

Novel Formulary
Essay 1
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Which epistemological themes in *Don Quixote* relate to contemporary themes, and how?

In this essay, I will focus on the epistemological notion of critical thinking and its relation to moral actions in *Don Quixote*¹. I will be analysing the novel in comparison with the 2014 film *Nightcrawler*², in order to assess how these notions within the novel have persisted and evolved throughout the centuries. *Nightcrawler*, I argue, draws upon features and themes of *Don Quixote* in order to assert similar moral and epistemological messages, but in a modern age. Instead of chivalric fiction as a source of knowledge, we are given mass media in the 21st century. Both texts, I argue, portray and judge an *uncritical* consumption of knowledge. I will explore where and how the character of Don Quixote consumes chivalric literature to such an extent that it leads to unethical consequences. I will explore where and how *Nightcrawler* portrays a similar sequence, but in terms of mass media and the news. I will reach the conclusion that through a comparison of the texts, the epistemological messages of both are highlighted, and that *Nightcrawler* can be treated as a current interpretation of this aspect of *Don Quixote*. There are, of course, many and varied interpretations of *Don Quixote* and the theme of epistemology. I do not wish to suggest that the novel is simply a morality tale or a comment upon chivalric literature. Nonetheless, I focus on an interpretation of the novel which reads it as a comment upon Don Quixote's treatment of literature, as this allows for an insightful connection to be made with an issue I believe important in the 21st century, and which is brought to focus through an analysis of the influence of the novel on *Nightcrawler*.

¹ Migeul de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, tr. Edith Grossman. (New York: Ecco Press: 2003)

² *Nightcrawler*. (2014). [film] Directed by D. Gilroy. United States: Bold Films.

Don Quixote is a picaresque tale following the adventures of Don Quixote and his 'sidekick' Sancho. The course of the pair's adventures, and thus the novel itself, is grounded upon Don Quixote's consumption of chivalric literature. *Nightcrawler*, whilst created centuries apart from *Don Quixote*, contains key features of the novel. To provide a brief summary, the film follows the protagonist, Lou Bloom, who, akin with Don Quixote, is of the picaresque type. The viewers are guided through his various adventures. His character, like Don Quixote, is flawed and dishonest, but appealing, and his narrative perspective allows for a critique and undermining of the culture he is part of. Lou Bloom becomes a stringer; a freelance journalist, whose trade is to record video footage of crime and sell it to news broadcasts. Lou does this alongside his assistant, a younger, homeless man, called Rick. As Lou gets this job and becomes more successful, we see the attempts he will go to footage become increasingly unethical. His actions are portrayed as resulting from a demand from the general public, for news which is entertaining, as opposed to factually correct. The dramatic ending involves Lou getting Rick killed for the sake of a piece of footage. We can see the influence of *Don Quixote* on *Nightcrawler* in ways other than the picaresque form. Both use caricatural twins, a master and sidekick duo, as central characters. Both protagonists fictionalise their environments, by using rhetoric to manipulate and influence those around them. And both depict a process of an unquestioning consumption of some media form having detrimental consequences.

Such an analysis of a contemporary film like *Nightcrawler* is essential in our present climate of mass media and technology. Kenneth G. Johnson, in his 'Epistemology and Responsibility of the Mass Media' wrote a very apt analysis of mass media today: "Those whose language is amplified through the power of the mass media have a special responsibility to understand

the role of language structure, the process of communication, and the nature of their ‘knowing’.³ This is one of the messages stressed by *Nightcrawler* in its representation and critique of those who create and broadcast news. In broadcasting news on a public platform, and by the identification of what is shown as being ‘news’, these platforms are claiming to ‘know’. Moreover, Kenneth G. Johnson notes another apt argument from Nicholas Johnson, who pointed out the role of the audience in the consumption of news: “The problem is no longer availability but selection [...] Man’s efficiency and effectiveness is substantially dependent upon his ability to identify that which is relevant in the torrent of current and stored information. We are forced now to make conscious choice of what not to know.”⁴ What Nicholas Johnson rightly notes is the responsibility of those who consume news, not only those who communicate it, and the importance of distinguishing truth from fiction.

