



CHAPTER 2

Dark Times: Fabulation, Synchrony, and the Musical Moment Reprised

Amy Herzog

Musical films, those cinematic baubles of irrepressible pleasure, have curiously and consistently arisen from dark historical times. At the moment I am writing in 2021, in the midst of a global pandemic, in the wake of four years of a Trump administration in the United States, with right-wing nationalist movements on the rise across the world, this coincidence feels especially poignant. How can we understand the relationship between musical films and history beyond the classical studio era, and beyond the lens of nostalgia? How do musical moments in film speak to the conditions of their time, and how do they speak across time? Perhaps more pointedly, how do the conditions of our own dark times demand new kinds of musical moments and new modes of reading them?

Musical moments in moving-image media are dynamic, shifting in nature between format, genre, and historical period, lacking fidelity to generic taxonomies or strict formal constraints. An expansive and inclusive

A. Herzog (✉)

Queens College, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

e-mail: amy.herzog@qc.cuny.edu

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formulation of the musical moment—instances when music ‘takes over’ the organising logic of a scene—allows us to locate these moments within and outside the musical genre, and to find echoes of more traditional film musical numbers in surprising places (in pornography, or line dancing, or fitness videos, or flash mobs). At the same time, this inclusive approach creates a host of new problems, as music can ‘take over’ in myriad ways, and it can become challenging to make meaningful sense out of the work an individual musical moment performs. My project in this chapter is to revisit the ways that I initially attempted to navigate this problem in my 2010 book on musicals and then reflect on how we might deepen our understanding of musical moments by way of three more contemporary case studies.

The genesis of my study of musical moments was an ongoing fascination with the ways in which film musical numbers functioned in film, in terms of their affective reconfigurations of time and space, and on their curious historical and industrial positioning (Herzog 2010). Despite their variations, musical moments are marked by certain common formal tendencies: narrative rupture, spectacular stagings and irrational cuts, impossible movements, formulaic scenarios, and hackneyed characters. They often served as cracked mirrors, reflecting the material conditions of their historical moments, at the same time that they gestured towards futurity, something better, something more.

While there is a rich body of scholarship on musical films, the existing literature tended to focus on identifying generic characteristics, mapping ideological tendencies, and creating taxonomies of film musical categories. But aside from Richard Dyer’s work, very little attention had been paid to what musical moments *feel* like, and to critically examining these affective circuits as material, as politically relevant, and as historically contingent.¹ At the same time, I was influenced by emerging work on race and musicals, and provocative industry studies that detailed the economic and structural conditions that gave rise to very different kinds of musical moments.² I am particularly indebted to Arthur Knight’s work on Black performance and the work of Matthew Tinkcom and Steven Cohan on camp, capital, and the centrality of queer labour in the production of studio era musicals. I was grappling for strategies for theorising musicals that could take into account both the historical and political richness of the texts themselves, as ‘incongruous’ commercial products, and the affective potentialities they set into motion in the event of reception. I was further fascinated with the ways that these ‘potentialities’ embodied

in musical moments themselves transform, sometimes dramatically, as the films circulate over time, and in new contexts with new audiences.

What I proposed, then, was to ask not what musical moments *are*, but rather, what is it that musical moments *do*.

Musical moments create realms of auditory and visual experimentation geared toward eliciting pleasurable sensory responses. Much of what the musical moment does, then, is registered within the affective responses of the audience. Musical moments are marked by a tendency to restructure spatiotemporal coordinates, to reconfigure the boundaries and operations of the human body, and to forge new relations between organic and inorganic elements within the frame. [...] In effect, the musical moment generates patterns of representational repetition that are, simultaneously and uniquely, open to the interventions of difference. The musical moment is unusual in its capacity to make this tension palpable; it is at once one of the most conservative and the most irreverent filmic phenomena. (Herzog 2010: 8)

