

Personal Cinema, Subjectivity and Emotional Realism in *Moonlight*

Luis M. García-Mainar 

Following the release of Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* in 2016 *The New Yorker* ran an enthusiastic review in which Richard Brody welcomes its political sensibility for focusing on a young gay Black man but not reducing its subject to gayness or Blackness. Instead, the film restores “complexity to the very idea of identity, of the multiplicity as well as the singularity of being oneself.” Brody enumerates the film's virtues, namely how it provides a first-person experience, embodies a personal sensibility, taps an inner world, offers an emotional experience of an almost unbearable intimacy, exhibits a spectacular directorial conception and creates a sense of place that is central to the characters' sense of being (2016). Brody's is actually just one among the many responses centered around issues of empathy, universality and specificity that Maria Flood's monograph on the film has discussed and conceptualized exhaustively (2022, 76–81). This essay would like to argue that this *New Yorker* piece may be pointing to a relevant, distinct set of themes and esthetics in contemporary US cinema, one that belongs to a broader cultural movement illustrated not only by cinema but also by television and literature and that extends beyond the United States.

The article centers on the common ground shared by a part of contemporary cinema that, found at least across Europe and the United States, will be discussed through Barry Jenkins's film. *Moonlight* exemplifies the contemporary salience of an intensely personal point of view present in a significant number of films and television narratives whose style intensifies the main characters', and in diverse ways also their creators', subjectivity, and whose stories exhibit varying degrees of inspiration on true events. The film shares this salience with, among others, films of the past decade such as Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014), Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017), Chloé Zhao's *The Rider* (2017), Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018), Paweł Pawlikowski's *Zimna wojna* (Cold War, 2018), or Pedro Almodóvar's

Luis M. García-Mainar is a Professor of Film and American Studies at the Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain). He is the author of *Clint Eastwood: de actor a autor* (Barcelona, Paidós, 2006) and *The Introspective Realist Crime Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). His work has appeared in, among other journals, *CineAction*, *Hispanic Research Journal*, *Journal of Film and Video* and *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas*.

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Dolor y Gloria (Pain and Glory, 2019). In television this intensity has become a trademark of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (BBC, 2016, 2019), Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* (BBC/HBO, 2020), or Joseph Gordon-Levitt's *Mr. Corman* (Apple TV, 2021). More specifically, *Moonlight*'s style exploits the potential of digital cinema to construct a particular kind of realism that connects the film with, among others, Robin Campillo's *120 battements par minute* (120 Beats per Minute/BPM, 2017) or Shola Amoo's *The Last Tree* (2019).

The article's main argument is that *Moonlight* belongs to a group of, not exclusively cinematographic, narratives based on constructions of authenticity and personal vision that make them particularly emphatic in their elaboration of personal point of view. While some of them are autobiographical they are not necessarily so, personal vision and connection to the story being more relevant than their strict autobiographical nature. In this context the paper will discuss how *Moonlight* illustrates the representational and stylistic strategies of one of the modes of this "personal cinema" by focusing on its deployment of an esthetic of intense personal point of view. More specifically, the paper will focus on the film's imagining of this private world as the meeting point for notions of identity and humanity, and on one of the styles of this "personal cinema", that which employs intense subjectivity and an immersive film language connected with the tradition of emotional realism. It will explore how emotional realism is produced by exploiting the possibilities of digital cinema, and how this runs parallel to the surge of the authentic and personal as response to the contemporary anxiety about culturalization. They would belong to a broader culture of the personal that, opposed to the public culture of media and institutions, would voice a response to the cultural colonization of modern life. The article will ultimately analyze how close attention to film language reveals the cultural role that a film like *Moonlight*, and those which share its subjective style and content, can perform today.

The article places *Moonlight* in the context of a broad movement of revitalization of a culture of the personal—as opposed to a public culture of the media, institutions or the state—that nevertheless holds political intentionality at its center. The literary world is a prominent example of this culture as in the past two decades a wave of literature has vindicated a personal point of view on politics and history in which the appeal to basic rights emerges from depictions of the quotidian and the private rather than from public debate. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has become a vocal champion of this turn by calling for a literature based on the real lives and experiences of authors, a literature that speaks about the personal but in the process acquires a political dimension (2018). The sustained success of auto-fiction in both Europe and the United States proves the cultural

relevance of this concern: Rachel Cusk, Valeria Luiselli, Ben Lerner, Ta-Nehisi Coates, David Sedaris, Emmanuel Carrère, Karl Ove Knausgaard, or the 2022 Noble Prize in Literature Annie Ernaux have developed an approach to fiction that takes themselves and their lives as subject matter of their narratives. In doing so they tend to dwell on the authors' experience of the quotidian, the everyday and ordinary, while suggesting the significance of that experience to broader historical and political circumstances.

