

Narrative, Identity, and Social Critique in Contemporary Cinema: Close Readings of *Moonlight*, *Get Out*, and *Parasite*

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Abstract. This article examines how selected contemporary films transform personal identity conflicts into broader forms of social critique. It narrows the broad category of modern cinema to three post-2000 feature films: *Moonlight*, *Get Out*, and *Parasite*. Through textual close reading and contextualized film analysis, the article argues that contemporary cinema does not merely mirror social anxieties but organizes them into affective and political experiences for viewers. The analysis focuses on three formal strategies: fragmented or restricted narration, visual and spatial symbolism, and the representation of marginalized subjectivity. *Moonlight* uses a triptych structure and sensory visual style to represent Black queer selfhood; *Get Out* adapts horror and thriller conventions to expose racial liberalism and bodily control; and *Parasite* uses vertical space and tonal shifts to frame class inequality as both domestic intimacy and systemic violence. By drawing on film form, representation theory, and narrative engagement research, the article shows that film can encourage viewers to re-evaluate race, sexuality, class, and belonging while acknowledging that representation alone cannot guarantee social change.

Keywords: Contemporary cinema; identity; representation; social critique; narrative form; close reading.

1. Introduction

Since the late nineteenth century, film has evolved from a technical novelty into one of the most influential forms of art and communication in Western and transnational culture. Unlike literature or painting, film combines visual imagery, sound, editing, performance, and narrative structure to create immersive experiences that reflect, question, and shape social values (Bordwell et al., 2020). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cinema has become a central medium through which artists explore identity, memory, justice, and human connection.

This article uses the term contemporary cinema to refer to selected feature films produced after 2000 in Anglophone and transnational contexts. The term identity refers not only to individual selfhood but also to socially constructed categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, and cultural belonging. This definition follows the broader argument in representation theory that cultural images do not merely reflect identity but actively help produce meaning around identity (Hall, 1997).

Rather than claiming that all modern cinema works in the same way, this article asks how specific contemporary films convert private identity conflicts into public social critique. Through close readings of *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016), *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), and *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), it argues that contemporary cinema functions as both a mirror and a window: it mirrors the cultural anxieties, conflicts, and ideals of its historical moment while opening a window onto marginalized voices, alternative perspectives, and critical visions of society. More precisely, the article argues that these films achieve their social force through three formal strategies: fragmented or restricted narration, visual and spatial symbolism, and ethically complex representation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cinema as Social Text

Film has long been recognized as a reflection of the social, political, and emotional climate in which it is created. Every era produces films that respond to its specific tensions, hopes, and fears. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, Hollywood film noir became associated with post-war anxiety, distrust, and moral ambiguity; Naremore (2008) treats noir not as a single fixed genre but as a style and critical category shaped by industrial, political, and aesthetic contexts. Similarly, science-fiction film has often used alien invasion, technological threat, and speculative futures to explore anxieties about science, militarization, dehumanization, and Cold War ideology (Telotte, 2001). In these cases, genre conventions become symbolic languages for controversial social concerns.

Recent scholarship also treats cinema as a cultural communication medium. Bandara (2026), for example, examines cinema in relation to cultural communication and literary-cultural convergence, while Salu (2025) discusses film as a vehicle for social change through the representation of gender, education, and society. These studies support the broader claim that cinema can circulate values, conflicts, and aspirations beyond the immediate experience of individual viewers. They also show why a study of film should not separate aesthetics from social meaning.

2.2. Representation, Identity, and Marginalized Voices

Representation matters because film shapes how audiences imagine people and communities they may not encounter directly in daily life. Hall (1997) argues that representation is a central practice through which culture produces meaning. In film studies, this point has been especially important for analyses of gender, race, sexuality, and spectatorship. Mulvey's (1975) account of visual pleasure and narrative cinema, for instance, shows how looking relations in mainstream cinema can reproduce gendered power. Work in trans studies likewise emphasizes that historically narrow media representation can shape how marginalized groups are seen, misrecognized, or excluded (Goldberg & Beemyn, 2021).

Contemporary and independent films have increasingly challenged older stereotypes by giving marginalized characters greater depth, agency, and narrative centrality. Tripathi et al. (2025) argue that independent film has become an important space for fat, queer, and neurodivergent narratives that contest simplified or stigmatizing portrayals. This does not mean that modern cinema has solved the politics of representation. It means that representation must be analyzed through form, authorship, character agency, and narrative point of view rather than through visibility alone.

