

*Are journalists heroes exposing the truth for the good of their audience, or manipulators obscuring facts for their personal gain? Scott explores this problem by analyzing the film *Nightcrawler* in the context of other movies about the news industry and through the history of sensational media, from yellow journalism to click-bait. (Instructor: Stephen Butler)*

A NETWORK OF LIES

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Lou follows the foreman into a small, dank, and messy office to settle the price negotiation for the wire he has just stolen from a construction site. He is wearing a brown leather jacket with his hair slicked down and his hands linked behind his back. His cheekbones are sunken, yet his eyes bulge out of his head, making him look constantly alert. In a slightly robotic tone, he says, “I am willing to take less to establish a business relationship. If that’s your last, best offer, then I guess I accept” (*Nightcrawler*). The foreman casually agrees, tells him to unload the material from his truck, and then gets back to work at his desk. But he is quickly interrupted by Lou again, who walks directly over to the desk. This time Lou asks for a job, giving a formal speech that almost resembles a verbal resume: “Who am I? I’m a hard worker, I set high goals, and I’ve been told that I’m persistent.” The foreman looks back down at his work and continues to shuffle through it, listening to Lou go on. Lou tells him that he doesn’t always expect consideration of his needs, despite growing up in a generational “self-esteem movement.” At the end of the day, he will work his ass off, he says, because “[his] motto is: If you wanna win the lottery, you have to make the money to buy a ticket.” The foreman chuckles. Thinking that he has sufficiently charmed him, Lou tries to seal the deal, even offering to start working that night. Yet the foreman quickly replies, “I’m not hiring a fucking thief.” Lou’s facial expressions quickly turn from angry, to sad, to slightly hysterical. The scene ends with Lou nodding his head and laughing in agreement with the foreman’s decision.

This particular scene is representative of Dan Gilroy’s *Nightcrawler* (2014). It establishes the attitude Lou, played by Jake

Gyllenhaal, has towards hard work, and how far he's willing to go to develop a career for himself. Yet it also establishes his lack of self-awareness, particularly of the difference between right and wrong. Before the previous scene, Lou beat up and possibly even killed a security guard to steal the wire from the construction site. Yet here he is now, already emotionally detached from his previous actions and moving on to future ambitions. It wasn't until the foreman uttered the words "I'm not hiring a fucking thief," that even I, an audience member, was reminded of Lou's sociopathic tendencies. This scene also foreshadows some of the ruthless behavior that Lou displays in the rest of the movie as he finds his calling as a stringer: a freelance video journalist who sells content to news stations. Lou blackmails Nina—KWLA 6's morning news director—into having sex with him, he adjusts the body of a dead hit-and-run victim just to "get the right shot," and he lies to the police about not being able to identify the gunman who committed a triple homicide in Grenada Hills. Lastly, after a car chase with the gunman, Lou betrays his partner Rick by telling him to go film the dead gunman, who was in fact still alive. The gunman kills Rick, and Lou stands in the background with his own camera, capturing the whole thing. As Rick takes his last breath, Lou tells him—again, without any remorse—that he didn't trust Rick enough to take the necessary actions required to work at his company. In that moment, it becomes clear that the only person Lou truly—and ironically—trusts is himself.

Nightcrawler is unlike many other well-known movies that put journalists at the center of the story. Films such as *All the President's Men* and *Good Night, and Good Luck* feature journalists as their heroes, willing to risk almost everything to expose those who are being dishonest and to provide the public with the truth. Yet in *Nightcrawler*, the journalism industry—presented through the stringer and the news station itself—is ruthless, greedy, and willing to manipulate the truth for the sake of a good story. Journalism scholar Brian McNair argues that while *Nightcrawler* might be excessive in its portrayal of the 'Fourth Estate,' it is important to expose this dishonest side to journalism. In "Rock Stars Versus Reptiles: Lou Bloom, Photojournalism and *Nightcrawler*," McNair identifies Lou Bloom as the "reptile . . . screen journalist" (615). This doesn't simply

refer to Lou's reptilian features. Unlike "rock star" journalists, whom McNair describes as "glamorous, sexy, romantic rebels," the "reptile" journalist "embodies without apology or hesitation the very worst of what journalism can be in market-driven media culture" ("Rock Stars" 615; *Journalists* 139). So how culturally significant is this character in comparison to the other characterizations of journalists in film? How does *Nightcrawler* change the viewer's understanding of the news media?