In particular, Karl Ove Knausgaard's *Min Kamp* (My Struggle, 2009–2012), a series of six autobiographical novels, succeeds in connecting everyday experience, described in exhausting detail, with broader concerns, mainly the sense that reality has lost factuality and gained abstraction. In *Min Kamp. Forste bok* (My Struggle: Book One, 2009) Knausgaard interweaves an account of his father's death with reflections on the nature of reality and the world, at one point recounting how he learned to view the world as fabricated: even the world's physical geography had been completely processed into images of a reality that human beings had rarely seen but in accordance with which they lived their lives. He describes his writing as an attempt to open this world and relieve his feeling that the world is small, "enclosed around itself" (2012, 100–101). This craving for the real, which commentators of his work have noted (Pierce 2015), would arguably exhibit the anxiety to escape from the cultural and social construction of reality ushered in by modernity. Particularly, Knausgaard's reflections on his father's death in *My Struggle: Book One* echo Anthony Giddens's argument about modernity's sequestration of experience. The security that modernity brought to everyday life was obtained at the expense of a sequestration of any experience related to madness, criminality, sickness, death, sexuality and nature; that is, "fundamental existential issues which raise central moral dilemmas for human beings" (1991, 156). Knausgaard's novels voice the concern over a reality that has been sequestered from human beings, offering attention to the everyday and a strong personal vision as ways to counter it. In more general terms, they illustrate a fantasy of escape from the cultural construction of the real. The article will employ the phrase "cultural colonization of the real" to refer to this sense of loss of factuality and the increasing abstraction produced by the seeming reduction of reality to representations of it, a process that in late modernity would produce the impression that individuals are being separated from experience.

The relevance of this concern is proved by its prominence in, among other cultural manifestations, the philosophical movement of "The New Realism." Heralded by German philosopher Markus Gabriel, the New Realism opposes the postmodern notion that reality is only accessible

through human experience and conceptualized through language, and instead advocates the existence of a reality independent of human intervention and previous to knowledge (Ramírez 2017). Gabriel proposes a philosophy engaged with its time and society, a philosophy with a political dimension, based on universal values such as human rights, social justice and democracy (2022). The New Realism can be viewed as a symptom of the current cultural need to denounce the passage from the natural to the social that has characterized modernity, according to which everything that was natural before has become culturalized, socially constructed. The New Realism objects to this, testifying to the current anxiety about culturalization and the desire to find an alternative to it in universal values and human rights.

The prominence of personal stories found in auto-fiction can also be perceived in contemporary film. The concept of “personal cinema” has been applied to experimental, amateur film and the “personal” label was attached to the authorship that characterized the New American Cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Gelmis 1970, xii). More recently, Alistair Fox has recuperated it to refer to the cinema originated in the biography of the artist who creates it, and which holds a certain therapeutic potential for the author (2011). Autobiographical or semi-autobiographical elements are present throughout the history of the cinema and their inscription in films has taken multiple forms that in the United States date back to such early filmmakers as Oscar Micheaux, whose somewhat autobiographical stories established him as cultural referent (Bowser and Spence 2003). In the context of western cinema it has proliferated in the past decade with, among many others, Mike Mills’s *Beginners* (2010), Carlos Reygadas’s *Nuestro tiempo* (Our Time, 2018), Alma Har’el’s *Honey Boy* (2019), Joanna Hogg’s *The Souvenir* (2019) and *The Souvenir Part II* (2021), Lulu Wang’s *The Farewell* (2019), or Lee Isaac Chung’s *Minari* (2020).

The relation of cinema to autobiography has remained underexplored in Film Studies, probably because as a distinct form autobiography has remained a marginal genre in the Hollywood tradition (McHugh 2001). Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact—which, with literature in mind, states that for an autobiography to exist the author, narrator and protagonist should be the same person (1989)—is clearly not often found in the cinema (Bruss 1980), but it is undeniable that many films have contained autobiographical material. The autobiographical has antecedents in the avant-garde films of the 1960s (Sitney 1978) and in the documentary, both arguably reflections of the turn to the politics of the self in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s (Lane 2002). Linda Haverty Rugg has opened the concept by proposing that actors, the act of directing or allusions to the technical apparatus might also be ways of including the

autobiographical author (2014), and that the authors' lives might be inscribed in their filmmaking mode, as Buster Keaton's life was in his films (2006). Despite Rugg's contribution, the study of narrative cinema has been constrained by a rigid notion of filmic autobiography because, since a clear autobiographical pact is hard to find in narrative cinema, attention to the personal account of stories connected with real lives has often been neglected. This can be remedied by adopting a more flexible approach that is less strict about the rules of autobiography and more attentive to the subjective by focusing on both the personal vision of the author, by author also meaning creative personnel, and the point of view of characters. It is in this more general and flexible sense that this article proposes to use the term "personal cinema." This cinema is also authorial, as its creative personnel is inscribed in it through autobiographically relevant stories or stylistic choices, or through both; but it is more than auteur cinema, in as much as the personal connotations of its stories and style make it rely on strategies of authenticity not necessarily central to auteur cinema.