Thus, in comparing and analysing *Don Quixote* and *Nightcrawler* in their respective contexts, I will be focussing on a specific aspect of epistemology, hinted at by Kenneth Johnson and Nicholas Johnson: critical thinking. Within that, the importance of critical thinking in terms of assessing the reliability of an alleged authority of knowledge. B. Othanel famously defined critically thinking: “Now if we set about to find out what .. [a] statement means and to determine whether to accept or reject it, we would be engaged in thinking which, for lack of a better term, we shall call critical thinking.”⁵ Ennis further defined a critical thinker on eight counts, the ninth of which my argument will focus on: “characterised by proficiency in judging whether ... 9. An alleged authority is reliable.”⁶ When using the term ‘authority’, I

³ Kenneth G. Johnson. “Epistemology and Responsibility of the Mass Media”, in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2004) p.664

⁴ Kenneth G. Johnson. “Epistemology and Responsibility of the Mass Media”, in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2004) p.668

⁵ B. Othanel. Smith. “The Improvement of Critical Thinking,” *Progressive Education*, 30. (Mar. 1953), pp.129-134

⁶ Robert H. Ennis, “A Definition of Critical Thinking.” *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 17, no. 8, 1964, p. 600

will be taking a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary: “Power to influence action, opinion, or belief, or a party possessing it.” In *Nightcrawler*, I will be reading the news as an authority, and, in *Don Quixote*, chivalric literature as an authority.

Throughout the text of *Don Quixote*, notions of epistemology are referenced. Fictional chivalric literature is portrayed as an unquestioned knowledge authority from the perspective of Don Quixote. Creel, on discussing the ‘theoretical implications in Don Quixote’s Idea of Enchantment’ aptly noted that ‘Criticism generally recognizes that in the *Quixote* Cervantes explores the dual character of human nature and the ethical and aesthetic implications of the relationship between human being’s physiologically real and psychologically fantastic aspects.’⁷ Indeed, through a boundless and utterly unquestioning consumption of chivalric literature, Don Quixote fashions for himself a ‘psychologically fantastic[al]’ identity. The reader learns of this very early on in the novel. Page 21 notes, of Don Quixote, ‘the truth is that when his mind was completely gone ... it seemed reasonable and necessary to him, both for the sake of his honor and as a service to the nation, to become a knight errant and travel the world with his armor and his horse to seek adventures and engage in everything he had read that knights errant engaged in.’⁸ Not only does Don Quixote unquestionably accept the literature as truth, he goes further. He claims *himself* to be an authority, in choosing to live his life on these terms, and lecturing the likes of Sancho and his niece on the *reality* of his life and beliefs. This is evident in a conversation between him and Sancho: “I want you to realise that all the things I am doing are not jokes but very real; otherwise, I would be contravening the rules of chivalry that command us never to lie.”⁹ Moreover, Don Quixote himself shows

⁷ Bryant. L. Creel. “Theoretical Implications in Don Quijote’s Idea of Enchantment”, *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 12.1 (1992), p. 20

⁸ *Don Quixote*, p.21

⁹ *Don Quixote*, p.197

an awareness of the methods and importance of critical thought. When discussing various knights with his niece, he informs her “it is necessary for us to use our knowledge and discernment to distinguish between these two kinds of knights, so similar in names, so dissimilar in actions.”¹⁰ Despite this apparent awareness of the need to assess information by way of ‘discernment’, and a distinguishing of one thing from another, he does not apply it to his own life.

A similarly unquestioning attitude towards an authority which claims knowledge is evident in *Nightcrawler*. The character of Lou Bloom portrays an authority of the internet and television as a source of knowledge, as only eleven minutes into the film, Lou claims “I spend all my time of my computer.”¹¹ In addition, throughout the film, viewers are provided short scenes of Lou alone in his flat, doing nothing but watching the news on a large television. In turn, the first time we see Lou watching the news in his flat, the transition uses non-diegetic background sound of a multitude of news readers, speaking over the top of one another, giving the suggestion of the overwhelming presence of news in the lives of Lou and other characters. In addition, thirty-five minutes in, Lou tells Nina, the director of a news broadcasting service he wants to sell his footage too, that “Television and news may be something that I love, as well as something that I’m good at”.¹² The authority of the news is further shown through its relationship with the general public. When discussing what kind of footage Lou should be shooting, Nina tells him “we like crime... we find our viewers are more interested in urban crime creeping into the suburbs.”¹³ Later, when Lou has increased his skills as a stringer and acquired footage he knows to be of value due to its graphic and