Although I was somewhat disturbed by the reptilian, sociopathic behavior of Lou Bloom, I was also refreshed. I saw it as an honest way to examine how media corporations influence our news, and what we are, or are not, exposed to. Other journalism-focused movies which I had seen before, such as *All the President's Men* and *Spotlight*, depict journalists and the industry as a group of heroes, fighting to expose the truth and to seek justice. *Nightcrawler* shows, in my eyes, the industry for what it really is: a business. And as a business, news stations have an incentive to report on sensational stories that often play into people's suspicions and fears, or even manifest new ones. But is that too harsh an assessment?

In his interview with *Nightcrawler* director Dan Gilroy and producer Tony Gilroy, *Deadline's* Mike Fleming Jr. couldn't help but wonder "what did . . . journalists, as a breed, do to offend the Gilroy clan so much that [they] could paint such a cynical picture about news gathering?" Fleming approaches this question from the context of his reflection on the life and career of *The Washington Post's* Ben Bradlee, who had recently died. Bradlee is primarily famous for his bold decision to release the Pentagon Papers, "a secret Pentagon history of the Vietnam War" to the public (Kaiser). The Nixon administration took issue with these stories and attempted, but failed, to prevent their publication. Bradlee also oversaw reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's investigation of the Nixon administration's involvement with the break-in at the DNC's office at the Watergate Hotel, which eventually turned into the famous Watergate scandal. Upon Bradlee's death, President Obama spoke of him in this way:

For Benjamin Bradlee, journalism was more than a profession—it was a public good vital to our democracy. . . . The standard he set—a standard for honest, objective, meticulous reporting—encouraged so many others to enter the profession. (qtd. in Kaiser)

Fleming and other reporters may have been inspired by this image of a Bradlee-esque editor. The film *All the President's Men* perpetuated this image of Bradlee through Jason Robards's portrayal of a hard-hitting editor who pushed Woodward and Bernstein to the limit. In fact, in the movie, Bradlee tells Woodward and Bernstein: "Nothing's riding on this except the, uh, first amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press, and maybe the future of the country. Not that any of that matters, but if you guys fuck up again, I'm going to get mad. Goodnight." In this film, there is a sense of responsibility, a moral obligation to American citizens that is prioritized over anything else, even the president himself.

Yet as the Gilroy brothers remind Fleming, such morality is no longer the reality of the journalism industry. In his answer to Fleming's question, Dan Gilroy (as well as many others who reviewed and discussed *Nightcrawler*) brings up the influence of one particular movie, 1976's *Network*: "What [*Network*] accurately grabbed was the moment when networks decided that news divisions had to make a profit. [It] foresaw that when that happened, news would have to become entertainment" (Gilroy qtd. in Fleming). BBC Reporter Nicholas Barber seems to agree with Gilroy's reflection on *Network*. Barber notes that when the movie was first released forty years ago, "the poster warned audiences to prepare themselves 'for a perfectly outrageous motion picture.'" And, given the cultural climate of the time, this movie was "outrageous." American citizens had seen the Watergate scandal and the release of the Pentagon Papers in addition to many political/social riots. All of this created a revolutionary fervor, or a movement to overthrow "the system." Released a few months prior, *All the President's Men* had pushed the idea that journalists, not politicians, were on the side of the people. So, until *Network* was released, journalism wasn't necessarily seen as part of "the system."

But, as *Network's* broadcasting company chairman, Arthur Jensen, explains to the movie's main character, Howard Beale:

You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations. There are no peoples . . . There is only IBM and ITT and AT&T, and DuPont, Dow, Union Carbide and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today. The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business. (*Network*)

Beale is a veteran anchorman who threatens to kill himself during his final broadcast after being given two-weeks notice that his show has been cancelled due to its low ratings. Originally, Union Broadcasting System panics and fires Howard for his behavior. Their concern doesn't lie in the well-being of their own newscaster, but in his stunt's effect on their ratings. However, the network's new division president, Max Schumacher, demands that Howard be allowed to say goodbye to his viewers with dignity. But when the time comes, Howard rants instead, claiming on-air that "life is bullshit." Surprisingly, this is what brings viewers back to his show. The production team, specifically Diana Christiansen, ruthlessly played by Faye Dunaway, is then keen to rebrand Howard as "the mad prophet of the airwaves." She understands that in the mid-1970s, "the American people are turning sullen. They've been clobbered on all sides by Vietnam, Watergate, the inflation, the depression. They're turned off, shot up, and they fuck themselves limp, and nothing helps. . . . The American people want somebody to articulate their rage for them." In other words, Diana realizes that Beale supplies what is in demand in the market of frustrated and distrustful American citizens. As a result, she continues to push this new genre of news in order to increase ratings.

