

# Film Reviews

## 2016 Vancouver International Film Festival



### *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016, USA)

It's difficult to describe *Moonlight*. It has no straightforward plot, no superficial characterization, no easy message to digest. It resists categorization.

Perhaps it's more accurate to describe *Moonlight* as a work of restrained emotion, of meaningful gestures.

It is less a film than a visual poem.

Director Barry Jenkins's work follows the life of a black man, sometimes called Little, sometimes Chiron, sometimes Black, as he struggles with his sexuality from the time he's a young boy running from schoolyard bullies to a hardened man embedded in the drug trafficking world.

Director Barry Jenkins and his incredible ensemble cast never shy away from emotional vulnerability. *Moonlight* presents itself to you already flayed open, with Little/Chiron/Black's struggles to hide this vulnerability as its heart.

Stunning cinematography (those dreamy, melancholic beach shots), and a haunting, Romantic score add an art house sensibility to an already socially conscious and essential work.

*Moonlight* might just herald the re-fusing of art and cultural critique in American cinema.

-Amanda Greer.



### *American Honey* (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2016, UK & USA)

*American Honey* -- the latest offering from art film powerhouse, Andrea Arnold -- follows a young woman, Star (Sasha Lane), as she travels with a band of "magazine salesmen" across the Southern United States after meeting the group's leader, the charming, ponytailed Jake (played by Shia LaBeouf in his most interesting role to date). These "salesmen" are made up of other Stars: young Americans certain they need to move, to go someplace else, but unsure of which direction to take.

Though the film is full of "nothing," (it lacks a tight causal plot), it is this meandering sensibility that creates Arnold's American dreamscape, and allows for one of the most sensitive portrayals of female sexuality on-screen. Star's sexuality, both as she asserts it and as it's forced out of her by others, has an Alice Munro-esque sensitivity to it; she blurs the line between pleasure and survival in an honest, breathtaking way.

Shot with a square aspect ratio and tight close-ups, Arnold does not show the audience the film, but embraces them with it. We watch as Star is loved, abused, and manipulated by the people around her. As a testament to Arnold's skill, this technique doesn't come off as voyeuristic, but as sympathetic and collaborative. It is, perhaps, the most important film for women of the last decade.

*American Honey* constructs a world that is at once unbearably cruel and as sweet as the film's title suggests. Arnold grabs her audience by their sensibilities and whisks them away into an America of run-down motels, flickering neon signs, and dusty country roads; shot with ferocious sensitivity, this seedy world is transformed into a dreamscape, a Beckettian realm of meandering journeys without end.

-Amanda Greer.



***Albüm* (dir. Mehmet Can Mertoğlu, 2016 Turkey)**

*Albüm*, the directorial debut of Mehmet Can Mertoğlu, follows married couple Cüneyt (Murat Kiliç) and Bahar (Şebnem Bozoklu) as they prepare for and secure the adoption of a baby boy. The pair stage a fake pregnancy – complete with a false belly and counterfeit “post-delivery” photos with a doctor and nurse – and look for options to leave the country upon learning that the local police have record of the adoption. A stigma against infertility in Turkey leads the couple to this apparently appropriate reaction, though the film never makes reference to the link between adoption and discredit, and will leave the unfamiliar viewer grasping at whispers of character motivation.

Fortunately, at a much louder volume, the film speaks with striking annunciations of finely constructed visual language: long tracking shots play out their own narrative arcs, arguments are heard over two shots of post-squabble tableau and lovingly shared physical separation. And throughout, a family building a false history through photo-shoots, calling attention to the performance that accompanies documentation of experience, and the largely untapped humour that sits behind this insincerity.

-Matthew Gartner.



***Manchester by the Sea* (dir. Kenneth Lonergan, 2016, USA)**

*Manchester by the Sea* mixes the faded imagery of a Massachusetts harbour town with muted performances of grief in a reflection on the death of single father Joe (Kyle Chandler), the place of this event in the life of his brother Lee (Casey Affleck), and Lee’s role as a guardian for Joe’s teenage son, Patrick (Lucas Hedges). The film makes use of some standard tools in fatherhood and brotherhood narratives: men burying emotions, using violence as a release of these emotions, while Lee accesses the role of father only after giving the volatile love and intimate distance that a brother provides. A notable departure prevents the film from completely committing to a familiar frame story. In a reversal, it is Joe’s wife Elise (Gretchen Mol) that is an unsuitable parent for Patrick, leaves Joe to (successfully) raise a child alone, and does not want to interact with Patrick after they are reunited.

Michelle Williams, as Lee’s ex-wife Randi, along with Hedges and Affleck, offer arrestingly strong performances that are uniquely befitting of grieving characters: they cycle through the failure of their coping mechanisms, they tolerate despair as something that has been permanently implanted within them, and go through spells when their only outward emotion can be passionate apathy. Heart-break is depicted, with aching veracity, as a process that involves harsh forgetting and reluctant pantomime.

-Matthew Gartner.

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