¹⁰ *Don Quixote*, p.493

¹¹ *Nightcrawler*, 2014

¹² *Nightcrawler*, 2014

¹³ *Nightcrawler*, 2014

shocking nature, in persuading Nina to pay him enough for it, he reminds her ‘With this footage, people would turn to your channel for the story.’¹⁴ The fact that Lou tempts Nina with the reward of viewers ‘turn[ing] to your channel’ in order to get her to pay him for his footage indicates how much her job is defined by the viewers. These quotes suggest a dynamic between news service and viewer which ensures the medium of news remains an authority (it being something a citizen ‘turn[s] to’ regularly in order to be updated on the world around them), and that it is an authority because the viewers, by turning to it, allow it to be so.

In turn, as I previously mentioned in regards to Don Quixote, his lack of critical thought caused him to believe fiction to be fact. The general, news watching public of *Nightcrawler* do the same. A clearer example of Nina and the other news broadcasters choosing to air a fictitious version of news over fact can be seen right at the end of the film. After Lou succeeds in recording a particularly dramatic and shocking scene, another member of the team (Fred) informs Nina of facts behind the crime which detract from the drama of it. He tells her it was a ‘drug robbery’ as opposed to a ‘home invasion’; the type of news which, according to Nina, receives the highest viewer numbers. As a result, she tells him:

Nina: “It detracts from the story.”

Fred: “It *is* the story.”¹⁵

Here then, we see Nina deliberately choosing to ignore a fact for the sake of a more compelling narrative. It is also important that the word ‘story’ is repeated, as it strongly connotes *fiction*, as opposed to fact. By the very fact that more people view news which is

¹⁴ *Nightcrawler*, 2014

¹⁵ *Nightcrawler*, 2014

hyperbolised or manipulated in some way, it is clear the general public lack the critical ability to discern between truth and fiction, or simply do not care to distinguish.

Having established that both *Don Quixote* and *Nightcrawler* correspondingly portray a lack of critical thought leading to a misguided acceptance of a source as an authority of knowledge, I will analyse where, in both texts, this acceptance has negative ethical implications. In part one of *Don Quixote*, the protagonist's delusional chivalric identity causes him to seriously harm others. He meets a barber, and, believing he is a knight with a helmet (which is his barber's basin), he attacks him with a 'lowered pike, intending to run him through'.¹⁶ In addition, he attacks someone who talks negatively of Lady Dulcinea. The quote reads: 'he could not endure hearing such blasphemies said against his Lady Dulcinea; he raised his lance ... struck him twice with blows so hard he knocked him to the ground, and if Dorotea had not called to him and told him to stop, he no doubt would have killed him then and there'.¹⁷ Whilst these scenes can be read comically in the novel, random and violent attacks are undoubtedly unethical, as is killing, or almost killing, an innocent man. The direct connection between Don Quixote's delusions (he was upset about verbal attacks against the fictional 'Lady Dulcinea') and violence ('He could not endure ... [so] he raised his lance') portray his violence outbursts as being a consequence of his acceptance of chivalric literature as a source of knowledge.

A comparable array of unethical and shocking actions can be seen in *Nightcrawler*. Nina's broadcast service receive footage from Lou of a house where a multiple homicide has just taken place.. Lou enters the house and films the victims in graphic detail, then leaves. The

¹⁶ *Don Quixote*, p.154

¹⁷ *Don Quixote*, p.255

dialogue between Nina and her team at this point is particularly telling. Nina asks her colleague:

“How much of this can we show?”

Colleague: “Legally?”

Nina: [sarcastically] “No, morally ... of course legally.”

Then later in the same conversation:

Nina: “Oh, for Christ sake, are we breaking the law by showing this?”

Colleague: “....Block the faces, don’t give out the exact address, do that .. I guess I .. I don’t know... I wouldn’t think so, no.”

Fred: “Journalistically and ethically?”

Nina: “This isn’t Hertford.”

Fred “We are beyond all broadcast standards.”

Nina “Have you seen the overnights? [points at screen] I’ll risk the fine.”¹⁸

It is clearly immoral to broadcast on the news the dead bodies and home of people who have not even yet been identified by their families, or their families perhaps even notified.

Nonetheless, Nina and the others show this footage, because, simply “Have you seen the overnights?” They care more about meeting the viewer’s needs.