2.3. Narrative Engagement and Audience Empathy

Inclusive storytelling can do more than entertain, but its effects should be stated carefully. Research on narrative transportation suggests that stories may influence beliefs when audiences become cognitively and emotionally absorbed in a narrative world (Green & Brock, 2000). Cohen (2001) similarly explains identification as one important way audiences relate to media characters. These concepts help explain why film can encourage perspective-taking or imaginative sympathy, but they do not prove that every film automatically reduces prejudice or produces social change.

Shapiro (2025) discusses film and miniseries as lenses for cultural awareness and psychotherapy, which supports the educational value of cinematic storytelling. At the same time, the relationship between viewing and social change remains mediated by audience background, institutional context, distribution, and interpretation. This article therefore treats empathy as a possible outcome of cinematic form, not as a guaranteed effect.

3. Methodology

This article uses qualitative textual analysis and close reading. The primary evidence consists of three feature films: *Moonlight*, *Get Out*, and *Parasite*. These films were selected because each was produced after 2000, circulated widely beyond a narrow local audience, and connects personal identity to a larger structure of social critique. They also offer distinct formal strategies: intimate triptych narration, racialized horror-thriller structure, and spatial class allegory.

The analysis focuses on three categories identified in the introduction: narrative structure, visual style, and representation. Narrative structure includes point of view, temporal organization, character development, and genre movement. Visual style includes cinematography, lighting, editing rhythm, sound, production design, and spatial organization. Representation refers to how race, sexuality, class, gender, and belonging are made meaningful through character agency and cinematic form. The article does not conduct audience interviews or quantitative reception research. Claims about empathy and attitude change are therefore limited to theoretical possibilities supported by media psychology and film studies scholarship.

4. Analytical Framework: Mirror, Window, and Lens

The metaphor of film as a mirror is useful but incomplete. Cinema reflects society by preserving the values and conflicts of a historical moment, yet it never reflects reality passively. Filmmakers select, emphasize, and rearrange reality to create meaning. Cinematic techniques such as montage, shot composition, lighting, and sound design guide the viewer's perception and emotion (Bordwell et al., 2020). A close-up can emphasize vulnerability; a long shot can emphasize isolation; a rapid edit can create tension or chaos. These choices mean that every film offers an interpretation of reality, not a neutral copy.

Film also acts as a window because it allows viewers to encounter lives and social worlds that may be distant from their own. For marginalized audiences, representation can provide recognition and belonging. For other viewers, it can invite ethical attention to experiences that dominant culture often ignores. Finally, film acts as a lens: it focuses attention on particular conflicts and makes them emotionally and visually legible. The following case studies show how these three functions operate through specific formal decisions.

5. Case Study 1: Narrative Structure and Identity in *Moonlight*

Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* converts the formation of Black queer identity into a problem of narrative structure. The film is divided into three chapters, each organized around a different name and stage in Chiron's life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Jenkins, 2016). This triptych structure prevents identity from appearing fixed or transparent. Instead, Chiron's selfhood is shown as something formed through repeated pressure: family instability, peer violence, racialized masculinity, silence, desire, and the search for tenderness.

The film's visual style reinforces this fragmented development. Rather than explaining Chiron through explicit dialogue, the camera often stays close to his face and body, making silence and gesture central to meaning. Blue light, water, and touch recur as sensory motifs. Marks's (2000) account of intercultural and embodied spectatorship is useful here because *Moonlight* asks viewers not only to understand identity intellectually but also to feel its vulnerability through color, texture, sound, and bodily proximity. The result is not a simple message film about sexuality or race. It is a formal study of how a person becomes readable to himself and others under social constraint.

This makes *Moonlight* a strong example of cinema as mirror, window, and lens. It mirrors broader anxieties around masculinity, poverty, race, and sexuality. It opens a window onto a life often marginalized by mainstream cinema. It also focuses attention on the ethical problem of recognition: Chiron is not represented as a symbol of one social category but as a complex subject whose identity

is shaped by intersecting forces. In this sense, the film challenges stereotype not by offering a perfect positive image but by insisting on emotional and formal complexity.

6. Case Study 2: Genre and Racial Critique in *Get Out*

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* uses horror and thriller conventions to transform racial anxiety into social critique. The film follows Chris, a Black photographer, as he visits the family of his white girlfriend and gradually discovers that their hospitality hides surveillance, commodification, and bodily appropriation (Peele, 2017). The premise turns apparently polite liberal space into a site of menace. In doing so, the film shows how racism can operate not only through open hostility but also through admiration, consumption, and control.