There were two philosophical concepts that I found especially helpful in contending with these contradictory qualities. The first is that of fabulation, as theorised by Henri Bergson. Fabulation, for Bergson, is a ‘voluntary hallucination’ that emerges from a moment of shock, circumventing reason such that an individual creates a fiction, a fabulation that carves out elements of the real, often from trauma, but then illuminates and reanimates those elements in a speculative way, writing the individual into the order of the collective. As taken up by Deleuze and Guattari, fabulation becomes a more explicitly political tool core to their idea of a minor literature. ‘Through fabulation, those who are marginalised can invent themselves, they can illuminate and mutate the [...] forces that oppress them’ (Herzog 2010: 132). As D. N. Rodowick writes,

[Fabulation] is neither a psychological memory where the individual recalls a repressed history, nor simply a historical memory as the representation of the occluded story of a people. Rather, it entails a serialism that transforms the individual at the same time as the collective. This double-becoming intertwines two discursive series in a free indirect relation: communication between the world and the I in a fragmented world, and communication of the world and the I in a fragmented I, which must find common points of articulation. (Rodowick 1997: 159–160)

The key points to take away here are that fabulation is not the mere reflection or recuperation of a forgotten history, now re-presented. It is a speculative, serial mode of fiction that excavates and riffs on the past, utilising multiple points of mutually transformative narration.

The second concept here is slightly more amorphous, but it has to do with that of cinema, or commercial media more broadly, as a kind of historical image. We can think here of Kracauer's description of Busby Berkelyesque 'girl-clusters' in the 'Mass Ornament' as the capitalist, fractured prism through which we can glimpse the rationale of a fractured historical moment:

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself [...] The surface-level expressions [...] by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. (Kracauer 1995: 75)

It seems fitting that some of the most enduring early theories of media spectatorship evolved alongside and even directly through the musical film. I return, again and again, to Kracauer and Walter Benjamin's descriptions of those entrancing, mass-produced prisms that contain the virtual shock to thought for the distracted masses. The refrain is familiar, but at the same time not yet fully realised, I would argue, in terms of our understanding of historical images as potentialities, events activated through acts of critical engagement. For Nietzsche, art can work in concert with genealogical history to critically excavate and to create something new from its interventions with the past:

If the value of a drama lay solely in its conclusion, the drama itself would be merely the most wearisome and indirect way possible of reaching this goal; and so I hope that the significance of history will not be thought to lie in its general propositions [...] but that its value will be seen to consist in its taking a familiar, perhaps commonplace theme, an everyday melody, and composing inspired variations on it, enhancing it, elevating it to a comprehensive symbol, and thus disclosing in the original theme a whole world of profundity, power, and beauty. (Nietzsche 1997: 92–93)

Musical moving images, I would argue, are particularly primed for transformative, historically illuminating reading practices. Through their

rehearsals of refrains, they introduce difference, animating time and space, and by extension, animating those that engage with them, to forge non-linear constellations that would not otherwise be perceptible.

James Tobias, in his book *Sync*, approaches questions of musicality and gesture in film, wondering why they are so often ‘deployed for emphasizing the synchronization not simply of sound and image streams but of historical and contemporized time’ (Tobias 2010: 10). Tobias is interested in the ways in which films such as *Metropolis* (1927) use gesture and rhythm not to ‘tell’ time, but to diagram temporal and affective relations from their historical period. In concert with the film-diagram, he writes, we, the spectators, ‘diagram some relation between its complex temporalities and our own in receiving it’ (Tobias 2010: 4). The moving image, as such, becomes a hieroglyph through the process of being perceived. Cinema and other streaming technologies, he argues, are ‘queer clocks: devices that diagram, express, and interpret unfamiliar temporal relations [...] Though it cannot accurately represent time and space because it helps displace them, cinema begins with a synchronisation of reception and production as exhibition, where historicity and contemporaneity are diagrammed via affective means that audiences feel’ (Tobias 2010: 1, 8).

