



## If It Bleeds, It Leads

A Review of

*Nightcrawler* (2014)

by Dan Gilroy (Director)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038571>

Reviewed by

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What is evil? If one asks the general public, responses about Adolf Hitler and the 9/11 hijackers will likely predominate. But evil is far more complex and nuanced. Phillip Zimbardo (2007) defined evil as “intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others—or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf” (p. 5). Killing a person is clearly included, but what about watching someone die and doing nothing to help? Does it matter if the observer is a journalist, filming the scene? Those viewing the dark and powerful film *Nightcrawler* will need to grapple with those questions and confront what it means to crave such bloodshed on the morning news.

In the film, Jake Gyllenhaal embodies the role of Louis Bloom, a hapless drifter who practices his job pitch and spouts off motivational quotes while trading stolen goods for cash. Early in the film, Bloom happens upon a devastating car crash and watches a freelance cameraman (portrayed by Bill Paxton) film emergency personnel dragging a body from the burning wreckage. Mesmerized that one could profit from such human suffering, Bloom obtains a camera and police scanner and starts to film the nightly tragedies that befall the citizens of Los Angeles. His lack of moral qualms and ability to cross ethical lines quickly propel his career. A local news producer (portrayed by Rene Russo, in a triumphant return to film) soon becomes dependent on his clips of bloodshed and brutality to improve the ratings of her morning show.

To say that Gyllenhaal transforms into the dark, amoral Bloom is an understatement. Having lost at least 20 pounds for the role, his gaunt face exudes desperation and his shriveled frame is a stark contrast to his musculature in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Newell, 2010). Filmgoers should rejoice at that film’s failure, as a successful franchise might have forced Gyllenhaal to focus more on cacophonous swashbuckling and less on seeking out daring roles in *End of Watch* (Ayer, 2012), *Prisoners* (Villeneuve, 2013), and now *Nightcrawler*, which might give him his second Oscar nomination. It is also of note that Gyllenhaal, at 33, is the same age as Robert DeNiro was when he took on the iconic role of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976).

Comparing Bloom and Bickle is not just an exercise in assessing an actor’s ability to lose weight to portray a dark, desperate man who thrives by driving around at night. Instead,

both characters are men of their respective times: loners with strong beliefs about what they must do to succeed. In 1976, Bickle, a Vietnam War veteran, drives a taxi cab by night while struggling with mental health issues. The occurrence of such issues as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in veterans has led to important programs of research in psychology to understand both risk factors (King, King, Foy, Keane, & Fairbank, 1999) and negative outcomes such as aggression (Sullivan & Elbogen, 2014). The mental health issues faced by Bloom, however, are a heavily exaggerated expansion of psychological research on millennials who might struggle to find jobs. Research has found that millennials generally value individualism, have high self-esteem, and seek rapid advancement (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2012). Bloom exudes individualism and thinks very highly of himself, doing whatever it takes to advance, not allowing the law, ethics, or morality to temper his meteoric rise in the media industry.

In one upsetting scene, Bloom arrives at a horrific car accident. Finding that the driver's lifeless body is not best placed for a perfect video to sell to the morning news, he rearranges the scene to get the man's body, the car's destruction, and the cityscape of Los Angeles in the same frame. It is not so much the abhorrent act of treating a critically injured man as a prop, but the glint of joy in Bloom's eye and macabre smirk that could cause a viewer's stomach to churn. The musical score swells in a way usually reserved for the most passionate scene in a romantic film to show Bloom's epiphany moment. Bloom commits even more heinous acts in the final third of the film, but they will not be spoiled here.

So, are these evil acts by an evil man? Baumeister and Vohs (2004) stated, "there is evil aplenty" in the world, but "hardly anyone recognizes himself or herself as evil" (p. 85). When Bloom talks about his own actions, he clearly exceeds the limit of what journalists can do at the scene of a crime (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996), but is he evil? With a few exceptions, Bloom does not generally enjoy his morbid actions; he just considers everyone as stepping stones on his way to the success he feels he deserves. But what about Russo's news producer, who is so blunt about her "if it bleeds, it leads" mantra that she will allow stomach-turning scenes on the morning news? Are her career-focused actions any more or less evil than Bloom's? Although she is not directly perpetuating Bloom's actions, she is the authority that encourages him (via hefty paychecks), not caring about the means as long as the end product results in good ratings.

However, what is most upsetting might not be the acts Bloom performs to get the best footage, but why the general public has such a fervent desire to watch such violence. What does it say about us that our morbid curiosities lead us to viewing such acts? And what does viewing such violence do to us as a society (see Cruz & Bushman, 2014, for an overview)? Returning to Zimbardo's definition of evil, the viewing public, in effect, might be the ones encouraging or perpetuating Bloom and the news producers to do such potentially evil acts on their behalf and rewarding them with high ratings and rapt attention. Bloom and the news producers revel in the dark side of the human experience and know many others will watch and lead them to the success they so desperately seek. The most horrific part of *Nightcrawler* might not be Bloom or his actions, but the need for a cautionary tale about our current society's demand for violence. And, for doing that and more, *Nightcrawler* is a thrilling success.

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