name*, a film concerned with male love but which provides a totally different perspective.

Bibliography:

“Effects of Purple Drank Abuse.” *Narconon International*, www.narconon.org/drug-abuse/purple-drank-effects.html. Accessed 8 March 2018.

Bordwell, David, and Kristin Marie Thompson. *Film Art: an Introduction*. 6th ed., pp 46-57. McGraw-Hill, 2001.

Cooper, Michael. “Hear How 'Moonlight' Got Its Sound: Violins, Chopped and Screwed.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 21 Feb. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/arts/music/moonlight-movie-score-music-oscar.html. Accessed 5 March 2018.

Gillespie, Michael Boyce. “One Step Ahead: A Conversation with Barry Jenkins.” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 3, 28 Feb. 2017, pp. 52–62., filmquarterly.org/2017/02/28/one-step-ahead-a-conversation-with-barry-jenkins/. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Grossberg, Lawrence, et al., editors. “Cultural Studies: An Introduction.” *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, 1992, pp. 3–5.

Kannan, Menaka, et al. “Watching Moonlight in the Twilight of Obama.” *Humanity & Society*, vol. 41, no. 3, 20 July 2017, pp. 287–298., doi:10.1177/0160597617719889. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

LensCulture. “The Photographic Inspirations Behind Moonlight, 2016's Best Picture - Interview with James Laxton, Moonlight's Cinematographer.” *LensCulture*, www.lensculture.com/articles/moonlight-cinematography-the-photographic-inspirations-behind-moonlight-2016-s-best-picture. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

O'Falt, Chris. “'Moonlight' Glow: Creating the Bold Color and Contrast of Barry Jenkins' Emotional Landscape.” *IndieWire*, 28 Oct. 2016, www.indiewire.com/2016/10/moonlight-cinematography-color-barry-jenkins-james-laxton-alex-bickel-1201740402/. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Pearce, Sheldon. “From DJ Screw to Moonlight: the Unlikely Comeback of Chopped and Screwed.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 24 Jan. 2017, www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jan/24/chopped-screwed-hip-hop-dj-screw-moonlight.

Sculos, Bryant W. (2017) "Who's Afraid of 'Toxic Masculinity'?", *Class, Race and Corporate Power*:

Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 6. DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.5.3.006517