

Basketballs and Heart Attacks: Lies and Deceptions in Two German Movies: *Wo ist Fred* and *Good-bye Lenin*

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Abstract:

An old German proverb says *Lügenhaben kurze Beine*, (lies have short legs), meaning, the truth will eventually catch up with the lie. In the Bible in Leviticus 19:11 we are taught: “Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another.” Moreover, in John 8:32 we read, “. . . the truth shall set you free.” The Quran teaches “And do not cloak the truth with falsehood (2:42).” Many movies deal with the topic of deception and characters lie for many different reasons. Two successful German movies I will investigate, in which the protagonists weave a web of lies, are *Wo ist Fred* (2003) and *Good-bye Lenin* (2006). Though the premise of both films is built on lies, the characters lie for different reasons. In *Wo ist Fred*, Fred lies to get an autographed basketball with which he intends to bribe his future step son, whereas in *Good-bye Lenin*, the protagonist lies to protect his mother from another heart attack. All characters involved believe that they are justified in telling bold lies to people they love. However, in both movies, the truth is revealed in the end and as one would expect there is a price to pay. However, is life fair and will destiny punish the liar? I will investigate the effects of lying on the other character in both films and if lying is ever justified.

Keywords: Lies, lying, deception, German movies, GDR, DDR, Basketball

1. Introduction

“A lie may take care of the present, but it has no future,” an anonymous author states; and Abraham Lincoln said: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” Ever since the dawn of time, people have lied to each other. Cain killed Able and lied about it. Wars have started based on lies. Politicians seem to have a problem with the truth in general and in recent days, lies have been re-categorized as “alternative facts.” Children lie to their parents, employees lie to their bosses, presidents lie to their people. Some are good liars, some are bad. Some liars get caught, many get away. With so many lies in the world, it is no wonder that some modern movies make lying the center of the plot. Two German movies in particular are built around lies and without them, there would not be a movie. One movie that revolves around a liar and a gigantic lie is the German hit movie *Wo ist Fred?* Another well-known movie dealing with deception is *Good-bye Lenin*. The protagonists in these two movies perpetuate a massive lie and though both are caught in the end, both movies plots are very different with different endings.

2. *Wo ist Fred?*

It is absolutely no surprise that soccer is the number one spectator sport in Germany. Surprisingly though, Germans also love basketball. Dirk Novitzki’s stellar performance in the American NBA might be a reason for this increase in popularity. Therefore, it is not surprising that a German film studio produced a movie in which Basketball fans of the German basketball team Alba Berlin play a major role.

The original screenplay of *Wo ist Fred* was written by two American screen writers, Ken Daurio und Cinco Paul, of *Despicable Me* and *The Santa Clause 2* fame.

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Because of the controversial topic, no Hollywood studio considered producing the film in the US. The German screen writer, Bora Dagtekin, however, liked the script, he secured the rights for it, and adapted it for the German-speaking market. It is unclear, how much he changed the script while translating and adapting it to German customs and culture. It officially opened in theaters nation-wide on November 16, 2006.

Anyone who has seen the movie understands why studios in the United States stayed away from this disrespectful script. It follows a simple formula: the film gets laughs at the expense of disabled basketball fans and in a politically correct world, this motion picture should probably have never been produced. Nonetheless Till Schweiger, also known as the German Tom Cruise, had no problem producing the movie and starring in it, and apparently, Germans are not as sensitive to political correctness as Americans are. Despite bad reviews, the movie was quite successful by German standards.

Fred, the protagonist, played by Till Schweiger, plans to marry his girlfriend Mara, who is his boss' daughter. Both are dedicated fans of the basketball team Alba Berlin and Fred decides to propose to the love of his life at one of their games. However, instead of accepting immediately, Mara lets her son, Linus, who appears to be around ten years old, decide. Linus, who is her only son and extremely spoiled, demands a basketball signed by his favorite player, Mercurio Müller. Sounds simple since there are fan shops and online platforms dealing in sports memorabilia, but here is the catch that makes this movie and the plot possible: whenever Mercurio Müller, the star player, sets a new personal scoring record, he throws the ball into the special section reserved for handicapped fans. Linus wants one of those very special and rare balls or he will not let his mother marry Fred.

