

Character Identification in *Nightcrawler*

Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler* presents a character, Lou Bloom, who is a seeming sociopathic man in need of a job. Throughout the course of the movie, the audience becomes aligned with this unconventional character, even though most of the things he does are against our moral standards. The movie plays with both the range and depth of information presented to the audience as well as the mise-en-scene to create an odd stigma within the audience's relationship with both the central character, Lou, and most of the minor characters. As the story is told in Lou's perspective, an audience finds itself more aligned with him, as it is he who takes us through the story. Lou Bloom's narration in *Nightcrawler* distorts the audience's ability to form allegiance with the central character, while also forcing us to identify with his struggle.

From the beginning of the film, we notice that it is Lou Bloom who will be our "narrator." The range of information is restricted to any scene which he is in; he will be the one to drive the plot. The movie is basically Lou's story, so every scene he is in is important to the story. From this, we are automatically aligned to him, as we will understand that everything he does becomes a catalyst for what is to happen next. For example, in the very first scene we see him cutting a fence and when the officer asks him what he is doing, we see that he lies and also assaults the officer. This scene offers us two things about this character in the film: Lou Bloom is the one that we will follow for the entirety of the film and that he is most likely a mentally or psychologically unstable character. Through this scene alone, we automatically recognize the kind of character that he is, and even though he seems to be a little psychotic, we will still align ourselves with him just to advance the plot. The movie forces us to do so and we are influenced to acknowledge everything he does and accept it.

The psychology of our main character, however, poses an even bigger question to the context of the story; we wonder whether Lou's mental instability provides for an unreliable form of narration. Because we are aligned with Lou, we see everything through his eyes and his point of view. However, the depth of information is subjective and does not let us inside his head. The movie does not allow us to hear his thoughts or see any flashbacks that will build his character; instead, we are given a very flat character who has only one way of seeing things and that is the way the audience will see it because he is, essentially, the protagonist of the story. Everything that happens to him and everything that he does is given to us at face value and we have to make the choice of whether or not to accept what we receive. In this viewpoint, whatever happens to him will trigger us to feel a certain emotion for him, whether or not it is something that we would usually react to in the same way. We know that he is in need of a job, so whenever he gets turned down we feel sorry for him and we can relate to his issues.

The range and depth of information in the plot forces us to reconcile with Lou; even though we know that the majority of the things he does are morally wrong, we have to stand with him to advance the plot. However, we do not have to agree with what he does. The small amount of allegiance we have for Lou comes from the fact that we are forced to see everything with him and since he carries us along, we subconsciously want him to be safe and advance the plot. For example, even though we know that Lou steals the fence and the potholes at the beginning of the movie, the fact that the man at the garage turns down his job offer makes us feel sorry for Lou and we see the man as a bad person. In any other movie with the same scene, we would instead align ourselves with this man because we know that he is right not to hire a thief to his company. Regardless, in the case of this film we see and hear everything that Lou sees and hears so we are automatically inclined to understand what he is going through and to feel sympathy for him.

One of the most important ways that *Nightcrawler* distorts our view of the characters is from our recognition of Lou. The range of information we receive makes the audience think that maybe we have been given false identification of the minor characters. Because we are given everything through Lou's point of view, we are emotionally inclined to feel sorry for the things we think hurt him and categorize the characters that do it as unreliable and unsupportive to him. However, in *recognizing* Lou as a character, we can tell that he is psychologically unstable and that leads us to question his reliability as a narrator. We wonder, are the people he makes us see as incompetent and untrustworthy actually more relatable than him? For example, our first encounter with Joe makes us think that he is the enemy and that he is not to be trusted because at this point the audience believes that every characterization Lou makes is correct and that we have to trust him; however, we realize it is Lou who should not be trusted when we see him tamper with Joe's car and almost get him killed. At this, we immediately lose the little amount of allegiance we had left for Lou because we cannot agree with his actions in this scene and this allegiance falls with Joe, instead. Because we were aligned with Lou for the entire film, we were blind to the fact that maybe Lou had been wrong about some of the minor characters, but in the progression of the film we (the audience) almost build our own character that knows right and wrong and can identify Lou as an unreliable narrator. This is a very important in the scene when Lou lies to Rick to get him killed because the majority of our allegiance throughout the entire film is aligned with Rick; he is a homeless student who is need of money, so he immediately gains our sympathy. For the entirety of the film, we are on his side because he is the sidekick to our protagonist. In this scene, Lou loses all of the allegiance we had left for him because he basically kills Rick because he "took away his bargaining power." This scene verifies our characterization for Lou as a psychotic, sociopathic, self-absorbed liar who will do anything for

money and power. These scenes establish our characterization for each of the characters in regards to how the story is told (in Lou's perspective) and how the audience is influenced by this perspective and is therefore blinded to making any critical characterizations of our own.

