



6-29-2016

The Invention of Lying

William L. Blizek

University of Nebraska at Omaha, wblizek@unomaha.edu

Recommended Citation

Blizek, William L. (2016) "The Invention of Lying," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13/iss2/13>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

The Invention of Lying

Abstract

This is a review of *The Invention of Lying* (2009).

The Invention of Lying is in many ways an asinine film. The humor within it depends less on the fact that human beings cannot lie and more on the fact that they seem to blurt out whatever is on their minds. The premise of the story itself is juvenile: a man is crazy about a woman who is very shallow and superficial – she’s mostly interested in money and the things she can buy and in having good looking children. But, this is a comedy, so we do not require that it be believable or that it all makes sense. Yet, within the shallow basis of this film, deeper meaning can be found.

Mark Bellison (Ricky Gervais) is the only person on earth, as far as we know, who is actually capable of lying. His lying, something he claims to have invented, provides much of the humor in the film. But, as Mark’s mother lay dying, she tells Mark that she is scared, that death is horrible because after death there is nothing but an eternity of nothingness. It’s all gone. This is it.

Out of kindness, Mark tells his mother that she is mistaken and that after death she will go to her favorite place. All of the people she loves will be there. She will be young again and she will be able to dance again. There will be no pain, only love and happiness. She will live in her very own mansion (“In my Father’s house there are many mansions:” John 14:2. King James Version) and all of this will last for eternity. Finally, Mark tells his mother to “Say hi to Dad for me.” The lies comfort Mark’s mother and she seems to die peacefully.

Telling his mother a lie, at least under these circumstances, does not seem to be a bad thing. A problem arises, however, because the medical staff hears what Mark has told his mother and they want to know more about what happens after death. The staff shares the news that Mark knows what happens after death with others and finally a throng gathers outside of Mark's apartment. Anna (Jennifer Garner), unable to imagine that Mark is lying, encourages him to share what he knows with the world. So Mark sits down and makes up a story. He writes the story down on the back of two pizza boxes that bear a striking resemblance to tablets of stone. He then tells the world what they want to hear.

There are ten things that Mark can tell people about the world in which they live. Imagine that – ten things written on pizza tablets? Mark tells the world that there is a man in the sky who controls everything. People cannot see the man in the sky, but he has chosen Mark as his messenger. After you die you go to a “really great place.” Everyone will live in a mansion of his or her own and all of the people you love will be with you in the really great place. Also, there will be free ice cream for everyone all of the time.

If you do bad things, however, you do not get to go to the really great place. Instead you go to the bad place. One of the throng then asks if you will go to the bad place if you do just one bad thing. And Mark answers that you have to do three bad things and the man in the crowd says: “Just like baseball.” There are some

doubters in the throng and their questions provide a good deal of humor and show that the story Mark is telling does not make sense. Mark is frustrated that the crowd will not just accept his story and this indicates that he himself does see how the story makes sense. Finally someone asks him why the man in the sky is just now, after thousands of years, letting people know what happens after death. The best Mark can do is to claim that up till now the man in the sky has been very busy.

As the spokesperson for the man in the sky, Mark has become rich, famous, and powerful. He is no longer the loser he once was. Yet he is still unable to win the heart of Anna. Her top priority in life is having attractive children. She does not want her children to be short, chubby, and have pug noses – a reasonable description of Mark.

As Mark and Anna discuss the possibility of being together, Anna asks Mark if his success and wealth change his genetic make-up. At just the moment Mark can lie and win the girl of his dreams, he instead tells the truth. All of the changes Anna likes in Mark will not change his contribution to the genes of their children. It is better, Mark decides and the movie concurs, to go without what you most want than to get it through a lie. And later, when Anna is marrying a handsome man with good genes, Mark interrupts the wedding, claiming that he is the right man for Anna and Anna then demands to know what the man in the sky says is best for her. Again, since Mark speaks for the non-existent man in the sky, he could tell

Anna that the man in the sky says she will be better off with Mark than the other man. But, Mark is unwilling to lie in order to be with the woman he loves.

Since what Mark tells his mother and then the rest of the world is a lie, and since Mark's story is similar to basic elements of the Christian story, one message of the movie is that the Christian story, at least as it parallels Mark's story, is false. A corresponding message is that it is better to live in the real world, to live with integrity, than to adopt false beliefs that make you happy. The element in the movie that clinches the message comes when Anna decides that she really does love Mark as he really is and she abandons her fiancé at the altar.

One might take the film to be an anti-Christian theology film, but it can also be interpreted as against any of the stories that we make up to make us feel happy – whether religious, political, or even personal. In a kind of existential humanist way, the movie says that we ought to embrace life, enjoy life, live life to the fullest, even if there is no god and no life after death.