Fred, being a clever man, purchases a signed basketball at a fan shop and hopes to fool Linus but he immediately recognizes the ploy and rejects the ball. He insists on a ball that was used in a game and was thrown into the crowd by Mercurio Müller. Desperate, since he wants to marry Mara, Fred decides to pose as a fan in a wheelchair. Afraid he would say the wrong things if questioned, he decides to appear mute and for some unknown reason, he manifests symptoms of Tourette Syndrome. Though there are at least 50 fans in the handicapped section, Fred catches the ball on the first visit by pushing another fan's wheel chair out of the way and slightly standing up. Strangely enough, even though the cameras are on him, nobody seems to notice this unfair action. Unfortunately, on that exact day, two young filmmakers are in the stadium working on an image film for the team Alba Berlin. The attractive young Denise decides to feature Fred in this film about handicapped fans, which was contracted to promote the team's inclusiveness. Since Fred cannot speak and even though he vehemently gestures his opposition to this plan, his friend, who pretends to be his caretaker, loves the idea since he is attracted to Vicky, the camerawoman. Unhappy by this development, Ronny, a genuinely handicapped and self-proclaimed biggest Alba fan, smells a rat and sets out to discredit Fred. Ronny, played by the well-known comedy actor Christoph Maria Herbst, is the target of many tasteless, offensive and cheap slapstick jokes.

The film received mixed to negative reviews. *Prisma-Online* described the film as “flat, childish, annoying and stupid”.ⁱ The *Lexicon of International Films* called it a “mix of desolate confusion, outrageous script and irritating stereotype”.ⁱⁱ Horst Koll complains about “irritating clichés . . . and women are portrayed either as calculating, as sex objects, or as gullible stupid sheep.”ⁱⁱⁱ Joachim Kurz calls it a “slapstick comedy” which reminds one of the “stone age of film making.”^{iv} The website *Prisma* writes: “How bored does one have to be to come up with such an idiotic story?”^v However, F. M. Hemke of *Filmszene* wrote that *Where Is Fred?* was a “really funny and entertaining film, a successful firework of situation comedy, despite a lame start,” and gave the film seven out of ten points.^{vi}

The entire plot is based on a big lie, the lie that Fred is handicapped so he can get the ball. One lie leads to another and soon Fred is stuck in a circle of lies – until he is finally discovered – yet there is a happy end and he does get the girl. Ironically, not exactly the girl for whom he constructed all these lies, no, but the young and naïve filmmaker who featured him in the image film, who is much nicer and more loving. Just another strange twist in this ill-constructed lie-based movie.

3. Good-bye Lenin

A different movie plot based on a massive lie is *Good-bye Lenin* (2003). The premise is that the Berlin Wall never fell and the GDR continued into the 1990's. The idea is much more original than the premise of *Wo ist Fred* and the film was much better received. The movie begins in East Germany in the year 1989, just before the wall came down. During a massive anti-government protest, the young man Alex, is beaten and arrested by the police.

His mother, who supports the system and appears to be a good follower, witnesses the incident, suffers a heart attack and falls into a coma. During her time in the coma, the regime opens up the wall and Berlin is slowly westernized. Many of the old products are replaced by western products, TV has changed dramatically, and suddenly the mother awakes from her coma. Concerned about her health, the doctor believes any excitement could lead to immediate death, and he recommends sheltering her from the outside world as much as possible.

Alex loves his mother very much and wants to do everything he can to protect her from any excitement. Since, as he believes, she was and still is a good communist, he has the brilliant idea of setting up a make-believe East Germany in their apartment. The mother, who is confined to her bed, does not know that the wall has fallen and Alex does everything he can to make her believe that nothing has changed. He buys up as many remaining GDR products; he shows old GDR Newscasts on a hidden video player and even produces new fake ones with the help of a friend. He hires neighbors to play their old parts in the Socialist Party, and they do everything to keep up this make-believe socialist world.

The film was nominated for and won many awards. Rewarded as the Best European Film at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival, it is the most commercially successful German movie in history.^{vii} Roger Moore of the *Orlando Sentinel* writes: “A funny movie that rises above farce to the level of sophisticated satire.”^{viii} Deborah Hornblow of the *Hartford Courant* praises the movie in these words: “*Good bye, Lenin!* is a wonder of a film with humor and heart and political savvy to spare. Don't miss it.”^{ix} Angie Ward of *Christianity Today* writes in her glowing report: “Succeeds as a comedy, as a glimpse at a tumultuous time in European history, and as a thoughtful look at the great lengths to which people will go for important relationships.”^x On the other hand, Marjorie Baumgarten of the *Austin Chronicle* sees the film in a different light: “[T]he film seems overlong and drawn out, with variations on the same joke occurring throughout. Although the performances are good, the nostalgia for the past seems quaint in the new ‘have it your way’ Burger King World.”^{xi}

4. The Science of Lying

Here are two fundamentally different movies: an offensive superficial slapstick comedy and a well thought-through movie that makes you ponder. Though very different, both plots are based on lies. Fred desires the woman of his dreams whereas Alex lies to spare his mother another possible heart attack. Fred pretends to be severely handicapped while Alex stages the old GDR after the unification. There are two major differences here: Fred lies for his personal gain and Alex lies to save his mother.

