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Reflecting About Fake

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Reflecting About “Deconstructing an Evil
Fakeness: Digital Media and Truth in Dan Gilroy’s
Nightcrawler”, by Nicholas Orlando
(Issue 9.1, Fake, 2019)

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Who wouldn’t want to find a message in a bottle or, at least once, perhaps as a child, tried sending one. If indeed you have fantasised about finding a sign from the past hoping that it would bring all of the puzzle pieces together, you, dear reader, are in luck today.

Reading Nicholas Orlando’s paper in the middle of a pandemic and, probably even more so, during its aftermath, is exactly like finding a note in a bottle, lost for years in the depths of the sea or simply washed under a pile of garbage and found, all of a sudden, one grey morning on the beach. “SOS”, it says, predictably, as they all do.

Orlando, in the article originally published in 2019 for the ninth volume of *Excursions*, discusses evil fakeness of the media in the US, basing his analysis on *Nightcrawler*, a film from 2014 directed by Dan Gilroy. The article follows Fuller and Goffey (2014) in arguing that the media, by reproducing power structures based on ownership and economy of entertainment, amplifies already existing social problems and consequently contributes to an even greater instability.

In the film, a wannabe, and soon to be successful, stringer starts staging road incidents in order to sell footage of them to TV news stations. In constructing events himself, rather than just recording them, he becomes a producer of newsworthy events, in a cycle of the self-serving logic of neoliberalism, within which only products with the ability to accelerate future demand can be on sale. The film and its main character eventually have to start sacrificing human lives, including his work colleague, at the altar of news consumption and audience titillation. But what happens if news is already grim enough to be newsworthy, but does not serve neoliberalism; what if the lack of information, disinformation or simple misinformation in the name of economic stability and survival of the system can equally put human lives in danger?

Whilst the mystification of news media and contemporary, western journalism has mostly ethical and/or theoretical consequences, as seen in the film from six years ago and discussed in Orlando's recent paper, we are witnessing a global crisis which is magnifying how truly evil and politically dependent fake media can be. As infodemic is being discussed as one of the additional, second grade problems resulting from the pandemic, it would be a gross omission not to see that, in fact, the mishandling of the crisis and the disinformation encouraged and actively created by politicians allowed for the pandemic to outbreak in the first place. It is particularly ethically problematic in the case of news media and journalism, as they are understood as vectors of social confidence, touchstones of political reality, as well as supposedly guardians of democracy.

However, on a more hopeful note, there have been numerous instances of human connection and support seen in forms such as mutual aid, cropping up across the country via social media platforms, as a result of the pandemic. Here, we see what Orlando describes as a media that is not "merely political instruments of misdirection" (Orlando, 2019, p. 32). Rather, as Orlando suggests, other forms of media that "activate ambiguous

and intersubjective connections with others that provide moments of anxious openness otherwise hindered by neoliberal logics of self-interest” (Orlando, 2019, p. 32). Thus, as you will see in the subsequent paper, Orlando begins to bring these puzzle pieces together in order to expose the exploitations endemic within the fakeness of the media and, also, to the possible means of challenging it.

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Refractions: Looking Through the Prism of Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler*

(Issue 9.1, Fake, 2019)

Nicholas Orlando

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As mainstream media continues to report the increasing case count of positive Covid-19 patients, and as public anxieties inflame as a result, it seems an odd time to look back to Dan Gilroy's 2014 directorial debut, *Nightcrawler*. Despite the film's satirical treatment of news media, one might suggest now, more than ever, is a time for trusting all news outlets to communicate good information from public health officials. Indeed, in the United States, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease and member of the White House coronavirus task force, has thus far make regular media appearances, from television (CNN and Fox News) to social media (YouTube and Instagram recordings of *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*). Media platforms, on this front, might be deemed heroic, since they are Fauci's primary connection to the American public and they foster the connectivity some long for while enduring social distancing. However, in our postmodern era of contagion, I find myself increasingly interested in poststructuralist questions of epistemology. With *Nightcrawler*, one is reminded of news media's operations under neoliberal rationalism and the violence it fosters. Moreover, *Nightcrawler* is also vital in unpacking the complexities of the hypercommodification of information under the neoliberal epistemological regime.