In describing works that critically intervene in oppressive representational blockages, Tobias describes these interventions in ways that resonate with my understanding of fabulation, art, and historical genealogy:

Across a wide range of media theories and practices of audiovisual media, a musical turn has been deployed where a crisis in representation becomes irremediable or irredeemable. [...] The musical turn consists in relating the time of media reception to historical temporality, the potentiality of the monad to the potentiality of the dialectic, to configure work, text, subjectivity, corporeality, conduct, national or transnational body politics [...] as a return of affective labor through the screen that otherwise closes off the subject from historical experience. (Tobias 2010: 217)

I am struck by three key points here in understanding the relationship between musical media and historical time: first, the notion of the moving image not as a text, but as a temporal diagram that connects at least two moments: the time of production and the time of activation via reception and reading; second, that each of these moments (production and reading) is marked by a particular form of affective labour; and third,

that musicality, in both moments, has the potential to resist representational blockages by animating time, and putting into motion discursive relationships between the singular and the collective.

Phil Powrie's theorisation of the 'crystal-song' in music-driven films arrives at a strikingly similar understanding of musicality, history, and time. Also borrowing from Deleuze, Powrie identifies, within musical moments, a cross-temporal movement that is at once grounding, embodied, and transcendent:

The crystal-song [...] binds us to our embodied selves, the *socius*, and the moment in a transcendent and haptic flight towards the sublime. It reconciles us to the present moment in its inevitable ungraspability, as the present shifts from present passed, as the sublime transports us to a different place and a different feeling. (2017: 27)

Much like a voluntary hallucination, a shock to thought, or the film-music-diagram, the crystal-song is a concentrated moment of perception and transformation, via which the present-moment coalesces through the materiality of the individual and the collective, activating affective shift that carries with it the potential for seeing, feeling, and thinking differently. This is not merely a rupture but a temporal prism, rooted in the material conditions of the 'now' of production, the 'now' of perception, and the future that it imagines.

If we think about the musical moment as a crystal-song or a 'queer clock' that diagrams constellations of different temporal presents, some of the iterations that speak most directly to our own current conditions are extended music videos and long-form 'visual albums' by artists like Beyoncé, Frank Ocean, Childish Gambino, and Janelle Monáe. I am especially haunted by Hiro Murai's 2014 music video for Flying Lotus and Kendrick Lamar's 'Never Catch Me'.³

The video begins with a slow dolly out from a window hazed in gauze curtains and partially shuttered venetian blinds, revealing a shiny wooden coffin atop a gurney. Preliminary keyboard chords hum as the camera pulls back in the hushed space of the darkened funeral home, joined by a bass guitar warming up as it shifts axes to a lateral move down a hallway, past empty carpeted rooms of mourning. Jewel-like vibraphone tones hover over a low-pitched, ominous hum, like an industrial fan, that swells and synchronises with the green flickering of fluorescent wall sconce. Through a matching cut, the camera continues down a church aisle where

a funeral is in progress; a simple piano melody marks this move and is soon joined by dizzying jazz- and prog rock-inflected rhythmic, bass, and vocal tracks. The rich musical textures find a visual analogue in the haptic fabrics, faces, and hunched shoulders of the mourners settling into their grief. We realise that we are entering the space of a Black funeral, a funeral for two young children.

The camera floats, grazing over the pews, the grieving families, the stuffed animals and memorial photos, the children's folded hands at a steady remove, until its movement is punctured by the eyes of the dead boy snapping open on the beat. He and the dead girl beside him rise from their open caskets in unison. What follows is a polyphony of cascading synchronous movements, each following a different line in Flying Lotus's intricate composition. The children's bodies move with angular schizoid exuberance along with Lamar's rapid-fire lyrics, intercut by the half-time flicks of a mourning woman's fan. The hands of the choir ghost the claps on the track, pulling them to the surface of the mix. And after the vocals break, the children's limbs are taken over by the percussive improvisation of the bass solo before slowing and floating from the room, and as the video unfolds, into the sunshine and wind. Never Gonna Catch Me.