Nightcrawler does a fantastic job at the distortion of establishing characters with the use of flow of story information and using the plot to connote the audience's progressive deterioration of the dependence on Lou as a reliable narrator.

From the beginning, we not only recognize Lou through flow of story information, but we also establish his character—and others—through mise-en-scene. Lou's mise-en-scene almost depends on the state of mind in which he is in. When he is acting like a normal person and is usually around other people, the lighting is brighter and there is more use of hard lights (i.e. sunlight and key, back and fill lights indoors). For example, when Joe is making Lou a job offer to work in another van for him, the lighting is bright and Lou has to act like a normal person with Joe as to not upset the balance of his character. However, whenever Lou is isolated in his apartment or doing his work (filming for the news or in even in the news station), the lighting is typically much darker. Backlights are used the most in scenes where only the side of his face is shown or we cannot see his face completely. The contrast between these two modes of lighting points to the dichotomy in Lou's character. We can tell that he is almost two-faced at this odd use of lighting because he has to pretend to be a normal person when it is lighter and when it becomes dark we are more questioning of Lou's character. The camera also exemplifies this polarity many times throughout the film, as it almost becomes a motif. In the scene where Lou is sitting outside, we see a cyclist lock his bike in the background and we think nothing of it.

The next scene cuts to him riding around a pawn shop on this very bike and the audience realizes that he stole it for profit. Automatically we see him as a thief who will do anything for

money, but the aforementioned shot also makes us realize another thing about Lou's character. While he is sitting on the bench, he seems to be very calm and collected and there is depth to the shot; the biker is in the background and Lou is in the foreground, which creates depth to both the shot and the character. The depth of field is the point in the film that we realize that there is more to Lou and that we cannot trust him because he is essentially two-faced; he presents himself as a normal person and a person in need, but in the background we know that he is uncaring of others and will always put himself first in order to gain profit. An interesting motif throughout the movie is Lou's hair; whenever he is about to commit a crime or film a scene, he pulls the top of his hair up into a ponytail, it pretty much sets the scene that he is about to do something illegal or he is trying to gain focus. Another motif that adds to Lou's character is his response to death or something brutal; even though he is the one to get Rick killed and also the one to cause Joe's car crash, he seems to have a hard time dealing with accidents, especially when they could affect him. In the scene where Rick and Lou are chasing the police car, the two cars get into an accident in front of them and Lou takes a deep breath and hold his breath; he does this a few times throughout the film and that leads us to wonder something else about his character. We wonder if there is a reason he does this that has to do with his psychology and builds another level to his character. Lou's mise-en-scene throughout the entire film creates a base for his character and personality for the audience to potentially align with and conform to in order to advance the plot.

The mise-en-scene for Nina and Lou is also very interesting; Nina serves as one of the driving forces of the plot, as she is the one who, in a way, employs Lou and provides him money. Whenever they are together, they are usually in a dark setting (the newsroom). This setting provides for the shady relationship that they have, which is potentially breaking broadcasting

rules by showing unearthly tapes on live television. The setting always seems to be intimate to highlight the relationship between these two characters. From this, we may think that their relationship is a key note in the development of Lou's character, but instead we just realize that Lou is constantly manipulating Nina to get what he wants so that she also gets what he wants. A "motif," in a way, is the camera shot that is presented to us whenever they are in conversation. In multiple scenes, for example when Lou is showing Nina the footage of the car chase, we have the two of them on either side of the screen with over the shoulder shots and they turn to face each other, giving us dark silhouettes with a backlight highlighting their faces. This provides for the establishment of their relationship and the strengthening of Lou's manipulative character.

Throughout the film, the flow of story information presents a dichotomy between real characterization and those presented to us by Lou's distorted state of mind. Since our perspective of events and other characters comes from Lou, we are inclined to go along with everything he says and does without realizing that it may all be wrong. Lou's character proves to be unreliable at the turning point, the scene when he breaks the mirror, because we realize that there is something more to his character and that all of the judgements that we have received from him came from him unreliable narration. After this scene, our allegiance for Lou is heightened but after his attacks on all of the other characters, he loses the little allegiance we had for him in the beginning and it is all gained by the ones he hurt (i.e. Joe and Rick) who did not have much of our allegiance in the beginning. *Nightcrawler* provides for a very different view of characterization through this different form of storytelling.