Nightcrawler exposes the entanglement of aesthetics between mass media and cinema, juxtaposing the digital technologies of its presumed

protagonist Louis Bloom (Jake Gyllenhaal) with those of the film's director. Bloom's methods of image capturing enable an amputative-voyeuristic use of media, which in turn brings to light mass media's uncaring exploitation of filmed and viewing subjects. Bloom himself embodies the neoliberal logics of self-interest that govern the news industry. By contrast, Gilroy employs similar digital technologies yet treats them as extensions of the human senses. Like Bloom, Gilroy uses a handheld digital camera; however, he also makes use of Steadicam and subtle computer graphic imaging (CGI) to reconfigure the digital's ontology under neoliberalism. From the film, I am reminded of Bloom's final sale to Nina Romena (Rene Russo) and KWLA. In an intimate close-up shot, the edge-lit silhouettes of Romena and Bloom frame Rick's (Riz Ahmed) face on a television screen just out of focus. Though paused, the video captures Rick looking out toward the viewer through the gap left by the light-lined faces. Enclosed in a digital grave, he is revealed as the film's true protagonist, albeit too late. Still, Gilroy looks to divorce the digital from associations of amputation, voyeurism, and fakeness, and instead introduces epistemological uncertainty to find a new ethic-aesthetic of care.

Since its release, other films have undertaken journalism as their subject, all moving to strengthen the institution's democratic duties to truth-telling. Tom McCarthy's *Spotlight* (2016), which eased us into the Trump Administration's "fake" mass media reality, basks in nostalgia for print journalism. *Spotlight* represents journalists as ardent speakers of truth to power, pressing the Catholic Church on its aiding and abetting of priestly misdeeds and sexual misconduct. Against all odds, including economic constraints and public reticence, the *Spotlight* investigative team publishes a ground-breaking story in *The Boston Globe*, boasting print journalism's informative and transformative powers. Likewise, Steven Spielberg's *The Post*, which retraces *The Washington Post's* investigation and publication of the Pentagon Papers, doubles down on *Spotlight's* nostalgia for print journalism. Shot on 35 mm film stock and fashioned as a spiritual prequel to

Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), Spielberg demonstrates the necessity to fight for analog press freedom though demonizes digital journalism in the process. With this, *The Post* overtly suggests, the press can hold power accountable and assist the public in making sense of the world. Tangible information is paramount to democracy.

Yet, the nostalgia for print journalism seems to miss a critical mark in the Trump Era. After all, Trump, too, ran his 2016 presidential campaign on promissory nostalgia with his tag line, "Make America Great Again". Reminiscent of President Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign promise, Trump seeks to restore an ideological American past flourishing under an economy directed by privatised forces while also boasting unbridled individualism. One could read Trump's Tax Cuts and Job's Act, which lowers the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21% and privileges corporations as the sole sustainers of the American economy, as a resuscitation of Reagan Era trickle-down economics. With restoration in mind, films like McCarthy's *Spotlight* and Spielberg's *The Post*, the latter of which was a Hollywood film, implicitly serve to affirm Trump's moves to restore 1980s America while issuing a rallying call behind journalism's sanctity and strength. In dire consequence, recent journalism films have failed to respond *Nightcrawler's* most urgent call.

More recently, I have looked to address the question of information from a slightly different, and perhaps broader, perspective. I would like to push further and suggest *Nightcrawler* not only calls on us to find a new aesthetics and ethics of care. It also demands a critical decomposition of the hypercommodification of information and the neoliberal framework that engenders the information economy. Of this, mainstream media makes up only a part, since, as I have demonstrated in my analysis of *Nightcrawler*, news media is required by political economic forces to find alternative, often private sources of funding to sustain itself¹. The question of information,

¹ See McChesney, R. W. (2004) 'The problem of journalism: a political economic contribution to an explanation of the crisis in contemporary US journalism', *Journalism Studies*, 4(3), pp. 229-329.