Murai's visualisation of this track is almost unbearably affecting, offering up an unblinking image of Black grief, the refrain of untimely death that is as familiar as it is shocking, but animated by life, embodied in the young dancers (Will Simmons and Angel Gibbs) and their unbridled joy in feeling moved by music (see Fig. 2.1). With gratitude to Michael Gillespie's *Film Blackness*, I would argue that this evocation of a very specific, very material image of death cannot be reduced to that index of 'the real' so insistently and oppressively imposed on Black bodies. Instead, this crystalline musical image provides the foundation for a discursive, collaborative, and collective improvisation (by Flying Lotus, Murai, Lamar and bassist Thundercat, alongside choreographers Keone and Mari and dancers Simmons and Gibbs) that destabilises the indexical function of that image, and puts it in dialogue, musically, with a host of artistic and philosophical threads (jazz historiography, psychedelia, and fusion rock, the broader relationship between art and death). The immersive materiality of both the haptic images (the fabrics, wood, lace, and skin) and the musical tracks are rooted in their Black specificity and their shared Black audiovisual culture. This constellation, constantly shifting between individuality and the collective, is forged through those moments of fleeting synchrony. The shock of the unexpected moments



Fig. 2.1 The young dancers of ‘Never Catch Me’ (*Courtesy* Doomsday Entertainment)

of sync punctuates the flow, stuttering, and in that moment of pleasure, a speculative, crystalline opening emerges.

In effect, rhythm, synchrony, and seriality function in this video as transformative vehicles. Familiar imagery, burdened with a representational history, becomes animated and recomposed. The song is not merely illustrated by the image, but instead sound and image function prismatically, illuminating and improvising on each other’s representational strategies. Such exquisite moments of crystallisation, of course, do not occur consistently, or even frequently, in musical production numbers. Much like Deleuze’s movement- and time-images, we might view musical moments along a continuum, with some verging towards staid, measured articulations of time, and others taking flight towards more complex spatiotemporal constructions. Those more temporally fluid musical moments, like the Murai video, tend to incorporate a doubling of time and concentration, rooting backwards into the materiality of the

present and the virtual history that lies embedded within it, and engaging in acts of improvisatory fabulation, speculative leaps into the future.

Visual synchrony, spatial animation, and contrapuntal audiovisual layering are strategies deployed in contemporary music videos, where these practices have evolved to define the format. In a number of recent narrative feature films, however (namely those not identified as neo-musical genre films), more subdued musical moments arise, seemingly unmotivated, in unexpected places. While often formally linked to classical musical conventions, such as the integrated number where characters burst into song, these more recent iterations capitalise on their surprise arrivals to generate affect (as their audiences are not anticipating these temporary shifts in generic convention). All the while, the imagery, staging, and soundscapes for these narrative-based musical moments tend to remain deeply grounded in the banality of realistic settings.

In the opening scene of Andrea Arnold's 2016 film *American Honey*, Star (Sasha Lane), who had been searching a parking lot dumpster for salvageable food with two children, follows a van full of exuberant and dirty young people into a Kmart discount store. This fragment, one of a long string of musical moments that structure the film, roots itself in Rhianna's 'We Found Love' playing on the box store sound system. The ringleader of the van crew, Jake (Shia LeBeouf) catches Star's gaze as she watches him from across the store, points at himself, and the two begin a distanced flirtation. Initially muddled by the ambient sound of the checkout line, the moment becomes musical as Jake, now on the far side of the checkout counter, begins nodding his head to the beat and his band of miscreants form a vocal rave circle. With this visual synchronisation, the wasteland of the box store springs to life. Jake leaps onto the bagging counter to dance, a spontaneous seduction that sinks its hook. Jake, fully aware of his hold on Star's (and our) attention, locks eyes with her (and us, the camera) through this entire performance, even as the checkout worker radios for security.

A complex bait-and-switch takes place here, as we and Star are simultaneously seduced by Jake's sales pitch (like countless audiences and starlets before us), even though we rightly suspect this song and dance is not only a knowing act, but in fact part of Jake's job. Indeed, this musical moment opens, like a Russian doll, into nested performances of affective paid labour. Jake is the recruiter and trainer for a nomad door-to-door magazine sales crew, a dubious business powered by otherwise homeless youth, and Star is his newest target. She seems aware that this is a