The hypnosis sequence and the visual idea of the Sunken Place are central to this critique. The scene turns psychological dispossession into cinematic form: the protagonist can see and feel, but his body and voice are controlled by others. The close-up on Chris's face, the sound of the teacup, and the sudden collapse of spatial control make racial domination visible and bodily. Here the film's genre form is not decorative. Horror provides the vocabulary through which the film makes everyday racial power appear as terror.

The film also revises the historical function of genre. Earlier science-fiction and horror films often displaced social fears into monsters, aliens, or technological threats (Telotte, 2001). *Get Out* keeps that symbolic function but makes the social target direct: the monster is not foreign invasion but racialized possession within ordinary domestic and medical spaces. The film therefore supports the central claim of this article: contemporary cinema can use familiar genre conventions to make identity, power, and inequality newly visible.

7. Case Study 3: Space, Class, and Social Power in *Parasite*

Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* turns class inequality into spatial form. The Kim family lives in a semi-basement apartment, while the Park family occupies an elevated modern house; later, the hidden bunker beneath the Park home reveals an even deeper layer of social invisibility (Bong, 2019). The film's class critique is therefore not only thematic but architectural. Social hierarchy is organized through vertical movement: climbing upward toward wealth, descending into poverty, and being forced underground when the social order refuses recognition.

The rain sequence demonstrates how the same event can carry radically different meanings across class positions. For the Park family, the rain clears the air and improves the next day's party atmosphere. For the Kim family, it floods their home and destroys the fragile stability they have built. This contrast shows how class inequality is experienced through space, infrastructure, and vulnerability rather than through income alone. The film's production design makes social structure visible as a lived environment.

Parasite also uses tonal instability as social critique. It moves from comedy to thriller to tragedy, refusing the viewer the comfort of a single emotional register. This formal instability mirrors the instability of the class system itself: intimacy between rich and poor appears possible, but it is repeatedly undermined by humiliation, dependency, smell, labor, and concealed violence. In Hall's (1997) terms, the film produces class meaning through signs, spaces, and contrasts rather than through direct explanation alone.

8. Discussion: Art, Politics, and Limits

A central debate in film studies concerns the relationship between art and politics. Some argue that film should remain neutral and focus only on aesthetic beauty; others argue that all art is political and that filmmakers have a responsibility to challenge injustice. The three case studies suggest that these goals are not opposed. In *Moonlight*, visual intimacy and nonlinear life structure deepen the

representation of identity. In *Get Out*, genre pleasure makes racial critique more forceful. In *Parasite*, spatial design and tonal shifts make class hierarchy concrete. In each case, formal creativity strengthens social critique.

Cinema's strength as a tool for social reflection lies in its accessibility and emotional impact. Films can reach mass audiences and touch viewers at a personal level, while festivals, independent cinema, and global distribution can expand the circulation of stories beyond national borders. Scholarship on cinema as cultural communication and public pedagogy supports this broader social role (Bandara, 2026; Salu, 2025). However, social impact should not be overstated. Commercial pressures, censorship, industry bias, and audience interpretation can limit which stories are funded, distributed, and understood.

Representation also has limits. A film may include marginalized characters while still reproducing stereotype, and greater visibility does not automatically produce political change. Media psychology suggests that narrative transportation and identification can influence beliefs, but such effects depend on the viewer, the narrative frame, and the context of reception (Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2000). For this reason, the value of contemporary cinema lies not in a guaranteed ability to change society but in its capacity to make social structures perceptible, emotionally compelling, and open to critique.

9. Conclusion

Modern cinema is much more than entertainment, but this claim becomes persuasive only when it is supported by specific textual evidence. Through close readings of *Moonlight*, *Get Out*, and *Parasite*, this article has shown how contemporary films transform personal identity conflicts into social critique through narrative structure, visual style, and representation. *Moonlight* uses fragmented life chapters and sensory intimacy to represent Black queer selfhood. *Get Out* uses horror-thriller conventions to reveal racial possession and liberal racism. *Parasite* uses vertical space, architecture, and tonal instability to expose class inequality.

These films demonstrate that cinema functions as a mirror, a window, and a lens. As a mirror, it records the fears and conflicts of its era. As a window, it opens onto lives and communities often excluded from dominant representation. As a lens, it focuses attention through cinematic form, making power, inequality, and identity visible in ways that are emotionally powerful and analytically rich. The article's limitation is that it analyzes selected films rather than measuring audience response. Future research could extend this argument through reception studies, comparative national cinemas, or more focused work on gender, disability, and trans representation. Even with these limits, contemporary cinema remains a vital extension of the humanities because it uses storytelling to explore what it means to be human in a complex, interconnected world.

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