however, extends beyond mass media. In my research, I aim to explore the politics and sensory meditation of information and unearth the political, economic, and aesthetic regimes of contemporary epistemology². As Pasquale (2015, p. 4) observes, “Internet companies collect more and more data on their users but fight regulations that would let those same users exercise control over the resulting digital dossier”. Information, he argues, is thus “colonized by the logic of secrecy”, logics fixed by laws that protect institutions rather than privacy of individuals (2015, p. 2). In my work, I contend film genres such as film noir, horror, and science fiction, place their anxieties in systems of epistemological authority and the political economic frameworks that sustain them. Hence, these films disrupt our epistemic faith, often shaped by algorithmic control, and make noticeable otherwise invisible regimes of informational governance.

Pasquale’s work is particularly illuminating in our moment of contagion, which has necessitated a global push toward techno-solutionism to maintain some semblance of a functioning economy in the wake of Covid-19. Techno-solutionism, to be sure, refers to an unwavering belief in technology, software, and code as absolute answers to the world’s problems. As Andrejevic and Selwyn (2020) argue, new media technologies have enabled some members of the workforce to avoid contagion by working from their computers at home while staying updated with developing news about the virus. However, Andrejevic and Selwyn (2020) also note these same technologies are also being used by authorities for surveillance in China and South Korea to gather information. All media, then, are locked into systems of power that leverage data for surveillance, data that is then used to track those who are or ought to be quarantined, those who are practicing social distancing, and those who fail to comply with public health guidelines.

² In addition to McChesney, I should also mention Michael Shudson and his book *The rise of the right to know: politics and the culture of transparency, 1945 – 1975*. Here, Schudson reconfigures transparency as a public epistemological value and a fundamental element in American politics.

Although at the time of this writing the United States has not engaged in surveillance to track the spread of the coronavirus, issues of surveillance are nothing new to American political landscape or cultural imagination³. One need only think of the 1970s' Watergate and *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1973) or the 2010s' social media takeover and *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010). In addition to surveillance, we have also witnessed Big Data's role in shaping public epistemology throughout and since the 2016 presidential race in the United States; recent restrictions to public access to information by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Department of State due to the coronavirus (Salame and Zweig, 2020); and a longstanding distrust of authority in Western society. I therefore affirm with urgency information as a public, sensory relationship rather than a privatized epistemological network. Because information, whether as abstract data, news, research material, etc., so actively governs public bodies and discourse, and because we rely on information to make social relationships possible, we must critically examine cinema participation in and disruptions of the neoliberal algorithmic episteme. Genre cinema aestheticises information, revealing its oft-repressed sensuousness and returning abstract data to the body. Moreover, it simultaneously questions socio-political constructs and recalls historical happenings surrounding changing perspectives on information freedom within a deluge-minded mediasphere. With the aesthetic, we must challenge contemporary algorithmic epistemology and advocate for an egalitarian public policy of knowledge production.

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³ An updated account on this was written by Adam Cancryn for *Politico*: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/07/kushner-coronavirus-surveillance-174165>

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Deconstructing an Evil Fakeness: Digital Media and Truth in Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler*

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Nicholas Orlando

He's the worst possible by-product of the American dream, raised on a vocabulary of pure business-speak, and lacking in a single human quality except cunning, drive, and one-upmanship – Tim Robey, The Telegraph.

Do you know what F.E.A.R. stands for?... False Evidence Appearing Real – Lou Bloom, *Nightcrawler*.

In his review of Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler* (2014), *The Telegraph's* Tim Robey diagnoses the consequences of the uncaring world fostered by contemporary neoliberalism: one is offered no alternative to the dehumanising drive encouraged by a system in which the market, however amorphous, freely regulates all facets of life. In this, Robey implies a precarious dualism in which Lou Bloom (Jake Gyllenhaal), the film's loosely-presumed protagonist, exists. Bloom, once marginalised by a neoliberal economic system devoid of care and rife with narcissism, embraces this same discard of ethics in favor of exploitative, sensational, and fake journalism. In doing so, Lou's immersion into the American gig economy reveals the networks of falsehood upon which this system hinges, and simultaneously lays bare the viewer's voyeuristic desires to know the world from a distance. *Nightcrawler*, from my reading, mobilises an evil view of digital media