Released in 2016, Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* reverberates through this culture of the personal both thematically and esthetically. It tells the story of Chiron, an African American child living in a poor Miami neighborhood who suffers the strife of growing up gay and living with an addicted mother. The story is divided into three sections through which Chiron grows from child (Alex Hibbert) to teenager (Ashton Sanders) and then to adult man (Trevante Rhodes). As a child he meets Cuban drug dealer Juan (Mahershala Ali) and his girlfriend Teresa (Janelle Monáe), who provide the affection he needs to face a sad life of bullying at school and neglect at home. As a teenager he discovers sexuality with his friend Kevin (Jharrel Jerome), who is then forced to participate in a hazing ritual and beat him. When Chiron retaliates he is arrested and sent to a juvenile center. The third section follows adult Chiron, now a muscular drug dealer in Atlanta, whom Kevin (André Holland) phones and invites to visit him in Miami. At the diner where he works, and later at his apartment, Kevin persuades Chiron to admit that he has never forgotten him. *Moonlight* was heralded as a product of the progressive Obama era, sanctioned by the Film Academy with the 2017 Award for Best Picture, and it quickly became an object of debate, particularly within Black culture.

Comments on the film tended to understand it as an intervention in the realm of identity. Menaka Kannan, Rhys Hall, and Matthew W. Hughey argue that the film reproduced the struggles over the representation of marginalized peoples at a time marked by the legacy of Obama's cultural influence (2017). In an interview with Barry Jenkins for *Film Quarterly*, Michael Boyce Gillespie describes *Moonlight* as a distinct form of Black film possessing the quality of what he calls "quiet," a form of Black

resistance that shifts attention to human interiority (2017, 53–54). It has also been posited as example of Blackness transmitted through touch and tactility (Bost 2021), the complexities of Black motherhood (Bradley 2017; Watkins-Hayes, Byrd, and Merritt 2019), both the humanization of Black queer men (Copeland 2018) and the propagation of derogatory views of Black feminine men (Stallings 2019), the use of music to represent Black male intimacy (Reznik 2019), and it also sparked a brief debate about its ability to reflect gay life given its lack of on-screen sexual activity (Lodge 2017; Lee 2017). These responses reveal that the film was explained as part of the cultural debate about identity that had reached peaks of visibility in the US at the time of its release.

Moonlight reflected a social and cultural context in which identity had once again become a major object of debate in the United States, even political debate. Donald Trump's victory at the 2016 presidential election produced a general questioning of the political attitudes that had made US citizens vote for a candidate that promised renewed nationalism and hostility to both multiculturalism and immigration. A great part of this critique was directed at the Democrats, who were accused by Columbia University professor Mark Lilla of relying on identity politics and thus failing to offer a project that could appeal to a majority of Americans (2018, 9). This critical view of the political use of identity echoed similar arguments of feminism that since the 1990s had called for a movement that would leave identity claims behind and thus facilitate political praxis (Brown 1995; Zerilli 2005). This notion would reach the public debate during the 2008 election, which to political and popular commentators inaugurated a post-identity world with Barack Obama as paradigm of the new post-racial era (Subramanian 2010, 6). However, to some commentators the election of Trump proved that the promise represented by that movement had not been fulfilled, arguing that *Moonlight* is less optimistic about it than the former president had been (Flood 2022, 17). In 2018, two years after *Moonlight's* release, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018) resented the division caused by identity, arguing that it was based on a misconception: the tendency to exaggerate differences from others and similarities with those who we feel are part of our group (1–32). From a wider perspective, Appiah, Lilla and the proponents of post-identity exemplified social theorist Alain Touraine's notion that global social transformations have produced a segment of society that asserts itself not in terms of their identity but in terms of their right to an individual existence and universal rights (2009, 200–213). Signals have thus emerged from the fields of politics, culture and social theory that converge on the relevance of changes affecting the consideration of contemporary identity.

As Maria Flood discusses, the critical reception of the film combines attention to identity, to which she refers as its specificity, with consistent mentions to what she terms its universality. By this she means its presentation of Chiron's life as example of a universal humanity, often "grounded in ideas of empathy and love" (2022, 76–77). Relying on Richard Dyer's critique of universal humanity as a cover for the white experience (1997, 1) and Janine Jones's analysis of its work in *Moonlight's* reception (2019, 95), Flood cautions us against the association of the universal with the human and criticizes the way empathy became a prerequisite for critics to perceive the Black experience as universal and human (2022, 78–80). Jones argues that the responses to the film that stressed the humanity of characters did so at the expense of their identity, for example neglecting its features of blackness, as interviews conducted on the film revealed (2019, 96). This article would like to engage in this debate over the film's presentation of humanity and identity by positing that every aspect of *Moonlight*, from its story and the conditions that surround its reception to its point of view and film style, suggests that both are the materials from which the film's complexity is made. As to the issue of empathy, Flood quotes Sara Ahmed's notion that it actually creates a distance between the subject who feels and the object whose suffering is felt, a distance that keeps subject and object in their place and thus divides them. However, she concludes by relying on Barry Jenkins's description of his approach to the making of the film, which brings together "feelings of both commonality and difference": as a straight man, he identifies with every aspect of Chiron's identity except for his sexuality but he approaches it "from the position of an 'ally'." Jenkins chooses to open a door for the audience to empathize with the character by working on his own empathy, in which he starts from everything he shares with him to then achieve an understanding of what separates them (2022, 80–81). This article will conceive empathy as this understanding of someone else's nature and circumstances that Jenkins hoped to bring to *Moonlight* through his own experience.

