

## Mikey and Nicky (1976)

Why take care of someone you're going to kill? *Mikey and Nicky* presents a world where feelings dominate over action. The main crux of the movie rests on two characters who are overly familiar with each other, who trust each other and rely on each other. The movie begins with Nicky (John Cassavetes) confiding in Mikey (Peter Falk) about his neurosis, letting him in when he wouldn't anyone else, calling Mikey for help and letting him take charge. Mikey, in return, seems to want to watch out for Nicky. He makes sure Nicky shaves and eats crackers to help his ulcer, both things that aren't necessary in order to put someone in the right place at the right time for a hit. Additionally, taking care of Nicky in such a state isn't easy, and so Mikey's dedication to actually making sure that Nicky is okay seems without ulterior motive. This is why it's so complicated that Mikey is trying to set Nicky up. He is talking to a dead man, a best friend, and someone who badly screwed up, all at the same time.

The film is also interested in what effect these friendships and emotions have on people. Specifically, the movie returns a couple of times to the idea that Mikey and Nicky were childhood friends and explores what that means. Nicky quietly realizes that Mikey is setting him up, and so takes him to his mother's grave to talk about death and history. It's unclear whether Nicky is trying to rub salt in the wound, change Mikey's mind, or simply spend his last moments with an old friend. It's probably some mixture of the three. But their conversations touch on something human and philosophical. Even though Mikey can explain in every detail something that happened to him as a child - what his father was like, who his brother was - his wife will never have the same understanding of events as someone who also lived through it. When Nicky dies, that shared experience of the watch and the father and the brother also dies, a fact that Mikey willfully doesn't want to deal with for most of the film. He claims that he can remember it all himself; but remembering isn't the same as knowing.

Making a gangster film that prioritizes emotions, though, makes it messy. They get lost and turned around, they talk about their kids. Elaine May's films are always messy, because they focus on people and the ways in which they deal with the world, as well as themselves. She is constantly returning to mundane details of life while simultaneously turning them on their head. I don't want to say she's being 'realistic,' but there is an emphasis on the everyday lies and trials and situations that people constantly must deal with. Lenny of *Heartbreak Kid* doesn't get to be totally swept away in a new affair without feeding his wife increasingly elaborate and implausible stories. In *New Leaf* the mundanity also centers on the people themselves, in that both Henry and Henrietta are rich, but not sophisticated. In *Mikey & Nicky*, the gangsters aren't mad James Cagney heroes going out in a blaze of glory, but overwrought, highly emotional neurotic messes with ulcers and co-dependent relationships. It's especially messy because the stakes are so high. Nicky knows he's going to die, and Mikey knows it, but they know it in different ways.

Nicky's emotionality overflows into the movie, he picks fights with everyone and runs every block. Mikey both wants to get it over with, but can't help but indulge Nicky every time they make a

new stop. At the same time, it feels like the outside world, and other people, keep interfering with them. The fight at the bar comes across as a culture jam, that the pair have wandered into somewhere they never belonged in the first place but Nicky is too obstinate to back down. Similarly, the argument with the bus driver sets boundaries for the two not to cross, but they force themselves out of it anyway. They are equally beset and set upon the outside. It makes sense, in a way, as Nicky is both crumbling from the inside and outside.

This pattern changes in the apartment scene with Nellie. The extended uncomfortableness spreads its burden all over the place - from Nicky's coerciveness, to Mikey sitting on a trash can in the background, to Nellie justifiably biting Mikey's lip. There doesn't seem to be a lack of communication as there is a not caring of what is being said. There's a certain amount of trust that gets broken, but whether that trust was ever there to begin with, or how and why exactly that trust disappears, is unclear. It's as though Nicky is coming up with a new way to torture Mikey, while also trying to be his version of generous - another way that he's both a good and terrible person at the same time. The fight in the street afterward lets the characters get to the bottom of their grievances with each other. Nicky ignores Mikey's calls, Mikey is always around to help and gets nothing in return. While this fight gives depth to their relationship and history, what makes it really complicated is how the characters are finding ways to deflect or reroute their feelings.

The two have been put in a position where they're not allowed to be on the same side anymore, and conflict brings out the best and worst of themselves. But again, it proves how well Mikey and Nicky know each other. Nicky pays enough attention to Mike's speech to call him 'The Echo,' and even though it's hurtful, it's also accurate. Mikey gets upset over Nicky smashing his father's watch, but also knows that it comes from Nicky understanding what the watch really means. He knows he's getting the watch because Mikey figures it would be a nice final gesture. The scene has to end with the two of them splitting up or else they'd be stuck with each other forever. In another way, leading someone to their death is the most intimate thing you can do with them.