Diana is a reflection of many news producers today and is arguably the inspiration behind Rene Russo's Nina Romina in *Nightcrawler*. Nina seeks to increase ratings by promoting a narrative of urban crime creeping into the Los Angeles suburbs. This is evident when Nina explains her goal as a news producer to Lou: "The best and clearest way that I can phrase it to you, Lou, to capture the spirit of what we air, is think of our newscast as a screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut." Ultimately, *Nightcrawler* updates the message of *Network* for viewers, confirming the once

'outrageous' theory that journalism has in fact become an industry that prioritizes its profit margins over the truth. And although these films do not necessarily depict the 'fake news' discussed so much today, characters like Diana, Lou, and Nina foreshadow the greedy and manipulative mindset that has contributed to creating this phenomenon.

However, a knowledge of nineteenth-century journalism suggests that history may simply be repeating itself, and that journalism has the potential to once again return to its moral values. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, "a dependence on the familiar aspects of sensationalism—crime news, scandal and gossip, divorces and sex" gave rise to the phenomenon of "yellow journalism" (Gullason qtd. in Samuel). The journalists who participated in these practices exploited "the freedom of regulation" permitted under the First Amendment, and used the industry to simply make a profit (McKerns qtd. in Samuel). Often, the result was a "deliberate suppression of certain kinds of news, distortion of news actually published, studied unfairness toward certain classes, political organizations and social movements, systematic catering to powerful groups of advertisers" (Yarros qtd. in Samuel). Yet as early as 1898, a movement to stop yellow journalism emerged. That year, an unnamed publication wrote, "the public is becoming heartily sick of fake news and fake extras" (Pomerantz qtd. in Samuel). This attitude is what allowed 'highly conservative' newspapers like *The New York Times* to thrive while more famous yellow journalist William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* declined in sales. Additionally, the courts began to reinforce the constitutional right to privacy, which yellow journalism often violated. Lastly, in 1910, W. E. Miller proposed the journalism industry's first code of ethics (Samuel). All of these efforts brought legitimacy back to news publications and perpetuated the narrative behind films like *All the President's Men*. As Alexandra Samuel points out in "To Fix Fake News, Look to Yellow Journalism," this doesn't mean that "sensationalistic headlines, intrusive reporting, and journalism that placed sales over accuracy" were ever completely eradicated. But over the past two decades, the financial downturn of print newspapers in the internet era has reinvigorated the industry's desire to return to sensationalistic practices. In *Nightcrawler*, the gambit is

to scare viewers into believing that there is a crime epidemic in Los Angeles caused by minorities; in the 2016 U.S. election, it was to use 'click-bait' headlines that would deepen the dramatic divide between political parties. Both techniques create biases that can significantly affect the way in which news media consumers view the world.

Before the 2016 election, many seemed to think that we still lived in a world of honest, unbiased journalism. Unlike nineteenth-century media consumers, we didn't seem to question the information we were given. Yet in 2014, *Nightcrawler* attempted to teach us that our news is in fact sensational and manipulated. And looking at *Nightcrawler* and characters like *Network's* Diana Christiansen through the lens of yellow journalism, we can see that news has been a product of supply and demand for a long time. *Nightcrawler* suggests that both the viewers and producers of news are stuck in an old cycle. The 'Fourth Estate' needs to make a profit, and so they feed us what they know we'll pay for: a confirmation of our pre-existing biases, beliefs, fears, and suspicions. And as long as we continue to pay for what we already believe—instead of demanding the truth—we will never be able to escape this cycle. Hence, as Alexandra Samuel suggests, the solution is to “read, share and support the news and commentary produced by responsible media outlets, and see click journalism wither away, just as yellow journalism did a century ago.” Once we do this, we can perhaps escape the frightening world of *Nightcrawler*, returning to an age of journalism dedicated to truthfully informing the consumer and producing content that is devoid of 'alternative facts.'

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