Another critical response to *Moonlight*, Racquel Gates's for *Film Quarterly*, engages with responses that have viewed its stylization as an attempt to elevate the image of Black people and in doing so introduced another key aspect of the film: a lavish cinematography that is generally praised by critics (2017). Publications devoted to cinematography are particularly emphatic on this as *Lensculture*, *Time.com*, *Lensflaretheory*, *Indiewire*, *American Cinematographer* or *British Cinematographer* welcomed *Moonlight's* digital photography and its use of Miami locations, light and color. However, the thematic and esthetic considerations that followed the film failed to set it in another context that would illuminate its function in contemporary US culture, a context that is indirectly fundamental in

Flood's book: it was the product of a keen interest in narratives of the personal. Cinematographer James Laxton seemed aware of it when he said that *Moonlight* belonged to a group of films of that year that were really personal visions, such as *Lion*, *Arrival* or *La La Land* (Moakley n.d.); and actually every discussion of the film tended to start with comments on Barry Jenkins's personal relation to his script, which was based on *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, a play by Tarell Alvin McCraney. These two issues, identity and film style, point to representational and stylistic strategies central to the film's articulation of an authenticity that suggests connotations of personal cinema.

A great portion of the film's recreation of identity needs to be understood through its creators' experience. Both Jenkins and McCraney had lived in the same area of Miami as children and teenagers, and both their mothers had been addicts. Particularly, McCraney's discussion of the film in the general press tended to focus on the story's autobiographical quality (Adams 2017), while Jenkins preferred to express his aspiration to a cinema that was not so much biographical as personal (Anderson-Moore 2018). McCraney had written his play when he was 22 years old and in mourning for the recent death of his mother from AIDS-related complications. To him it represented a way to cope with what he felt was a turning point for both his life and writing career, a way to make sense of his past by pouring his experience onto Chiron by, for example, having a drug-dealer teach the boy to swim or accept his difference. Jenkins shared much of McCraney's life experience and, although he was not homosexual, managed to bring his own to the film (Wbur Here & Now 2017). The work he has done since, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) and television series *The Underground Railroad* (Amazon, 2021), adds context to *Moonlight* that brings to the surface his recurrent stylistic blend of realism and lyrical tone, as well as his preference for stories that he regards as personal (Girish 2021, 29–33). For McCraney, *Moonlight* was like breaking a dam inside him with “all the energy that was behind it,” which has made him able to write about his past life (Adams 2017). The television series he has written after *Moonlight*, *David Makes Man* (OWN, 2019, 2021), can be considered a product of that turn in his career: it is a coming-of-age drama about a teenager's search for a way out of poverty in South Florida that is also partly autobiographical. To both Jenkins and McCraney the identity they bring to their work has a deep connection with the personal nature of their stories and esthetic choices.

Moonlight's point of view both shapes a visual/aural style that contributes subjective intensity and creates characters that illustrate the complexities of identity and humanity. Both operations construct a sense of authenticity that qualifies the film's point of view as a very personal one attributed to

its creators—mainly its director, writer, and cinematographer—which ultimately suggests personal cinema. Both deployments of point of view rely on strategies that suggest authenticity by on one hand creating emotion and intimacy through attention to the everyday and on the other offering complex views of life and reality. These two strategies are arguably central to autobiography, which reveals *Moonlight*'s proximity to its form despite not being a strictly autobiographical film in Lejeune's terms.

Moonlight's realist vocation associates it first of all with the wave of New Black Realism films of the 1990s, which includes such films as *Boys n de Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991) or *Menace II Society* (the Hughes brothers). These films are set in real locations and communities, offer a critique of the social causes of crime and violence in degenerating American large cities, and often do so through coming-of-age dramas that follow characters from childhood to maturity (Flood 2022, 20–23). However, the esthetic of Jenkins's film differs significantly from that of New Black Realism, as *Moonlight*'s visual and aural configuration creates an immersive experience that fills character point of view with emotion and intimacy, which in turn produce a sense of authenticity. In this the film echoes autobiography's appeal to the everyday in order to suggest the relevance of the personal. At the same time, emotion and intimacy also represent a response to the modern sequestration of experience that separates individuals from the real. This immersive emotional connection that offers intimations of the characters' experience is created by means of three film styles in *Moonlight*: a sedate one focused on the everyday, a more energetic one that relies on camera movement and tight framing, and an obviously excessive one. The first style features an unhurried rhythm that evokes the pace of real life, and often tight shots that allow performance to suggest intimacy, friendship or affection. It predominates in Chiron's encounters with Juan and Teresa in the "Little" section, later during the "Chiron" segment in the moments with Teresa and in the beach scene with Kevin, and more extensively during the "Black" section in Chiron's meetings with Kevin, both at the diner and the apartment.