Discussing the question in depth if lying is ethically acceptable or inherently wrong would go much beyond the limitations of this paper and I am no expert on why people lie nor do I want to pretend to be one. I will just address a few thoughts on lying and some of the ethics of lying. It is very interesting to explore what experts say about lying. In the article “Situational Determinants of the Acceptability of Telling Lies” in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, the authors conducted a survey about lies and hearing lies. They say: “It appeared that the interviewees reacted rather negatively to lying in general and even more negatively to other people’s lies. In contrast, however, the interviewees reported many instances in which they lied themselves, and even showed a great deal of understanding for their own lies.”^{xii}

Obviously, there is a disconnect, a double standard here. Lying seems somewhat acceptable, but being lied to is unacceptable and wrong. Interesting is the fact that even though Fred lies to get the basketball, and even steals it from a deserving fan – or maybe because he lies – the viewer roots for him. He constructs a big fictional tale and we think it is funny or even adorable. The viewer is conspiring with the protagonist and believes that the lie will advance his desires. The researchers confirm this double standard: “The interviewees did not seem to be aware of having a somewhat dual attitude toward lying” (1048-1049). One interpretation might be that our own lies are always justified, a necessity, but other people’s lies are not serving us and are therefore wrong. Fred exhibits exactly that same selfish and egotistical behavior.

Alex in *Good-bye Lenin*, however lies to protect his mother, an altruistic desire to preserve her life and to spare her another medical emergency. Is that kind of lying justified at all? In the article, “Lies and Pain: Patients and Caregivers in the ‘Conspiracy of Silence’” in the *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, Marco Marzano comes to the conclusion that it is ethically acceptable not to tell a terminally ill patient the entire truth. “The ‘protective lie’ has proved useful to health care institutions, which have been able to organize their activities in complete disregard of the wishes and desires of patients confined to ignorance and silence.”^{xiii}

The idea is to not overburden or worry patients with too much information, even if it deals with their own lives. According to researchers who deal with this subject, lying to terminally ill patients is justified and in their best interest. Robert Brault states it this way:

“Today I bent the truth to be kind, and I have no regret, for I am far surer of what is kind than I am of what is true.”^{xiv} Marco Marzono states: “[T]he fear of not being able to cope with the situation generated by the onset of a fatal disease is the origin of the ‘conspiracy of silence’” (57). The ‘conspiracy of silence’ is precisely what Alex perpetuates in *Good-bye Lenin*. However, he does not only lie, he puts on an elaborate show to deceive and to protect his mother.

Most people would say that lying is wrong, except when there is a good reason for it or it gets the liar out of a sticky situation. The BBC ethics guide states: “Many people believe that lying is bad because it treats those who are lied to as a means to achieve the liar's purpose, rather than as a valuable end in themselves.”^{xv} Tim Z. Mazur elaborates on Emanuel Kant's take on lying:

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said that lying was always morally wrong. He argued that all persons are born with an “intrinsic worth” that he called human dignity. This dignity derives from the fact that humans are uniquely rational agents, capable of freely making their own decisions, setting their own goals, and guiding their conduct by reason. To be human, said Kant, is to have the rational power of free choice; to be ethical, he continued, is to respect that power in oneself and others.^{xvi}

In Kant's opinion, all persons are born with an inherent worth that he referred to as human dignity. Humans can make their own rational decisions, they have the freedom and power to choose, and this choice is generally guided by reason. Being lied to robs the individual of the freedom to make rational decisions. Christians have heard the commandment: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor in Exodus 20:16. It does not give a disclaimer that starts with unless . . . The Bible is very clear that lying is wrong, no matter what the circumstances. That, in turn, can cause quite a dilemma in some situations. The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of lying is “to make a false statement with the intention to deceive” (*OED* 1989) and the most widely accepted definition of lying is the following: “A lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it.”^{xvii}

According to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

. . . there are at least four necessary conditions for lying. First, lying requires that a person make a statement (statement condition). Second, lying requires that the person believes the statement to be false; that is, lying requires that the statement be untruthful (untruthfulness condition). Third, lying requires that the untruthful statement be made to another person (addressee condition). Fourth, lying requires that the person intends that that other person believe the untruthful statement to be true (intention to deceive the addressee condition).^{xviii}

In Fred's case, all four requirements apply. He clearly makes a statement by being wheeled around in a wheelchair by his friend and pretending to be mute. He makes this statement to a stadium full of people and he hopes that everyone will buy into the lie and let him keep the basketball. Alex also makes a statement: He recreates the old socialist order in their apartment for his mother. He also hopes that his mother will believe the deception, therefore, Alex is also a liar. Both rob the people to which they lie the ability to make rational decisions. However, are both lies equally bad?