technologies, most notably the digital camera. In its tangled aesthetics, *Nightcrawler* critiques an amputative, voyeuristic view of digital media which links fakeness and distance with virtue and violence through Lou. Yet, through Gilroy, it also offers a self-reflexive extensive critique of Lou's voyeurism to reveal the medium of journalism, the economic structures that support it, and the challenge to virtuous freedom this fakeness offers. *Nightcrawler* calls for a reconfiguration of digital media ethics that does not marginalise fakeness, but rather embraces its modes of abstraction and ambiguity. In this way, we can turn toward our contemporary moment of fake news to advocate for care in news media.

The extant scholarship on *Nightcrawler*, although scarce given its still recent release, places much of its focus on the film's critique of digital capitalism. According to Boyle (2017, p. 549), *Nightcrawler* employs an anti-realist aesthetic to “[tell] a neoliberal origin story of sorts, where fabricated news – signifiers divorces from their real world referents – of the infotainment industry prefigures the ‘fictitious capital’... created by Wall Street's financial instruments that collapsed the economy and sounded the death knell of neoliberalism's legitimacy”. Boyle's discussion of fakeness as a signifier brings to light the digital's association within conventional media studies with groundless abstraction. In a slightly different reading of the film, Brayton (2017) contends *Nightcrawler* reveals psychopathic behavior as the catalyst behind one's success in late capitalism. For Brayton, Lou's desire for profit by way of the bloody scenes he captures is symptomatic of a system that flourishes in its unempathetic distance from human suffering. The sale, with its exchange of goods for capital gain, dominates the late capitalist's interests, and these monetary exchanges, like the digital media discussed shortly, remain phenomenologically disconnected from the consumer.

In what follows, then, I turn to reposition media not as an intermediary device, but rather as evil actors in systems of mediation that generate ambiguity and uncertainty. Evil media, for Fuller and Goffey (2014,

p. 3), “[facilitate] and [amplify] the creation of troubling, ambiguous social processes, fragile networks of susceptible activity, opaque zones of nonknowledge – the evils of media”. By maintaining an active role in determining the social relations of which they are a part, media are not evil in a conventional and supernatural wickedness. Rather, for Fuller and Goffey, media are unconventionally evil because they precipitate the production of instability. Fuller and Goffey share my contention that media are inherently unstable, and though they help to forge new social relations in their indeterminacy, they simultaneously perturb the extant social reality. By considering media as objects, they state, “mediation entails the process of becoming activated, whether one consciously takes on the role of spectator or not” (2014, p. 2). Further, Fuller and Goffey argue for an “ethico-aesthetic sensibility” that realises how these objects are made mutable within power structures. For my purposes, the evils of *Nightcrawler* emerge from the deceit born by its digital, abstract, and thus purportedly fake mediating forms, both within and without its diegesis. Media, in their demand for our spectatorship, activate us as onlookers, inciting modes of looking marked by ambiguity and undecidability. In this construction, consistent with Fuller and Goffey, media are evil in their indeterminacy, an evilness that, I contend, ought to be reclaimed in order to challenge the determinism imposed upon them by the procedures of contemporary mass media.

Whereas Fuller and Goffey forgo questions of spectatorship, *Nightcrawler*, I argue, reclaims spectatorship as a site for challenge prevailing power structures of news-making. For Marshall McLuhan (1964, p. 2), all media are extensions of our ‘sense lives’; they actively “[shape] and [control] the scale and form of human association and action”. Although Fuller and Goffey give credit to McLuhan and his maxim “the medium is the message” for influencing their conception of media evilness, they leave behind McLuhan’s conception of amputation and extension. An amputative view of media removes one’s responsibility from the effects they have on the

world, whereas an extensive view maintains that sense of responsibility and thinks of media as extensions of the human senses. *Nightcrawler* critiques this amputative view of digital media as a mode of mediation that allows for the detachment of one's self from material facts and, more generally, the world. If we recognise that all media are extensions of ourselves, we may also recognize our own relationality to the subjects cinematic and televisual media capture. In doing so, media are not merely political instruments of misdirection. Rather, they activate ambiguous and intersubjective connections with others that provide moments of anxious openness otherwise hindered by neoliberal logics self-interest.