However, *Moonlight*'s most pervasive style consists of a combination of mobile camera and close framing that enhances subjectivity by offering viewers both glimpses into the emotional state of character through performance and an approximation to a visual-aural experience of that emotion. Its sensuous quality suggests meaning by evoking the physical experience of affection, anxiety or fear, while its stylistic salience suggests the presence of a personal point of view to be attributed to the film's director and cinematographer. It appears already in the opening scene, when Juan visits his man at the corner: the anxiety expressed through their constant looks in every direction, alert at the sudden appearance of danger, is

also suggested through the camera frantically circling around them. The first views of Chiron are also tinged with the anxiety conveyed through a camera that follows him, mimicking the jerky feel of his run as he tries to escape from the boys who chase him. This mobile subjective cinematography combines with music and close shots that focus on character emotion when the child plays in the fields, which leads to his first conversation with Kevin, or when Juan finds Chiron's mother smoking crack in the street. Juan's internal conflict as a dealer who is fueling her addiction while accusing her of neglecting her son is powerfully rendered through a camera that approximates character at key dramatic moments. Chiron's traumatic experience at high school in the second section is mostly portrayed through this visual style too: his fear of Terrel's constant threats and Kevin's induced aggression are turned into an almost physical experience for the audience through a roving camera that dwells on Chiron's facial expression of helplessness. A similar approach is found in the scenes that show Chiron's despair at his mother's increasing addiction, while the third section makes less use of the style, restricting it to Chiron's initial scenes in Atlanta and the meeting with his mother at the rehabilitation center.

In an interview for *Lensculture* magazine, cinematographer James Laxton qualifies this style as "subjective intensity" and attributes it to the laxness facilitated by digital filming. The digital camera allowed him to engage with Miami and its people, which created a sense of inhabiting the film's spaces, while operating the camera himself produced intimacy and subjectivity, as if the film were seeing through the eyes of the characters. Proximity to the actors provided a physical presence that offered the audience identification by sharing the characters' experience. Generally, digital shooting allowed for opportunities to find "nuance, subtleties and moments of realism," such as a shot of Alex Hibbert inadvertently playing with his hands in the water during the swimming scene (Strecker n.d.). Laxton's emphasis on the digital nature of the film, as well as on the subjectivity, intimacy and physicality obtained by the opportunities it grants to dwell on the everyday, are central to the particular film style represented by *Moonlight*. The interview also operates as an extra-textual intervention that reclaims such style as a personal signature credited to the film's creative personnel.

The genealogy of this style that combines mobile camerawork with tight shots can be traced to the esthetic of emotional realism, which *Moonlight* updates through digital cinema. Attention to this genealogy reveals implications related to the abstract and constructed quality of digital cinema that are relevant to the film's third style, a style that is central to the film's construction of personal cinema and to its international, World Cinema relevance. As Aymer Jean Christian argues, Jenkins's previous film, *Medicine*

for Melancholy (2008), qualifies as an example of mumblecore, a digital-age version of realism that in the 2000s crystallized into a movement of films about confused young people (2011, 119–121). Mumblecore reflected the new conditions of an emerging digital cinema that provides possibilities generated by smaller, more mobile cameras, such as spontaneity, flexibility, unobtrusiveness and intimacy. Digital cameras can follow the action into tight spaces and capture unpredictable moments, shooting in a way that is organic to places and people, and producing a both spontaneous and intimate esthetic (Daly 2009, 7–9). Spontaneity and intimacy are central to *Medicine for Melancholy* and *Moonlight*, and they can be regarded as the core of Barry Jenkins’s cinema, who has acknowledged intimacy and everyday temporality, a focus on small and quotidian moments, as a major aspiration of his film style (Girish 2021, 30). The result is a distinct form called “emotional realism” that privileges intimacy and attempts to show lived experience as mundane and everyday, investing it with the emotion of the characters’ inner life. A style that, with a tradition in independent cinema, dates back to the work of John Cassavetes and more recently the Dogme95 movement (Christian 2011, 132–133). With roots in amateur and underground cinema, Cassavetes’s emotional realism drew on television and experimental docudrama to construct character through emotion by means of close-ups and a mobile camera focused on performance. Location shooting, simple lighting and deep space mise-en-scène rounded off a style that aspired to a sense of authenticity (Margulies 1998, 280–287). Like Cassavetes, Dogme95 criticized Hollywood for its lack of emotional realism and ultimately contributed a focus on the inner life of character as marker of realism (Christian 2011, 133). From a broader perspective, emotional realism follows the trail of avant-garde film that developed ways to metaphorically represent states of mind (Lane 2002, 13), while it has more recently been associated with the use of nonprofessional handheld video cameras’ capacity to signal authenticity and character emotion (Lam 2014, 88, 100).