pitch, however, and the benefits (freedom, comradeship) are worth both the risks, and the work (indentured servitude, her own performed pitches). As an audience, we are also acutely aware of Shia LeBeouf's frustratingly effective work here as an actor, rendered sour by the resonances between his character and recent revelations about his real-life abusive behaviour. Amongst the intrusions of the real within this scene is another worker, the clenched-jawed store cop, an analogue, perhaps, to the rain-sodden police officer in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), he himself only a thin blue-light special away from the disaffected youth he casts into the parking lot, ushering the number to a close. Arnold's musical intervention in the film functions on multiple registers. It gestures towards the historical legacy of the integrated number as meet-cute, rendered both poignant and ironic in this unromantic setting. Through our own affective responses to the triggers of Rhianna's infectious tune and to the thrilling surprise of synchronised movements, we feel Star's pleasure and surrender. But the brutality of her real world always remains palpable, present through the *mise en scène* and the soundscape. In its relentless attention to the underbelly of the gig economy, a voluntary hallucination of late-capitalist rural poverty, *American Honey*, resolutely refuses condescension, tapping instead into rhythms, breaks, and silences of that world to find connection, or as Rhianna suggests, love in a hopeless place.

Despite its association with nostalgia, escapism, and social conservatism, the musical moment, then, has the potential to generate genuine political insights. Contemporary experiments with the form, particularly those that put music in dialogue with the material realities of race and capitalism, are expanding our understanding of the work that the musical moment can perform. I would argue that Barry Jenkin's *Moonlight* (2016) is one of the most complex iterations of this potential. *Moonlight* is a film that in many ways functions as an extended series of musical moments, a symphonic layering of temporal references and rhythmic variations. Here, the three-act portrait of an evolving young man is realised by the absorption of image in sound, followed by subsequent waves of near silence, weaving together complex allusions and links between seemingly disparate trains of thought and points in time.

One key musical sequence opens to the strains of Brazilian musician and activist Caetano Veloso's version of 'Cucurrucú paloma' as the protagonist, Black (Trevante Rhodes), begins a drive from Atlanta to Miami. Chiron is en route to see a man, Kevin (André Holland), whom

he has not spoken to since childhood, whom he loved, and who betrayed him, setting both their lives careening on disparate trajectories.⁴

The scene begins with a point of view shot of the open, sunlit highway stretching to the horizon, vertical street lamps providing a visual rhythmic measure as they pass. As Veloso's voice gently joins the sparse acoustic orchestration, the camera pivots to the left, gliding over the dashboard to frame Chiron in profile, contemplating the road, bathed in soft light. The camera cuts to a floating shot above and behind Chiron's 1978 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme as it glides down the nearly empty highway. Just as Veloso intones the soaring 'ay, ay, ay, ay, ay' of the chorus, through a slow dissolve, the highway merges with and is replaced by a night-time image and soft sounds of Black children playing in the surf (it is unclear if this is a memory image from his own childhood, or a scene of arrival back home). In another axis shift, the camera pans slowly upward from the water, following Veloso's voice to linger on the full moon in the deep blue Miami sky.

'Cucurrucucú paloma' has a storied cinematic history, first rendered in its original Mexican *huapango* style in the 1955 film *Escuela de vagabundos* (*School for Tramps*), and later performed with gusto by Lola Beltrán and the Mariachi Pulido as the title track for her 1965 film. Veloso's rendition, however, strips the melody of the traditional huapango de mariachi group accompaniment, slows its tempo, lingering over the onomatopoeic cooing of the dove, which serves in lyrics of the song as a vehicle for a lovelorn soul. Veloso most famously performed the song live in Pedro Almodóvar's *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*, 2002), but Jenkins pays homage more directly in *Moonlight* to the appearance of Veloso's recording in Wong Kar-Wai's 1997 film *Happy Together*. *Happy Together* is a fragmented, brutal portrait of the dissolution of a romantic relationship between two men from Hong Kong, who travel to Argentina, on a quest to find a waterfall and salvage their love. There, too, Veloso's live recording accompanies a road trip laden with promise and queer longing.