Lou Bloom is a morally flawed character throughout the film. There are particular instances, however, where he is goes to appallingly unethical lengths for the sake of news. In the formerly mentioned house Lou enters and films after a multiple homicide, he films, but does not assist, a man who alive and moaning for help. He tells Rick “One of the people in the house last night, was alive. I cut that part out. I also cut out the men leaving in their car.”¹⁹

¹⁸ *Nightcrawler*, 2014

¹⁹ *Nightcrawler*, 2014

What this conversation leads on to is another unethical action on Lou's part. Despite seeing and filming the men who committed the homicide, and their number plate, he does not inform the police. Instead, he tracks them down, with the intention of following them to a populous area, where he will then call the police and film their (hopefully, for Lou) dramatic arrest:

Rick: "You gotta call the cops."

Lou: "And we will, at the right time... We'll find a more interesting place to film the arrest."

Rick: "Like where?"

Lou: "Anywhere we want.... a better or more populated neighbourhood. He's a violent and wanted criminal, I can't believe he's just going to peacefully surrender."²⁰

Evident, again, are Lou's attempts to create a fictionalised, edited version of the 'truth'; an arrest, orchestrated by himself. What he intends is evidently ethically problematic as he hopes for civilians to be hurt or killed. This does come to fruition. Rick, alongside a number of police officers, are killed. Bearing in mind my previous analysis, it is clear that the characters in *Nightcrawler* commit unethical acts *for* the viewers, who, *because* they lack critical thought when it comes to media consumption, *prefer* news which is shocking and graphic, not necessarily, but predominantly, in opposition to what is true.

It is important that, as a novel, *Don Quixote* mocks and displays a self-consciousness of itself as a genre in critiquing literature as an authority of knowledge, through such features as its epistolary form, and the discussion of a book of Don Quixote's exploits at the beginning of Part Two. In doing so, the text immediately directs its own readers towards an awareness of the act of reading, a notion noted aptly in Friedman's 'The Critical Frames of Don Quixote',

²⁰ *Nightcrawler*, 2014

who wrote that “Don Quixote invites the reader to penetrate the frame, to analyze, to recognize ironies and interpretive conundrums. Reading and writing are what Don Quixote is about, but, despite the obvious emphasis on literary in-games, internal references, and comic modalities, the preoccupation with the nature of narrative relates to the foundations of epistemology.”²¹ As a film, *Nightcrawler* displays a self-consciousness of itself as a medium not dissimilar to the visual one it critiques, and in doing so, more effectively imparts its caution. Throughout the film there is non-diegetic background music, the mood of which is jarring. For example, mid-way through the film, Lou arrives at the scene of a car accident before the police. He comes across the dead body of a man, and, in order to get the best possible camera shot, he physically moves the body so it is under more aesthetically pleasing light. The music during this disturbing scene is hopeful, successful and congratulatory. As a picaresque hero, this music encourages the viewer to root for Lou, to see his actions from his perspective, as a positive moment for his career. It makes the immoral protagonist appear attractive. Further, it places the viewer in the position of the society depicted in the film. The society who *does* demand, watch and *enjoy* the news footage Lou produces through actions such as these. This is effectively done through the form of *Nightcrawler* as a film.

In analysing *Nightcrawler* as influenced by and in line with *Don Quixote*, it is evident that the consumption of knowledge is an epistemological theme which is pertinent both in 17th century Spain and in 21st century USA. With the depiction of chivalric literature and the news, both reveal authorities of knowledge which are taken to be true, but which are in reality at best, hyperbolised, and, at worst, utterly fictitious. Don Quixote consumes chivalric literature with an utter lack of critical thought, and, as a consequence, is unable to distinguish

²¹ Edward H. Friedman, “The Critical Frames of “Don Quixote””, *Confluencia*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (FALL 1998), University of Northern Colorado, p. 4

between truth and fiction, and, as a further consequence, commits immoral acts.

Nightcrawler, through Lou and Nina, reveals the fictitious nature of much of what we call ‘news’, and shows us a general public who consume it much like Don Quixote consumes books; uncritically and with no concern for truth, with equally immoral consequences.

Nightcrawler, then, acknowledges this important epistemological theme within *Don Quixote*, and applies and furthers it in a modern climate in which an increased awareness of the nature, communication and consumption of knowledge, is vital.

Word Count: 3,272

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