This aspiration to recreate the authenticity of emotion would seem to clash with the abstract and constructed nature of digital cinema. Its detachment from the real referent and its removal of the tangible process in artistic production would make explicit the construction inherent in filmmaking. For Christian this contradiction is already present in mumblecore, which in its exhibition of the need to reconnect with the real refocuses the debate on the question of emotional tangibility. How can filmmakers continue to make films that, in their attempt to reconnect with the real, seek the viewers’ emotional response while dealing with a digital medium that constantly points to its evident construction? (2011, 134–135). *Moonlight* responds to the limitations of the digital not by downplaying its

constructed nature but by amplifying it through a third style that reveals characters' emotion through a degree of excess inherent in emotional realism. In this, *Moonlight* embraces the more expressionistic possibilities found in Dogme95. The opening scene with Juan illustrates it as the camera circling around him and his man at the corner points to the anxiety of the characters while its insistent movement, which extends even after the emotion has been evoked, reveals excess meant to express character point of view. The scene in which Juan takes Chiron to the beach and teaches him to swim exemplifies the versatility of digital cinematography that provides the boy's emotionally intense point of view while music adds a lyrical tone. The camera's proximity to Chiron in the water, its self-conscious presence as it strives to suggest the child's mix of uneasiness and excitement by imitating his eye-level view of the waves, manages to render the emotional experience powerfully by means of evident stylization. Other outstanding examples are the fuchsia backlight, slow-motion and music employed to show Chiron's mother during one of her rages, or adult Kevin's slow-motion direct look at the camera to the sound of extradiegetic music while he smokes outside the diner. This use of stylization is noted in reviews of the film, which interpret it as proof that the naturalism often adopted in the presentation of Blacks is not the only way to suggest authenticity (Zaman 2016, 42). Visually, *Moonlight* modifies the tradition of emotional realism but remains true to its spirit by exploiting the excess inherent in it and in digital cinema. This particular version of emotional realism manages to reconcile tangibility and self-consciousness, authenticity of emotion and constructedness, a dichotomy that lies at the heart of digital cinema.

Moonlight's creative personnel was aware of the role of this excess in producing authenticity and how this contributed to a sense of personal cinema. In an interview for *Time* magazine, cinematographer James Laxton attributes the film's truthfulness to the fact that it reflected the lives of Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney, but at the same time describes this authenticity as not exactly the product of realism. It is not a realist movie, especially in visual terms, but it is truthful because it allows the audience to feel that they are watching a real experience. According to Laxton, drawing attention to the medium appeals to younger viewers:

I don't mind being reminded that I'm watching a movie. I think that younger audiences are more accepting of this than older audiences. But this idea that the medium is always present when watching something I think is a good thing. It's something that allows an audience to really sink into a story.

Laxton and Jenkins made characters three-dimensional by enhancing the intensity of their emotions through cinematography; in doing so they departed from conventional realism but provided a realism of emotion that

reminded viewers that they were having an experience that was really personal. To Laxton, this reflects audiences' demand for "really personal unique visions of things," visions that originate in the artist's biography: "we all have gazes [...] I think who we are dictates so much of how we see the world" (Moakley n.d.). Thus, the film's personal point of view emanates from emotion and intimacy that in their attention to the everyday mimic the operations of autobiography. Their connection with the quotidian recalls autobiography's recourse to the minutiae of everyday life to fabricate a point of view that feels personal and proximate.

Emotional realism, in its variations from the more sedate to the more excessive, is thus the esthetic basis on which *Moonlight's* film language builds its formal work, and point of view has emerged as its main operation, a point of view by which I will now understand both Chiron's role as guide for the audience to access the story and the film's structuring of his look and attitudes. The film deploys it in such ways that it constructs character by appealing to notions of both humanity and identity, which posits the resulting complexity as alternative to the cultural colonization of reality. Arguably, complexity constitutes the core of autobiography, which strives to show the multiple factors that intervene in shaping a human life and views human identity as a complex construction expressed in narrative form (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001, 15). The first section, "Little," hinges on a point of view that alternates between Juan and Chiron. The first segment introduces Chiron through Juan's eyes, as he follows the boy to the abandoned apartment where he has hidden from the other children, and continues with the first scene at Juan and Teresa's home, in which they realize the extent of Chiron's helplessness when he refuses to return to his mother for the night. When he does the next morning his mother appears cold and unable to provide the affection he needs. The first scenes introduce the audience to a Black Southern district marked by poverty and drug traffic while the lengthy family scene at Juan and Teresa's allows characters to develop from the identities offered by their surroundings to emphasis on both Chiron's hermetic, helpless personality and the couple's openness and warmth. The section progresses by means of scenes of Chiron at school, in which he is harassed while Kevin offers his companionship, or at home, where the situation deteriorates and he is neglected and lonely. During a break from this misery Juan teaches him to swim at the beach and the boy finally relaxes, behaving like a child to Juan's eyes.