This web of layered quotations and slowed tempos is core to Jenkins's craft. Jenkins speaks about the Veloso track at length in an interview with *Pitchfork* magazine. When asked if he was referencing Almodóvar by including the track, Jenkins answered:

It's more on purpose that it's the same song used in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*. It's a direct homage. [...] *Moonlight* is worlds away from *Happy Together*—it's a movie about two Asian men living in Argentina, and here

we have these two black men from fucking Liberty City, Miami. The world is very big and also very small, because they're experiencing the same things. [...] [H]opefully it will introduce a certain audience that has been going to see this film but who has maybe never heard Caetano Veloso—the same way that when I watched *Happy Together*, I got to Asia by way of Argentina and discovered Caetano Veloso. There's also a hard cut out of it to fucking 'Classic Man'—the Caetano is very soft and cool, the Jidenna comes in hard as fuck. Because again, the worlds clash. (Schnipper 2016)

Veloso's song performs an enormous amount of labour here. As the primary expressive force in a study of a character who rarely speaks, the song here works to grant us access to Chiron's continuously shifting consciousness, at the same time that it opens outward, outside the character, outside the film. This kind of dual movement informs Michael Gillespie's theorisation of film blackness, which points to the ways in which blackness on film exists as both material and immaterial, 'a free-floating trace unmoored from individual subjects' and as a 'concrete index of power' (Gillespie 2016: 157, quoting Huey Copeland); Gillespie posits film blackness not as a category, but an assemblage of multidirectional strategies, including 'discourse, sedimentations, and modalities' (Gillespie 2016: 157) as well as 'interpretive and creative' processes—critical modes of art making and spectatorship (Gillespie 2016: 5–6).

Suddenly those otherwise over-determined signifiers of Black masculinity, the muscles and the car and the gold fronts, through this tender temporal mapping and untangling, emerge as signs of intense vulnerability, as armour against trauma, as homage and anchor to lost or broken parental figures, launching the spectator into her own journey of mapping and untangling. In much the same way, Veloso's song becomes the discursive vector that maps Chiron's desire (and, it seems, Jenkins's personal history) onto all these various historical outpourings of longing this same song has borne (indeed, this might be the thing that the musical moment does best). This series of nesting sites of articulation and interpretation strikes me as very similar to the notion of a temporal diagram. Or to put this in different terms, 'this double-becoming intertwines two discursive series in a free indirect relation: communication between the world and the I in a fragmented world, and communication of the world and the I in a fragmented I, which have found a common point of musical articulation' (Rodowick 1997: 159).

This sequence also exists, as Jenkins suggests, to set up a cut that is hard as fuck, jumping from the soft cool tones of the ‘Cucurru-cucú paloma’ into a chopped and screwed version of Jidenna’s ‘Classic Man’. Chopping and screwing is the 1990s, Houston, TX-based style of remixing, pioneered by DJ Screw. The technique involves cutting fragments of existing popular songs, slowing them down, shifting the pitch, and performing other sonic manipulations (skipping beats, looping, or creating crossfade delays). Thus a fairly light-hearted song such as ‘Classic Man’ takes on a darker resonance on the soundtrack where it is slowed, deepened, and weighted. Jidenna’s original sartorial boast, rendered here hard as fuck, is suddenly haunted by its own aspirational assertion, opening into a paradoxical space of vulnerability. What does it mean to claim, with such insistence, and with such accumulated anguish, to be a ‘classic man’?

Chopping and screwing, for Barry Jenkins,

makes hip-hop almost hypermasculine, but it opens up all this yearning in the lyrics. Hip-hop is usually moving at such a high bpm that you don’t catch that not only is this poetry, but it’s really pained [...] If you chop and screw it, you allow all of that pain to come through. (Zaman and Rapold 2016)

‘When you slow things down’, Jenkins recounted in an interview, ‘there’s this emotion, this yearning’ (Schnipper 2016). Composer Nick Britell embraced the practice of chopping and screwing, which is deployed throughout the soundtrack, including the score. Britell’s own original themes, each linked to a stage in Little/Chiron/Black’s life, are versions of his first childhood theme, extensively slowed down, re-pitched, and sometimes re-orchestrated and slowed even further, resurfacing each time in a new key, transformed.⁵

The deployment of pre-existing music within this soundtrack furthers this project of recontextualisation, where familiar refrains become defamiliarised, disclosing previously unheard qualities, and teasing out from the image new sets of affective relations. In an exquisite sequence, the ‘Laudate Dominum’ from Mozart’s ‘Vesperae Solennes de Confessore’ accompanies a group of young boys playing ball and wrestling in a sun-drenched field. The orchestration is at once transcendent and rooted in the now, startlingly punctured by the blare of a passing train and the laughter of the children. The bodies of the boys, their makeshift paper

ball, the birds swooping overhead, are animated and rendered operatic as they gather and separate in time. Here, as across film as a whole, the audiovisual refrain extends into contemplative spaces, reaching at once backwards into individual and collective memories, and forward, as they mutate and take flight, always changing, always moving.

