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# With Moonlight's Oscar win, Hollywood begins to right old wrongs

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# With Moonlight's Oscar win, Hollywood begins to right old wrongs

## **Abstract**

When Faye Dunaway, standing next to a puzzled-looking Warren Beatty, announced that *La La Land* had won Best Picture at Monday's Oscars, I doubt many people were surprised. Sure, pretty much all of the queer film fans, writers and academics I follow on Twitter were hoping for a win by the new gay classic *Moonlight*, but we are a crowd that has been disappointed before.

## **Keywords**

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## THE CONVERSATION

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### With Moonlight's Oscar win, Hollywood begins to right old wrongs

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André Holland and Trevante Rhodes in Moonlight: it has seemed in recent years that queer films are just not Best Picture material. A24, Plan B Entertainment

When Faye Dunaway, standing next to a puzzled-looking Warren Beatty, announced that La La Land had won Best Picture at Monday's Oscars, I doubt many people were surprised. Sure, pretty much all of the queer film fans, writers and academics I follow on Twitter were hoping for a win by the new gay classic Moonlight, but we are a crowd that has been disappointed before.

In 2005, we watched opened-mouthed as the ensemble piece Crash took Best Picture ahead of the far more deserving "I ain't no queer" masterpiece, Brokeback Mountain. Just last year, the Academy failed to even nominate the extraordinary lesbian romance Carol for its top prize. It has seemed in recent years that queer films, even the masterpieces, are just not Best Picture material.

With Dunaway's announcement, therefore, I imagined less an outraged cry than a resigned sigh ringing throughout the queer world. But then Moonlight – a low budget film that explores the life of a black man struggling with same-sex desires – was declared the true Best Picture winner.

In Moonlight, we see lives generally absent from movie screens. Although gay characters are more commonly seen in film now than ever before, the lives of queer people of colour are rarely explored.

A quick look at the queer films with Oscar-nominated performances since 2000 (including Brokeback Mountain, Carol, Capote, Milk, A Single Man and The Danish Girl) reveals a startlingly monochrome



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palate. The recent historical drama *Stonewall*, meanwhile, was heavily critiqued for shifting real-life transgender people of colour to the margins of their own story. *Moonlight* was, therefore, always going to be a welcome arrival.

If the subject matter was welcome, the film itself is stunning. *Moonlight* explores, with beauty and gentleness, a heartbreakingly constrained and fearful life. The film is divided into three chapters, each devoted to a period of that life, following Chiron from young boy to teenager to twenty-something. He is cruelly bullied at school, labelled a faggot and learns to respond to a world of violence with violence of his own. Through each chapter, Chiron craves love and kindness. He tries to hide behind silence, but his yearning glows through.

Among the delight over *Moonlight*'s win, there is an equal amount of surprise. Just how did we get to the point where such a film could win? The reasons for this shock lie in memories of *Brokeback Mountain* and *Carol*, certainly, but also in both the long history of Hollywood and the current mood of America.

It is only in relatively recent times that a film like *Moonlight* could even be made. Indeed, Warren Beatty began his acting career as a 1950s pretty-boy, TV star in an era that simply would not have countenanced homosexual men at the centre of any cinematic story.



John Ker in *Tea and Sympathy*. MGM/idmb

Films like *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1956) told stories about queer characters, but only by pretending that those characters weren't queer at all. It wasn't until the 1960s, with the *British Victim* (1961), that the pretence was finally dropped and gay characters were, at least from time to time, allowed to admit to being gay. Like many actors of his generation, the film's star, Dirk Bogarde, was forced to hide his own homosexuality throughout much of his career.

Non-white queer lives remained even rarer on-screen.

Occasional comedic characters appeared in 1970s films like *Car Wash* and *Next Stop Greenwich Village*, but they were never central to the film. It would only be in the late 1980s

and early 1990s that black queer lives found central focus in a range of non-Hollywood documentaries and experimental works including *Looking for Langston*, *Tongues Untied* and *Paris is Burning*.

This long history of exclusion matters greatly to *Moonlight*'s victory. Many queer people felt that, even if Hollywood seemed willing to make films about our lives, a final door of acceptance was slammed in the face of *Brokeback Mountain* and *Carol*. Equally, queer people of colour found it difficult to celebrate the victories of queer film when their own lives were excluded. The success of *Moonlight*,



Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara in *Carol*. Weinstein Company

therefore, offers two victories at once.





Heather Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in Brokeback Mountain. Focus Features

And then, of course, there is the particular moment in which we now find ourselves. The election of Trump and the blatantly racist, homophobic and transphobic policies of many Republican politicians have offered a reminder to queer people and people of colour that hard-fought victories might all too easily be swept away.

An Oscar win doesn't only mean a nice statue, but a far greater audience. In the US, for instance, Moonlight has now been booked into at least 1,500 theaters for the coming weekend. In these crazy times, the fact that more people will now see Chiron's story feels like a victory over ascendant dark forces.

While I take great pleasure in Moonlight's win, I hope that this isn't seen as a resolution of Hollywood's continuing problems with race, sexuality and gender. We shouldn't have only one great film about black queer lives, any more than we should have one great film about white straight people. Hopefully, Moonlight is less a point of redemption for the Oscars than the start of something interesting in Hollywood more generally.

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