Released in 2014, *Nightcrawler* clearly precedes the Trump Administration's claims of "fake news", yet it sheds light on a different facet of neoliberal violence from which such claims redirect our attention. In Gilroy's film, Lou Bloom is introduced to us as an unemployed thief who steals industrial materials from private properties and sells them to construction contractors. Unnervingly thin in his physique as he prowls the streets of Los Angeles in an aging automobile, Lou soon discovers a pair of stringers, or nightcrawlers, recording the death and carnage of the city and selling the footage to local television news stations. Inspired, Lou enters this line of freelance work, purchasing some basic equipment from a pawn shop, namely a digital camera and a police scanner. For Lou, in gathering the footage for KWLA, the diegetic news station that forms a working agreement with him, he contributes to the construction of daily "fake news", or narrativized images of the city's dead, dying, and wounded.

This violence is the foundation on which the Trump's Administration delineations of mass media are built; however, it is often repressed by the immediate implications of Trump's use of the phrase. For Trump, media outlets that actively criticise him or his administration are fake, and his public proclamations of "fake news" serve as attempts to delegitimise certain news sources, like CNN and *The New York Times*, or news discourse, such

as White House dysfunction, the Trump-Russia Dossier, and his administration's plans to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. Trump's deployment of these claims has not escaped critical academic attention. According to Farkas and Schou (2018), the phrase "fake news" acts as a floating signifier within hegemonic struggles for conceptions of truth. As Farkas and Schou (2018, p. 308) argue, the phrase "is meant as a frontal attack on traditional core values of journalistic practice, such as critical investigations of those holding power". Trump's perversions of the epistemological certainty promised by news media remind us of television news' struggles with balancing spectacle and information before 2016.

If "fake news", as used by Trump, signifies a failing mass media in its struggle for hegemonic truths, *Nightcrawler's* "fake news" signifies the neoliberal violence that links fakeness with the digital and the desired production of fear made manifest by this relationship. KWLA's Nina Romina (Rene Russo), after purchasing her first collection of footage from Lou, describes perfectly the object the film's "fake news" signifies. She states, "we find our viewers are more interested in urban crime creeping into the suburbs. What that means, is a victim, or victims, and white, preferably well-off, injured at the hands of the poor or a minority" (Gilroy, 2014). She goes on to say footage of automotive accidents are also acceptable, so long as the content is "graphic". KWLA's sensational narrative, that of the white, private suburbs' suffering under a fake threat of urbanity, characterized by Nina as non-white and disorderly, is "fake news". Yet, Trump's use of the term exclusively in the political realm actively ignores the very real implications of the media's violence. *Nightcrawler*, therefore, reminds us of the fear associated with the digital, and, in some suggestive shots throughout the film, looks *to* and *at* us for a new ethics of care in our aesthetics.

Nightcrawler substantiates the relationship between the digital and the fake through its diegetic depiction of media voyeurism. Many of the technologies on which Lou relies are digital, including his cameras, police

scanner, and computer. Such devices, for some film and media scholars, always remain at a distance from reality, rendering their abilities to convey realism impossible. According to Prince (2004), digital video's default wide-angle format, sharp definition, and near-perfect crispness deaden the potential for realism that remains unique to analog film. Digital media, in this view, struggle to hide their inauthenticity, or their fakeness. Furthermore, Prince asserts, because the digital operates by wide-angle image capture and deep focus, digital media thereby deviate from the ethical significance of those same aesthetic choices as applied to the analog. Not only, then, is the digital fake, but it is also devoid of ethical expression and thus conventionally evil, a vision of evil for which I do not argue. Lou engenders Prince's codelike sharpness of the digital and the evil sense of remove it permits. In one particular dissolve near the film's start, a close-up shot of Lou's face briefly merges with a close-up shot of his just off-center police scanner and computer screen [see Figure 1]. The brief superimpositions of Bloom merging with police scanner, human with technology, and Prince's assertion of digital as fake suggest Lou's inhuman and fake digitality fuel neoliberal self-interest, violence, and public fear.



