The Politics of Love in Motion: Music, Movement and Gender in *Lovers Rock*

Thick, dense air stuffs the inside of the walls. Beads of sweat glisten as the room's lighting catches faces moving around the space. The sensuous party film—suffused with the contagious sounds of reggae and dub—transports viewers into the world of 1980s West London blues parties. *Lovers Rock* (Steve Mcqueen, 2020), the second installment in McQueen's Small Axe series, is an undeniable triumph of expression.

The sequence I will analyze features the song Kunta Kinte Dub by The Revolutionaries. This song appears right after the film's climax, taking place in the midst of the house party that serves as its central setting. By this point, the dance floor has become a focal point in the film's plot, where bodies move in sync with the music, expressing joy, desire, and solidarity. Up to this moment, the audience has navigated the convoluted yet insulated world of the house party—an oasis amid looming threats from the outside, including police and hostile, racist neighbors. They have also observed the slow-burning romance between the protagonists, Martha and Franklyn. Prior to this scene, Martha intervenes to stop the assault of Cynthia, a character in search of love. After Cynthia recuperates inside with Grace, they share an intimate kiss. This leads to Kunta Kinte Dub being played a total of three times, as the rowdy crowd continues to demand spin-backs. The final rendition transitions into a complex and visually striking sequence of moving bodies within the space.

Unlike many films, which use quick cuts to condense dance and music sequences, *Lovers Rock* departs from conventional filmmaking by allowing these moments to unfold at length. [2]The extended Silly Games scene has already been hailed as one of the great sequences in film history, with some critics interpreting its production as a form of "spiritual awakening." states Darragh

O'Donoghue. This type of prolonged scene [1]"dares the stolid movie-watcher, perched on their couch, to let go of the fourth wall and get up and dance… We are so used to leaning on the barrier, the fiction that we set up between ourselves and whatever's happening on screen. But something about an extended dance scene coaxes us out of that bubble." reinforces Alissa Wilkinson at Vox. *Lovers Rock* truly hypnotizes the viewer into the feeling of the room. Film scholar Chrystel Oloukoï describes this effect [2]"As the room seems imbued with a kind of infinite spatial and temporal expansiveness.". This sequence reveals the powerful effect of movement, music, and duration, serving to immerse both characters and audience in the experience. I argue that *Lovers Rock* is primarily about love in its many forms, and that dance and bodily movement vitally exemplifies this theme.

Understanding the historical and musical context of the time is crucial to understand the way men and women move in this film. The film's setting—the milieu of a 1980s house party in West London—is beautifully rendered with realism. In an interview with Dan Kois, McQueen discusses why he structured the film around a certain sound, he states

> [3]"In the '50s, it used to be bluebeat, prior to reggae. Then ska, and then reggae, and then dub came in. Often, the women, the ladies, they weren't keen on—it's not that they didn't like it, but it wasn't a thing for them. What had to happen, in a way, was that we had to make our own sweet music. And that's when *Lovers Rock* came in. That's when it was so beautiful because of the vulnerability of these women and these men singing in high-toned voices about 'Do you like me?' 'Do you want to hold my hand?' It became much gentler. It set the mood for the dance."

Clearly, McQueen takes special care in exploring the relationship between music, movement, and human connection. He shifts the way couples and friends—whether of the same or opposite

gender—interact based on the historical experience of blues parties. The mutual dynamic of men standing against the walls, shoulder to shoulder, as their partners sway in front of them; the cheerfulness of women dancing together, looking eye to eye, responding to the rhythm. The relationships are explored through movement. As McQueen recalls, [3]"I remember the men used to sort of line the walls like wallpaper, and the women who were there danced in their groups. Then, of course, the DJ would play something like 'Kung Fu Fighting,' and the guys would say, 'Oh yeah, OK, we can get involved now.' Because it's a masculine sort of pursuit, that song.". Through these contextual references, we see how McQueen translates these lived experiences into cinematic movement, using dance and music to express emotion and relationships between people.

One particular shot of the dance floor is a powerful moment of raw expression, occurring at the end of the sequence. This particular shot helps express the film's larger theme of love taking many forms, in the case of this shot and sequence it is love between men. The shot begins as a medium shot of only men on the dance floor. The camera is handheld, directed at the center of the room where the men's movement is most intense. It remains focused on the most active part of the dance floor, highlighting the men's sweat-drenched faces and unbuttoned shirts, a chaotic aftermath of the repeated spin-backs of Kunta Kinte Dub. The men are all shouting "Mercury Sound" as the previous diegetic music is non-existent, leaving only the acapella, diegetic sound of their chanting filling the atmosphere. The camera maintains deep focus throughout the shot, ensuring that every man's face remains illuminated by the yellow light. Initially, the camera is stationary, with subtle pans left and right, capturing the collective energy of the men. As they start jumping into the frame and pushing each other, the camera subtly zooms in and out, emphasizing the chaotic collective movement. The sound of feet landing

against the wooden floor becomes increasingly audible, adding a percussive layer to the scene. As more bodies enter and exit the frame with increasing velocity, the camera zooms in further, bringing the men into medium close-up. The sound of feet hitting the wood exponentially builds into a rhythmic stomp in sync with the "Mercury Sound" chants. The camera's position remains relatively still—stationary in the middle of the party at eye-level—but now with wider panning movements, a closer zoom, and a consistent instability. Heads start to partially block the frame as the crowd's energy intensifies. Finally, the camera moves away from the center of the dance floor, shifting focus toward the DJ booth. As the perspective changes, the sound of stomping fades, and the deep focus on the men dissolves into an unfocused shot of the DJ. This movement signals a transition, subtly pulling the audience away from the raw male camaraderie.