Returning to the musical sequence that unfolds from the ‘Cucurrucucú paloma’/‘Classic Man’ transition, that brash cut takes place in a diner parking lot where Black is disembarking from his car, the chopped and screwed Jidenna blaring from the Cutlass’s speakers. He abruptly shuts off the stereo, and we are immersed in the ambient sounds of the empty parking lot, the hiss of passing cars on wet pavement, the rustling to Black’s movements as he pulls on a shirt, adjusts his chain, grooms his hair. The traffic noise rises in the mix to match our suspense as the camera follows Black closely from behind, and he reaches for the door of the diner.

All ambient noise abruptly drops out, and the image cuts to a closeup of a small gold bell that rings to mark our arrival, and we are conveyed, via Aretha Franklin’s ‘One Step Ahead’, into the nostalgia-infused world of the diner, which, with its leatherette booths and wood panelling, feels transported straight from 1965. Black slides onto a counter stool, and we gaze over his broad shoulders as he waits, the camera pivoting to reveal Kevin, who has not yet recognised him, waiting on customers, then panning back to Black’s face, eyes turned downward, panning back to Kevin as he approaches with a coffee pot, then back to Black, still unable to look up. Franklin’s restrained performance, and the heartbreak of the lyrics push the romantic anticipation to a breaking point:

One step is all I have to take
 Backwards, to be the same old fool for you
 I used to be
 I’m only one step ahead of your arms
 One kiss away from your sweet lips
 I know I can’t afford to stop for one moment

Kevin’s face fills the frame at the moment of recognition, his soft eyes wide (see Fig. 2.2). The sound de-links itself from the image, Kevin’s lips remain still while we hear his voice: ‘Chiron?’ The image cuts to Black, returning his look. Time stops.

The affect here overwhelms the circuits of the image, which falls out of sync. The coincidence of memory, melody, and connection cause time



Fig. 2.2 Kevin recognises Black (*Courtesy* Altitude Film Distribution)

to stutter, shifting us, along with the characters, into what Deleuze would call an ‘any-space-whatever’ of longing, a bubble that quickly bursts, bringing us back to the mundane space of the diner, with Franklin’s song now relegated to the background.

A second musical moment is again triggered by the jukebox, when Kevin stops to play the song that sparked his memories of Chiron, Barbara Lewis’s ‘Hello Stranger’, the reason he gives for calling him after ten years.

Hello, stranger
 It seems so good to see you back again
 How long has it been?
 It seems like a mighty long time

Jenkins describes the importance of this number in the temporal design of the film: ‘It just felt like everything was building to this halo of space that was going to be created by the wonder of the song. The whole sequence in the diner is meant to function as time outside time’ (Sullivan 2017). After circling around each other all evening, they are finally, within the space of the song, alone to look each other in the eye. By slowing time, desire is stretched and suspended to an almost agonising plasticity, to the point that the smallest of movements, the flicker of a glance, becomes an exquisite spectacle of longing, vulnerability, and acquiescence.

Then, once again, the cut of the door’s bell as we exit the dream space, followed by the silence of Black and Kevin’s awkward walk to Black’s car.

As Black turns the ignition, ‘Classic Man’, still in the stereo where we had left it, is heard differently, now through Kevin’s ears. Chiron? Is this you?