The final segment of the section centers on the conflict created by drug addiction and drug dealing, which the film expresses as Juan's conflict over Chiron: he resents his mother's neglect but at the same time knows that he is responsible for it as his people supply her drugs. In the section's pivotal scene Juan encounters Chiron's mother smoking crack in her car at one of

his corners. A handheld camera follows Juan as he approaches the car, creating an intense point of view that increases with tight shots of his face when he spots her and the argument about the child ensues. By this point Juan's warmth and affection for the child have made him a surrogate father figure who now has to face the contradiction between his values and his trade. The emphatic point of view serves here to express a conflict that complexly combines drug dealing's connotations of poverty and race with Juan's depiction as a typically contradictory and thus very human character. The coda to this scene appears shortly later when Chiron visits Juan and Teresa once more, this time to enquire about the reason why he is bullied at school ("Am I a faggot?") and to deliver Juan a final blow: "Do you sell drugs?" The section ends with the boy asking for confirmation that his mother is an addict and then leaving the house, a gesture that amounts to a harsh judgment of Juan, whose anguished face expresses his devastation. Chiron's intense point of view speaks of an aggravated helplessness now that he realizes that not even Juan can provide solace in his life. As in Juan's case, point of view characterizes Chiron in ways that combine his identity as a poor gay Black child with a story of loneliness and neglect that would apply to any human being, regardless of their specific identity.

The second section, "Chiron," progresses more consistently by means of the main character's point of view. Mostly set around his time at school and a home where his mother spirals down to increasing substance dependence, the section dwells on teenager Chiron's feelings of inadequacy, only alleviated by a shortly-lived intimate spell with Kevin at the beach, an emotional turning point in which his friend engages him in his first sexual experience. Chiron provides the main point of view as sex is preceded by the confidence that sometimes he cries so much that he might "turn into drops." The section closes with Kevin's sudden change, under the pressure of bully Terrel, and his beating of Chiron, whose retaliation by attacking Terrel leads to his arrest. Both scenes rely on a handheld cinematography that creates Chiron's point of view to express extreme despair.

The third section, "Black," develops around Chiron's adult life after his stay in an Atlanta juvenile center. Broad-shouldered and muscular, his body contrasts with teenage Chiron's lanky frame while the temporal ellipsis structures the logic of the section around the mystery over his present personality: is he the same Chiron or has he changed into a hardened drug dealer? The story of this section is also mainly offered through his point of view, as we see him wake up from a nightmare, drive to tend his dealing business, or receive Kevin's call: the focus is still on Chiron's reaction to events, here to Kevin's invitation to visit him in Miami. During the diner scene that occupies most of the section Chiron's point of view guides the audience through Kevin's surprised reaction to his visit, his hard look, and

his occupation as a dealer. Chiron's helplessness contrasts with his strong physique, showing a troubled young man grappling with his affection and sexuality, not only a Black or gay man but an individual looking for connection, a traumatized person plagued by his past and trapped in a masculinity that does not match his personality.

Chiron embodies a poor, homosexual and Black identity but the film suggests that at the same time he is a character that refuses to be reduced to them, a character presented as both a recipient of identities and a human being. *Moonlight* constructs its story and characters in a way that the foreground is occupied by both views of identity and a human drama: the intimacy and subjectivity created through a point of view centered on the quotidian opens a door to both the character's identity and his life. This emphasis on humanity and identity matches the attempt of autobiographical texts to present their subjects as complex, a complexity that creates the sense that what we see is authentic and personal. It is this authenticity and personal point of view that in turn prompt the film's status as personal cinema. Furthermore, the centrality of these authentic undertones stands as a reaction to the cultural colonization of reality. Chiron's conflict between his real self and his appearance in the third section stems from his accommodation to social and cultural expectations about a Black man involved in drug-dealing, a perception of reality filtered and modified by culture that in fact conceals Chiron's real self. The film's ending, in which Chiron opens up and rejects the connotations of his muscular masculinity to embrace vulnerability and Kevin's affection, stands as a rejection of culturally assigned roles and the assumption of an individualized personality grounded in the complex sum total of his identity, his humanity and human rights.