Figure 1: Lou archiving his first video recording onto his computer, 00:22:44

One need not look too far back into television news history to locate the industry's indebtedness to a neoliberal ethos of self-interest and market expansion. News coverage has, as of late, become more about cutting costs and garnering a large viewership rather than promoting national and international awareness. As Robert McChesney (2003) points out, the budget-cutting practices imposed upon contemporary journalism under neoliberalism, and the resulting reliance on alternate modes of funding from advertising, renders the industry more susceptible to corporate interest. Contemporary mass media outlets refocus their resources toward decreasing labor costs, often relying on contract workers who are paid by project rather than by regular salary. Contract workers occupy an intermediary position within the neoliberal labor paradigm, which ultimately enables corporations to disavow ethical responsibility for the financial security of contracted employees and maximize their flows of revenue. Furthermore, because they are beholden to the wishes of advertisers, corporate media often sensationalise their news content, using entertainment value rather than informational value to drive advertising revenue gained from public viewership.

In addition to the reorganisation of news media labor under neoliberalism, which paves the way for unethical reporting and uncaring narratives, *Nightcrawler* also suggests the problems with television news do not solely rest on the back of the media industry. Rather, the film is critical of the voyeurism of public viewership. Writing for *The Conversation*, Lauren Rosewarne (2013) states the success of news stories about terrorism and shootings relies partly on the viewer's consumption of them. Because television news personalises a tragedy by inviting discussants to provide eye witness testimony of an event, the discussion maintains a relevance to the general public. In this way, as Rosewarne suggests, television news solidifies a tragedy's position within domestic spaces and encourages a morbid voyeurism among viewers. Although she sees this move by mass media as an object of disgust and perversity, she leaves her readers in wonder with her

final sentiment. Despite the reality conveyed by emotional and physical wounds inflicted upon bystanders, mass media merely present to audiences an opportunity for sadism rather than information. Rosewarne (2013) concludes, “That CNN is doing it, however, somehow makes it seem less perverse”, thus implying CNN’s supposed reliability as a resource for factual information mutes the voyeuristic viewership its coverage of tragedy encourages.

Taken together, McChesney’s and Rosewarne’s arguments of the neoliberal news industry and public viewership put into sharp relief *Nightcrawler*’s critique of this industry’s perpetuation digital media voyeurism, crisis, and precarity. McChesney and Rosewarne reveal a contract worker’s livelihood as always precarious, in crisis, teetering on accident, and predicated on the failure of neoliberalism to supply secure employment. In *Nightcrawler*, these are the very themes Lou is encouraged to shoot in order to perpetuate KWLA’s ethos of fear. Victims of traffic accidents and house shootings are not safe from Lou’s gaze or KWLA’s desire. As Nina explains to Lou after his first sale of footage to the station, it is best to “think of our newscast as a screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut” (Gilroy, 2014). Although hyperbolic, Nina’s comments provide the news’ sensationalism with a bodily force whose screams ought not be ignored and spread anxiety throughout the diegetic Los Angeles. Such a force, like the contract worker’s livelihood, is always precarious, in crisis, and teetering on accident. And, because neoliberal news relies on immaterial, fake labor relations between employer and worker that are always in crisis and teetering on accident, digital media is often conflated with and used to emphasise these anxieties. In this way, digital media are active agents of amputative voyeurism that perpetuate the labor relations, in which they are intertwined. However, I argue this need not be the case. Positioning neoliberal contract labor and neoliberal aesthetics, demonstrated by *Nightcrawler*’s character and form respectively, as institutions with mirroring logics opens a space for reconsideration. In this

space, one finds an entangling of aesthetics, which presents a crisis of representation for the spectator.

