



The Invention of Lying

James Musson

Lying, loving and the truth

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PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK) Contains moderate comic sex references

[Image]

What would the world be like if no one had ever lied? Ricky Gervais's new film, *The Invention of Lying*, explores this question with the uncomfortable and irony-laden humour for which he has become famous. As in *The Office* (2001-3) and *Extras* (2005-7), the laughs are not mindless and slapstick: the viewer is confronted with a number of questions about our own lie-permissive world as we see truth-telling pushed to its most exaggerated.

Mark Bellison lives in a world without lies. There is no flattery, no deception and no religion. Everyone speaks only the truth, all of the time, however blunt or unkind we liars might think it. It's a society where those who aren't attractive or prosperous are pushed firmly to the bottom of the pile, including the stub-nosed, podgy and unsuccessful Mark (Ricky Gervais). All the films in this fiction-less world are, naturally, history documentaries (delivered from an armchair, narration only). This is no problem for screenwriters allocated the most interesting and popular centuries, like Mark's nemesis Brad Kessler (Rob Lowe), but for Mark himself, stuck with the thirteenth century (most notable for the

Black Death), it's another assignment that fixes his status as one of life's 'losers'. Everyone Mark meets is compelled to add insult to his indignity, even his mother, colleagues and friends.

His romantic life is no different. The film opens with Mark embarking on a disastrous (if frank) date with his childhood sweetheart, Anna McDoogles (Jennifer Gardner). In this world of superficial judgements, Anna announces on Mark's arrival that she's feeling '*a little depressed and frankly pessimistic*' about their date. The waiter at their restaurant adds his assent, reminding Mark (if he needed it) that Anna is completely out of his league. This jarring bluntness is characteristic of the whole film, and it's unrelenting in the opening scenes. It's clear that Mark's chances with Anna are thin, but her reasons begin to indicate something deeper about the kind of truth in their world. She believes she could never fall in love with him because, frankly, of his stub-nose and portly appearance, and neither does she want children with the same undesirable characteristics. In short, the truth is that Mark's not a good match for Anna in the unemotional rationality of the film's world.

That is, until Mark stumbles on a completely new discovery. The lie. For all his efforts at screenwriting about the thirteenth century, he hasn't been able to liven up the Black Death (because he can't), and it's finally earned him the sack. His colleagues had always hated him, and, naturally, they make it extremely plain. But his plight earns him no sympathy from his landlord, who (at the most inconvenient moment) demands the rent. Mark steps into the bank to withdraw all his money, \$300, but he needs \$800 for the rent. It's at this point his discovery comes, in a moment of synaptic misfiring. Why not ask for all \$800? The cashier, who *knows* people always tell the truth, hands over the money. The first ever deception in his world has worked.

In fact, there's not even a word for his action and, come to that, no concept of truth either. There is only 'what is'. 'What isn't' is inconceivable. Once we understand this, the rest of the plot of the film, and most of its jokes, fall into place. Now Mark has to feel his way through the tricky ethical landscape of lying for the first time, with the additional responsibility of knowing that people will be credulous of his fibs, however outrageous.

The comedy potential here is not left untapped, of course. The only question his friends have when he teases them that he's a *'one-armed German space explorer'* is, *'When's the launch date?'* Yet it becomes clear very soon that Mark does not feel comfortable deploying his gift without discrimination. He discovers that he can use his ability to lie to *'live life the way he wants it'*, but at what cost to others, when their trust is guaranteed?

One situation brings this into sharp relief. Mark sits at his mother's bedside as she lies dying in hospital, and she confides in him her fear of an eternity of nothingness. He is moved by her distress, and decides to comfort her, telling her of the good place that waits for her after she dies, where everyone gets a mansion and will be with everyone they love, presided over by the kindly *'Man in the Sky'*. In the film's universe, it's a lie, of course, but we see the delight on her face as she dies. Mark's decision, as we might imagine, has huge consequences in his world. And it rather overshadows the rest of the plot.