As already established, according to Marco Marzano, the “conspiracy of silence” benefits Alex's mother. The idea is to not overburden or worry patients with too much information, even if it deals with their own lives. The lie preserves his mother possibly longer for Alex but it comes at a huge price – he has to keep up this charade indefinitely and the mother is confined to her little room in their apartment. The lie then becomes a way of life for him and his mother, effectively the new normal. Ever protective and assuring that his mother will not leave the room, he works hard keeping up the illusion. Here, Alex burdens himself with this gigantic task, spends every spare minute keeping up the lie, and misses out on being a teenager. He basically sacrifices his personal freedom for his mother's well-being. Could such a lie not be justified or even admired?

People have lied to government officials to save their fellow citizens and then have been praised and awarded for their actions. In the Second World War, citizens lied to Nazi soldiers in order to save the lives of sometimes total strangers.

On the other hand, Fred lies for his own gain, to get her spoiled son on his side and to get into the favor of his beloved Mara. Fred is acting for himself with no regard for others. Because of his actions, others, truly disabled people, missed out on the ball and on being in the promotional video. Both lies rob others of making intelligent rational decisions. Fred hurts people and steals the ball from a deserving genuine fan.

He pulls in all his friends to make this fraud work, and his friend even forges a document for him. Martin Luther once said: "A lie is like a snow-ball; the longer it is rolled, the larger it is!" For both characters, the lies take over their lives and any normal routine is replaced by a tiring demand for more lies.

In contrast to Fred, Alex has altruistic motivations to save his mother. He lies, and yes, he also drags people into his web of lies, but it is all for a good cause, or at least he thinks it is a good cause. Unfortunately, we do not know what the outcome would have been without the charade. Would the mother, who is confined to her bed, have lived longer without his intervention since she would have been able to exercise and enjoy fresh air? Would she have had a better life, a life other than sitting in bed and watching old DDR propaganda? Or would she truly have died of a heart attack? We find out late in the movie that the mother was not the dedicated communist at all as everyone had believed. She admits having put on a show to survive and to forget that her husband had left her by fleeing the regime and going to the West. After this becomes clear, an earlier revelation of the truth might have made her life happier, she could have left the apartment and enjoyed the new freedoms of a unified Germany.

5. Consequences of Lying

So what are the consequences of these lies and how are the liars rewarded or punished? Fred, in the end, is beaten into a short coma by a small gang of bikers who find his actions despicable but then, when he wakes up again, gets a much more loving, yet naïve young woman. The people he betrayed accept his apology, all are friends and they will live happily ever after. Only Mara, his initial love interest, is abandoned by him and hates him now.

Alex in *Good-by Lenin* has no consequences. His mother eventually leaves the apartment and later passes away, unrelated to the stress of the unification. Alex's elaborate scheme might not have had any benefit at all.

6. Conclusion

Lying and the art of lying are complex and complicated. Though generally seen as immoral or unfair, lying has pervaded the governments of numerous countries in recent years to such an extent that it is impossible at times to get to the truth. If only we knew when someone is lying! The Blue Fairy in the movie *Pinocchio* says: "A lie keeps growing and growing until it's as plain as the nose on your face."^{xix} So how does Pinocchio get around his telltale sign of his lying? Let me finish with a quote from the movie *Shrek*. Prince Charming asks Pinocchio where Shrek is, knowing that Pinocchio cannot tell a lie. Here is the dialogue:

Prince Charming: You. You can't lie. So tell me, puppet, where is Shrek?

Pinocchio: Uh, hmm, well, uh, I don't know where he's not.

Prince Charming: You're telling me you don't know where Shrek is?

Pinocchio: It wouldn't be inaccurate to assume that I couldn't exactly not say that it is or isn't almost partially incorrect.

Prince Charming:- So you do know where he is?

Pinocchio: Oh, on the contrary. I'm possibly more or less not definitely rejecting the idea that in no way with any amount of uncertainty that I undeniably...

Prince Charming: Stop it!

Pinocchio: ...do or do not know where he shouldn't probably be, if that indeed wasn't where he isn't. Even if he wasn't at where I knew he was, that'd mean I'd really have to know where he wasn't.^{xx}

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" (Sir Walter Scott, 1808).

ⁱ „Wo ist Fred.“ *Prisma*, Prisma-Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 16 November 2006, www.prisma.de/filme/Wo-ist-Fred,484974

ⁱⁱ "Where Is Fred." *Alchetron*, Alchetron, 20 April 2018, <https://alchetron.com/Where-Is-Fred>

ⁱⁱⁱ Koll, Horst Peter. „Wo ist Fred?“ *Filmdienst*, dreipunktdrei mediengesellschaft mbH, no date, <https://www.filmdienst.de/film/details/527778/wo-ist-fred>

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