By plugging into the digital processes of the contemporary news industry, Lou adopts an amputative, voyeuristic eye encouraged by the digital camera and the news industry. For McLuhan, media extend our bodily senses further into the world; however, when one ignores the medium and pays attention to content, he or she severs, or amputates, the connection between self and media. Not only does Lou assume this narcissism, but he also leverages the unreciprocated look of voyeurism as a means for power. Nearly a third of the way through the film, Lou and his partner Rick arrive at the scene of a car crash. To capture the wreckage, Lou runs to record the damage from a higher vantage point. Frustrated by a lack of visibility, he rearranges the *mise-en-scene*, dragging the dead body into better lighting and retaking his vantage point to continue his amputative voyeurism. This time, the film captures him in a medium shot, as he raises his camera off-screen, and severing his hands by the film's frame [see Figure 2]. The car crash victim cannot look back, thereby granting Lou voyeuristic amputative power in his look through digital media. Though he was once left powerless in a neoliberal economic system, Lou now embodies its logics of self-interest and exceptionalism.



Figure 2: Lou lifting his camera to capture his crime scene re-arranged, 00:41:52

Lou's lack of care for his subjects, and the lack of reciprocity for Lou's look, speaks to the issue of ethical television journalism. Film and media theorist Vivian Sobchack (2004, p. 254), in her discussion of filming death in the documentary mode, identifies the "professional gaze" as a mode of looking that requires journalists to evaluate their own ethical values to determine when or if they should intervene. According to Sobchack (2004, p. 255), "[t]he professional gaze is marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and *machinelike competence* in the face of an event that seems to call for further and more human response". Lou Bloom had more than one chance to intervene and provide support, such as calling for help when he films a wealthy victim of a shooting suffering and groaning in pain. Bloom lacks empathy for human beings. If anything, Bloom enjoys looking at these victims. His footage provides a socio-sexual pleasure for him, and he even monitors his progress by watching the broadcast of his footage the morning it airs on television.

News, in this configuration, as well the reality it purports to communicate, become more about the consistency of narrative, the foisting of power, and the eliciting of viewer emotions rather than serving a larger democratic purpose as an informational service. Lou's efforts, then, are conventionally evil, because they capitalize on the viewer's voyeuristic desire to know their surroundings yet see it from a distance. However, if what is digital and fake is evil, and this evilness delegitimizes the validity of digital/fake content, then one must turn toward medium for reconciliation. As Fuller and Goffey (2018, p. 5) argue, all media are evil precisely because they create "a troubling opacity and thickness in the relations of which they are a part, with an *active* capacity of their own to shape or manipulate the things or people with which they come into contact". A medium's materiality does not determine its truthful or false relationship with reality, as Prince's contention of digital video does. Instead, it is our indeterminate, affective, and essentially bodily relationship with media that determines its validity. That is,

media as extensions of our bodily senses, emphasize an opaque and thick relationality with a mediated subject that activates ethics through ambiguity.

Returning to *Nightcrawler*, when one looks to film form, one sees the film's entangled aesthetics, since it, too, relies on digital cinematography and risks the same amputative voyeurism wielded by Lou. For most of the film's nighttime scenes, Gilroy and cinematographer Robert Elswitt choose to shoot on digital with the Arri Alexa. Digital cameras, according to Elswitt (Desowitz, 2014) are particularly suited for capturing dimly lit environments, and the Arri Alexa even adds a "dreamy glow" to its footage. In this digital glow, Gilroy himself captures the death and carnage of Los Angeles that forms the content of the morning news. This dreaminess is best demonstrated by the film's opening sequence, during which bright electric guitars and crystalline long shots of the LA cityscape seductively lure the viewer into an uncanny world, at once promising safety while withholding its threat. By contrast, the film's daytime scenes are shot on analog, thus grounding these scenes in conventional analog realism by way of its grain. The digital's promise to "see into the distance", as Elswit (2014) states, also conceals its apparent threat to realism's stability. The digital's dream, then, is a threat cloaked in seductive, seemingly unknowable darkness, ultimately posing the dreamy digital as an imminent threat to the authentic analog.