This lie quickly escalates. The attending doctors and nurses overhear Mark's words to his mother, and they urge him not to keep his knowledge to himself. Mark becomes a reluctant prophet, heavily reminiscent of the misunderstood Brian in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Eventually, bowing to the pressure of world interest in his whopper, Mark delivers his *'ten pronouncements'*, which he holds aloft on two pizza boxes. His gullible audience takes it all in, of course, but not without some questions, such as *'Where is this Man in the Sky?'* Mark ends up creating a *'three strikes and you're out'* requirement for entering the *'good place'* after death. Strikes are earned for doing things that *'hurt other people'*. It's an admirable morality, to be sure, and we can see why Mark would be keen to fashion it, being one of those in his society so often hurt by others. At this point the film becomes a rather curious mix of commentary about religion in our own world and an insight into what might happen if we had the chance to invent morality again. For all Gervais's own scepticism of a transcendent moral code in our universe, Mark Bellison is earnest about the creation of one that has a remarkably similar base: treat others as you would have them treat you (compare it with what Jesus says in Matthew 7:12).

Mark's troubled conscience at telling lies to gain Anna's heart continues to surface through the rest of the film. It's not that he's avoiding his three strikes, because they are his creation, but his actions appear to share that same moral basis as his invented religion. In his case, treating others this way involves *really* telling the truth. Intentional or not, the heavy irony in *The Invention of Lying* is this: Bellison, the only man who has ever been able to lie, is actually the only person really speaking the truth. He sets out trying to show Anna that the truth about himself is more than his superficial defining characteristics (those being the stub nose and chubby looks). We might say that there was objectivity in such blunt comments, however harmful they were. But why do we feel uncomfortable watching them speak the truth in this way? By pushing truth-telling to cold and ridiculous extremes, we're being persuaded that society only becomes bearable when lies are allowed, that these soften the blow of the honest truth about us.

This misrepresents the heart of the problem. The truth-telling of the film is cruel because it actually reveals defects in their perception of what is true. As Mark reveals to Anna, a child who has the genetic disadvantage of being small and chubby can still be smart and caring. What's missing in Mark's society is not lies; it's love. This is something our world shares, too. Many of us can think of examples of comments that hurt us, even if they were true. But there is an alternative: speaking truthfully, but doing so with genuine love for the person. When he wrote to the Ephesian church, Paul had to remind his readers not only to speak to each other truthfully, but to do so in love (Ephesians 4:15). Truth isn't necessarily the blunt instrument that the characters in the film use to batter each other daily. Where Mark toys with using *'good lies'* to encourage a suicidal flatmate, he could have better reassured him with the loving truth about his positive attributes. At the core, the problem these characters have is not being too honest; it's with their hearts. They speak superficial truth to put others down, but Mark gives us a glimpse of the difference we could make by speaking deeper truths out of love.

The film tries to persuade us that another set of *'good lies'* can be beneficial: religion. Here people are given hope. Previously death was a terrifying oblivion, but Mark comforts them with the idea of

an eternal paradise. There are entry requirements, but they're not too strict. The gullibility of his audience is, of course, a result of their peculiar situation, but the whole sequence appears to be intended as a satirical comment on religious believers in our own world. Yet our context is entirely different. We do live in a world with lies, so it's entirely appropriate to test what people say and the claims they make. In fact we must do so: of what value is a hope that is untrue? If we are to have integrity, it's important that we assess the evidence for claims of this kind. Why did Jesus, for instance, say that he was God himself? Was he a liar? If so, his death was foolish and his teaching was criminal, because he urged others to follow him. Was he convinced he was God, but horribly mistaken? The rest of his recorded words suggest none of the instability of someone under such an illusion. The final alternative is that he was telling the truth, that Jesus is God himself.

The scale of this claim is so great that it must be tested, and, unlike the characters in *The Invention of Lying*, we can examine rationally whether something is true or not. When we're considering whether a claim is true, we can assess the arguments and the evidence. We might ask a question like, 'Does it make sense in itself?' If claim contradicts itself, it cannot be true. Another question might be, 'Does it work?' If it cannot be applied to our lives or is impossible to live by, it cannot be true. A final question could be, 'Does it fit with reality?' If an idea is true, it will make sense in the real world. These are three questions that we can use to help us evaluate truth, to make sure that it is trustworthy. Why not ask these questions of a belief that you hold, to see if it stands up? What do you make of Jesus's claims?

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