One formalistic element that stands out in this shot and the broader sequence is character movement. In the shot, we see men jumping and pulling on each other in an aggressive manner. Some are taking off shirts, while in the second shot of the sequence, one man dances erratically on the ground. This form of dancing is new within the plot and helps convey a distinct relationship in the film. Up to this point, we have seen women playfully dancing together during the Kung Fu Fighting scene, but maintaining physical distance. Later, we see couples dancing slowly. However, the bond between men has yet to be represented, and here, it is expressed through a joyful and physical display of masculinity.

Adding to this idea is the sound of the sequence. Most notably, the diegetic music, Kunta Kinte, plays continuously throughout the sequence until shot seven. This sound is unique, and its beat captivates both the characters and the audience, as we begin to witness the male camaraderie unfold. The director states, [3]"That kind of tune would spark off extra dancing at any blues party. People would lose their minds when they hear that song. It is a very haunting song that signifies

some dangerous stuff about to happen.". This foreshadowing plays out as we see a shift in character movement, transitioning into the erratic dancing. The song, which represents impending danger, ties into the overarching theme of love—but a love rooted in shared struggle. Black men in the 1980s were often forced to comply with the expectations of white authority figures to avoid harm or retaliation, as seen later in the film during the confrontation between Franklin and his white boss. However, within this secluded space, energized by the song's rhythm, we see the men letting loose—bonding through a rare moment of uninhibited self-expression, a connection forged through shared oppression.

The sequence is filled with other diegetic sounds. The director establishes a noisy environment immediately in shot one, where overlapping voices, shouts, and stomps create a continuous hum in the background, interfering with our perception of Kunta Kinte. This contrasts with other dance sequences, such as the coupling scenes where music dominates, or the Kung Fu Fighting scene, where voices and music are distinctly separated. The overwhelming soundscape in this scene underscores the unique nature of male relationships—it is chaotic yet deeply intertwined. The director presents male bonds as expansive and full, though largely unexpressed, parallel to how it is hidden in the film until this sequence.

Another significant formalistic element in this sequence is camera movement. As noted in the shot analysis, the handheld camera technique continues throughout the film, but in this sequence, it maintains an added level of instability. The audience experiences the scene as if being jostled within the rowdy, male-dominated crowd. This approach not only immerses the audience in the film's atmosphere but also reflects the unpredictable, energetic nature of the environment. The depiction of male camaraderie here is intense and raw—unlike the graceful, flowing movement seen in the earlier portrayal of women's platonic bonds. The director

emphasizes this relationship through a sense of erratic energy, an ode to both the masculinity of the characters and the fierceness they must embody in protecting their loved ones as black men in that time period.

The sequence actually begins with a couple swaying—specifically, the bodyguard and his partner. The camera moves steadily around them, rotating smoothly and keeping them centered in the frame. This contrasts with the later depiction of male bonding, which is captured through shaky, dynamic shots. However, the bodyguard's presence still aligns with the themes expressed in the sequence. He represents the director's vision of masculinity—he is physically imposing and serves as the party's protector. Though he does not engage in the same erratic movements or camera techniques, he is fully immersed in the diegetic soundscape and remains connected to the collective energy of the men around him.

Finally, Cinematography plays a key role in emphasizing body movement and reinforcing the overall theme of different forms of love. Unlike the coupling scenes, which feature numerous close-ups of hands, this sequence avoids the use of close-ups. Instead, as seen in shot seven it primarily consists of medium and medium close-up shots. This shifts how intimacy is conveyed—it is not less intimate, but rather, connection is expressed differently. Instead of focusing on the small touches, the camera captures the men bumping into one another from a slightly wider perspective, emphasizing a broader sense of communal unity between the men and the few women now present. This sense of collectiveness is further reinforced by the use of deep focus, which remains consistent throughout the scene. We are able to see the emotional expressions on each man's face, highlighting their shared intensity. The men exude a collective strength, needed as black men in this time-period—one that cannot be easily articulated through

dialogue or individual close-ups. Rather, it is communicated through movement, sound, and the immersive visual composition of the sequence.

Lovers Rock masterfully captures the intersection of movement, music, and love. Through its extended dance sequences, immersive cinematography, and layered sound design, the film offers a powerful meditation on intimacy, resistance, and joy. By highlighting different forms of connection McQueen presents a rich and textured portrayal of love within the context of 1980s Black British culture. The spatial politics of the dance floor become a means of liberation, where bodies move in defiance of societal constraints, celebrating the freedom found in music and movement.

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