In his deployment of Steadicam, Gilroy establishes an almost-but not quite relationship between the viewer and Bloom. This enables us, according to film and media scholar Amy Rust, to oscillate between identification with viewer and an extra-filmic body. For Rust (2016, p. 154), the Steadicam establishes two-way almost-but not quite relationship by combining the first and third person perspectives. Discussing the emergence and use of Steadicam in the 1970s, she argues this device forms a near-identification between spectator and character and spectator and camera, and "underscores and undermines the stability and freedom for which it is widely touted". Instead, in its instability, it draws together freedom and

responsibility to supply an ecological ethic, as she terms it; that is, by immersing spectators into other worlds, and, I suggest, especially those uncanny such as *Nightcrawler's* diegesis, the device demands care for its subjects. Rust's ecological ethic is similar to evil media's ethico-aesthetic sensibility proposed by Fuller and Goffey. If evil media make room for ambiguity in otherwise determinate conceptions of mediation, then, I contend, they can do the same for the representation offered by digital cinema and television news alike. I suggest evil digital media, although easily manipulated in structures of power such as the news industry by way of the ambiguities they introduce, can also demand care for the subjects they mediate.

Turning back to *Nightcrawler* and its car crash scene, Gilroy juxtaposes the amputative-voyeuristic hand-held camera with the care-inducing Steadicam. In *Nightcrawler's* car crash scene, the Steadicam operator moves with Lou and makes subtle gestures to move away, though it struggles to do so completely [see Figure 3]. The Steadicam's attempts to pull away from Lou, to fulfill its promise for viewer-camera identification as proposed by Rust, is disrupted and often disallowed by the film's adherence to conventional editing. This moment reveals *Nightcrawler's* cinematographic ethical ambivalence: The film at once yearns to distance itself from Lou through its cinematography and also desires the voyeuristic fakeness the digital supposedly promises. Elswitt's digital dreamy glow implies *Nightcrawler's* world is a desired dream and a grotesque nightmare, lulling the viewer in its affective ebbs and flows. Gilroy, then, cannot fully return his critique of Lou to his own embrace of the digital because his film reveals that both digital cinema and digital broadcast news rely on this sensational, fake dream. Still, this does not further delegitimize the digital's potential to elicit ethical care. In fact, the uncertainty provided by *Nightcrawler's* entangled aesthetics provides us a moment of critical reflection.



Figure 3: The Steadicam operator stands apart from Lou as he assesses the car crash scene, 00:40:50

We have reached a moment, it seems, when our modes of representation are so homogenous it becomes impossible to disentangle fact from fiction. *Nightcrawler*, then, leaves us in unease and uncertainty, and therefor adds to our anxiety of the digital and risks abetting the self-interested logics of neoliberal media. However, it is in this anxiety, this undecidability, and this evilness, that we find a sense of the real in digital mediation in our post-truth era. The real, rather than being a construction that promises material certainty, may deceive us in our own looks outward. Toward *Nightcrawler*'s end, we see Lou and Nina negotiating their final sale of the film, each facing the other in profile in a close-up shot. Their sexually euphemistic language finally puts the film's preoccupations with voyeurism in full thrust. Yet, in the space between, Rick stares at us as his life drifts away [see Figure 4], thus locking the audience into a tension. The images Lou and Nina exploit look back at us, a look that contrasts Lou's evil stare through KWLA's television monitors in its demand for our attention, begging for empathy [see Figure 5]. It is in these looks from Rick and Lou, one pleading while the other warning, that lay Gilroy's call for a new "ethico-aesthetic sensibility" (Fuller and Goffey, 2014) in our modes of representation. We must choose between the seduction of an amputative-voyeurism that

perpetuates neoliberal falsehoods and a call for a new ecological ethic in the digital, to borrow Rust's term. Advocating for the latter, we find that what is fake, digital, and evil might help us to pull away from the dizzying sensations of news, and instead push toward a better, careful journalism.

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Figure 4: Rick stares at the viewer through a KWLA camera monitor, 01:47:01



Figure 5: Lou stares at the viewer through a KWLA camera monitor, 00:36:46

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