4) Moonlight (2016):

“Who is you, man?” Dramatic film has long been fascinated with issues of identity, but they’ve rarely been explored with the degree of eloquence and heartbreaking beauty as in [Barry Jenkins (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/barry-jenkins)’ masterful “Moonlight,” one of the essential American films of 2016. “Moonlight” is a film that is both lyrical and deeply grounded in its character work, a balancing act that’s breathtaking to behold. It is one of those rare pieces of filmmaking that stays completely focused on its characters while also feeling like it’s dealing with universal themes about identity, sexuality, family, and, most of all, masculinity. And yet it's never preachy or moralizing. It is a movie in which deep, complex themes are reflected through character first and foremost. Jenkins’ film is confident in every single aspect of the way that a critic can use that word. Every performance, every shot choice, every piece of music, every lived-in setting—it’s one of those rare movies that just doesn’t take a wrong step, and climaxes in a scene not of CGI or twists but of dialogue that is one of the best single scenes in years.

The protagonist of “Moonlight” reflects the conflicted and fluid masculinity of young African-American men in the United States, even in just the way he’s presented. The film is divided into three chapters—“Little,” “Chiron” and “Black”—the three names used to refer to the same person that we follow from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. He’s a boy and then a man who has trouble figuring out his place in the world, which is also articulated by the character being played by three separate, all-remarkable actors.

The film starts with Chiron as a boy, referred to by his bullies as “Little” ([Alex R. Hibbert (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/alex-r-hibbert)). We meet this youngster running, trying to hide in a boarded up apartment from the kids who want to beat him up. Little is found there by Juan ([Mahershala Ali (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/mahershala-ali" \t "_blank), doing career-best work), a local drug dealer. Juan takes the kid out to eat, even bringing him back to his place, where he meets his partner Teresa ([Janelle Monáe (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/janelle-mon%C3%A1e)). Little could use this makeshift family. His dad is gone and his mother Paula ([Naomie Harris (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/naomie-harris)) happens to be one of Juan’s best clients. Juan becomes something of a father figure, but that might make this relationship sound more predictable than it is. Juan sees something good in Chiron and wants to help this quiet boy, even as he provides the product that’s ruining his home life.

The film jumps to Chiron as a teenager, dealing with more intense bullying and questions about sexuality. These are the years in which everyone claims to be sleeping around and a young man like Chiron (now played by [Ashton Sanders (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ashton-sanders)) struggles to find himself, especially now that all semblance of a normal home life is gone.