Personal cinema, and the authenticity on which it is based, is also central to the film's articulation of emotional realism as expression of the desire to regain the real that has been lost to culture. The immersive style that produces subjective intensity, emotion and intimacy tries to place viewers in the physical and psychological places occupied by characters, which represents a response to culturalization and the sequestration of experience. *Moonlight* responds to the development of digital technology by first offering a detailed account of a poor, gay, Black identity, and secondly by invoking a return to humanism that characterizes some contemporary digital cinema. As Nicholas Rombes has argued, faced with the contradictory nature of the digital, the deployment of an inscrutable technology that constantly draws attention to the artificiality of the medium is often compensated in digital cinema by making stories that are intensely realistic, concrete and human (2009, 81–83). In a paradoxical but at bottom complementary way *Moonlight* imagines both a deeply culturally constructed

world of identity and a humanist one that dreams of canceling identity, making both emerge out of the newest technology and its esthetic possibilities. The humanist aspiration represents a humanist response to the cultural colonization of life that the abstract quality of digital cinema amounts to. The film reacts against that abstract quality by exploiting its capacity to evoke emotion and intimacy, and by putting its expressionistic component to work in order to engage viewers. At the same time, and in the same way as emotion operates as a social and cultural practice rather than a strictly psychological or private state (Ahmed 2014, 9), the constructed nature of the digital affects this response, qualifying it as a fantasy of escape from culture.

Finally, its amplification of emotional realism places *Moonlight* in a global film context noted by academic discussions of the film. Attention to this new context reveals that the emotion and intimacy that shape views of humanity and intense subjectivity may be becoming a language for empathy that may be gradually emerging as a broad paradigm not only of western cinema but arguably also of World Cinema. *Moonlight*'s most often noted connection has been with the cinema of Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai, whose sensuality and tactility are evoked in the film, as reviewers mentioned and even Jenkins himself acknowledged (2016). Wong's cinema uses a suggestive visual esthetic that relies on sensuousness and mood, as it creates emotion and subjectivity by producing a visceral effect (Greenhalgh 2005, 196; Bettinson 2015, 59, 62–63). The esthetic echoes John Orr's account of Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Cinema of Poetry" as a visual style that entails "immersion of the filmmaker in the experience of the subject" (1998, 1–3). This sensuous, tactile, immersive experience that relies on emotion to suggest subjectivity belongs to the same field as the emotional realism of *Moonlight*. More recently, Robert Stone and Luis Freijo (2021) have discussed the film's borrowing of the esthetics of Wong's *Faa yeung nin wa* (*In the Mood for Love*, 2000) as example of World Cinema's influence on western film. They argue that attention to the traces left in western cinema by other cinemas, its impurities, brings to the surface new paradigms that reveal the development of film and locate it in a world context. World Cinema operates by exposing difference in terms of both genre and identity, and *Moonlight* does share its themes of otherness and outsider-ness, while at the same time erasing it and focusing on the empathy generated around characters. Thus, when in the opening scene Juan supervises his drug deals and meets Chiron, the film exposes difference through its setting and focus on drug and poverty, which would associate the film with the genre of social realism. However, the scene also erases that context in order to focus on the characters' search for empathetic connections, and it does so by using a visual style reminiscent of Wong's films: a long take

that circles around characters in shallow depth-of-field (2021, 8–16). The personal point of view that emerges from both *Moonlight*'s take on identity and its version of emotional realism may be becoming a World Cinema language for empathy. The connotations of authenticity and personal cinema that they suggest through autobiographical operations would thus also be associated with this language whose goal is to erase difference and center on empathy.

To conclude, the mode of personal cinema illustrated by *Moonlight* relies on representational and stylistic strategies that provide authenticity and personal vision both by combining identity with humanity and by offering a subjective intensity achieved through immersive realism. The strategies that this mode uses in order to construct authenticity and personal vision mostly rely on a powerful point of view that delivers both complexity in the depiction of story/character and an immersive blend of emotion and intimacy, the two arguably ingredients that connect the film with the strategies of the autobiographical form. Although *Moonlight* does not meet the requirements of autobiography stated by Lejeune, placing it in the context of autobiography helps understand its strategies of authenticity and personal vision.

These constructions of authenticity and personal vision often rely on personal stories and are related to autobiography or semiautobiography to varying degrees, which include the autobiographical strategies of constructing identity as complexly imbricated with humanity and dwelling on the minutiae of everyday life. A flexible approach to the connections between film and the autobiographical may be fruitful in order to explore the role of the personal in contemporary cinema.

Central to these strategies is an esthetic of subjective intensity, an immersive esthetic whose genealogy dates back to the emotional realism of John Cassavetes, its contemporary adaptation in mumblecore, and the intermediacy of Dogme95. Digital cinema exhibits a great capacity to exploit the possibilities of emotional realism and, furthermore, to engage audiences through its inherent excess; both emotional realism and its excess intervene in the process of qualifying *Moonlight* as personal cinema. If we agree that the digital is reconfiguring realism in contemporary cinema, this mode of personal cinema would amount to one of those reconfigurations.

This mode of personal cinema possesses an international, global dimension as it can be posited that the particular style of emotional realism illustrated by this mode may be becoming a World Cinema language.

At bottom *Moonlight* displays how a part of the contemporary culture of the personal that has crystallized around cinema employs a notion of the personal that, in its capacity to provide fantasies of complexity, experience and connection with reality, reacts against the culturalization of the real

imposed by late modernity. In this the cinema shares the cultural work of some of the literature of the personal.

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ORCID

Luis M. García-Mainar  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3169-5920>

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