Jenkins’s sonic and temporal manipulations in *Moonlight* are at once formally stunning, drawing on a staggering range of cultural and historical juxtapositions, and emotionally poignant, opening an empathetic window into the lived experiences of a fragmented man. On each of these fronts, the film refuses the easy nostalgia or short-hand clichés that might typically be evoked by, for instance, the re-use of a familiar 1960s pop song. Through formal mutations, stuttering breaks, and narrative layering, each element of the film insists on the pressures, textures, and affective realities of this specific present. This ‘now’ may be a prism refracting a complex virtual past, but the relationship between present and past is never universalised, and contradiction persists, unresolved. *Moonlight* offers us a historical image that is uniquely manifested via the material, lived experiences of blackness and queerness, and via blackness and queerness as modalities of creating, reading, listening, and remembering.

Trauma can be mapped as a historically contingent sociological phenomenon, but it is experienced as a deep, isolating, and personal wound. The musical moment might similarly be described as an art form structured by resonant, inherent contradictions, manifested via rhythms and breaks, harmonies and counterpoints, points of visual synchrony and spatial animation, variations and refrains. Precisely because of these formal tensions, the musical moment is a particularly effective vehicle for fabulation, speculating new possibilities in bleak political times: mapping circuits of impact through individual affective experiences and broader collective patterns; recasting familiar themes such that they mark, and spark, unexpected transformations; teasing out moments of genuine joy, not to escape from the real, but to look it fully in the eyes, to feel it, and open it to change. The musical moments I have outlined here tell us something about what the musical moment can do, or what some musical moments can do, or what some musical moments can do very well, in responding to, reflecting upon, and reimagining our own historical moment. Each of these moments stages musical arguments regarding difference, making a case, not just for increased representation, but for creative improvisation, for the reactivation of lost histories, for forging artistic links between moments and ideas, between individuals and collectives, for welcoming moments that shock us into thinking, and re-remembering differently. Each of these works, too, makes use of interruption, recontextualised refrains, clashing juxtapositions, and speculative leaps. Instead of closure

and a satisfying finale, we are more likely to encounter the intrusion of another rhythm, a counter-memory, another temporal pressure. In these darkest of times, the musical moment might offer an invitation for an interpretive intervention, a transformative connection, a glimpse of futurity arising from profound precarity.

NOTES

1. More recently, Phil Powrie's formulation of the 'crystal-song' brilliantly excavates the experience of musical numbers in film, linking the pleasures of surprise, and repetition to the peculiar temporality of musical moments. Here time is both personal and historically and politically contingent (Powrie 2017).
2. See, for example, Arthur Knight (2002), Dyer (2002, 2013), Griffin (2002), Smith (2005), and Garcia (2014).
3. The video can be streamed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lXD0vv-ds8>.
4. *Moonlight* contains three distinct acts in which the lead character is referred to by changing nicknames as he ages (Little, 9, Chiron, 16, and Black, adult) and is played by three different actors (respectively, Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes). The role of Kevin is also played by three different actors in each act (Jaden Piner, Jharrel Jerome, André Holland).
5. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Britell describes his process of composing and chopping and screwing, with audio examples. See Cooper (2017), online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/arts/music/moonlight-movie-score-music-oscar.html>.

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Escuela de vagabundos, 1955, Rogelio A. González, Mexico.
Happy Together, 1997, Wong Kar-Wai, Hong Kong.
Metropolis, 1927, Fritz Lang, Germany.
Moonlight, 2016, Barry Jenkins, USA.
 'Never Catch Me,' 2014, music video, Flying Lotus featuring Kendrick Lamar (musical pf.), Hiro Murai (dir.), Keone and Mari (choreography), Will Simmons and Angel Gibbs (dance pf.), USA.
Singin' in the Rain, 1952, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, USA.
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LIST OF SONGS

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- ‘Cucurrucú paloma (live).’ 1995. Caetano Veloso (pf.). Tomás Méndez (comp.). © Verve.
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- ‘One Step Ahead.’ 1965. Aretha Franklin (pf.). Eddie Snyder, Charles Singleton (comp.). © Columbia.
- ‘Never Catch Me.’ 2014. Flying Lotus featuring Kendrick Lamar (pf.). Steven Ellison, Kendrick Duckworth (comp.). © Warp.
- ‘We Found Love.’ 2011. Rhianna featuring Calvin Harris (pf.). Calvin Harris (comp.). © Def Jam/SRP.

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