

LIAR LIAR [1997]

by

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Divorced lawyer Fletcher Reed (Jim Carrey) is so busy with his legal practice, he keeps missing appointments with his son, Max (Justin Cooper), and makes up various excuses. The last straw when he misses his son's birthday party. His son wishes his father would be unable to lie for one day. His wish comes true and Reed's life as a high-priced lawyer whose clever lies bring clients and win cases, comes crashing down. At the law office, where he is fishing for a partnership, he tells everyone, from the lowly clerk to the chairman of the board, exactly what he thinks of them. For instance, seduced by his sexually carnivorous boss (Amanda Donohoe), he tells her she is lousy in bed. The next morning in court, he cannot defend his sleazy client as he had intended. Fletcher literally wrestles with himself to stop the ceaseless flow of honesty pouring from his mouth. However, his relationship with his son now becomes normalized and he realizes that his love for his son is the most important thing in the world to him.

First, *Liar, Liar* is a very funny film because of the immense talents of the flexible-faced Jim Carrey. His humor varies from the spastic gyrations of Jerry Lewis to the sly double-take of Jack Benny. In my view, he has always been a significant talent constrained to mediocre if not outright terrible films (though I've not seen them all). *Ace Ventura*, *Pet Detective* [1994], for instance, equates masculinity with sports accomplishments and thus one who loses a football game goes insane, has a sex-change operation, and becomes a murderer(ess?). No one comes off well in a swamp of psychic disease like this.

While *Liar, Liar* is by no means a great movie, it is a step upward in the psychological environment in which Carrey can work. He now places his large, if sketch-oriented talent as the single absurd element in an otherwise conventional world and thus can point out both the absurdities and conventionalities of his character and the world in which he *thinks* he must function.

Reed's foray into enforced truth has two distinctly different consequences. His personal life, his interactions with his son, and his relationship with his ex-wife, take a turn for the better. He discovers the deep love he holds for his son; he changes into a better father, he starts building a barrier between his personal and public life, and so on.

In stark contrast to his private life, his professional life takes a very big turn for the worse as a result of his day of imposed honesty. He almost loses his job, he has to beat himself bloody in an attempt to protect his client, he tells his boss what he *really* thinks of him, and so on. Thus, the idea of lying, and its mirror image – truth – is a most complex subject.

While the film's conclusion is that truth is best, in the course of getting to that (rather simplistic) conclusion, it takes some very interesting detours into some philosophically dangerous territory. While the philosophy of truth is certainly beyond anything we can tackle here, I want to make a few observations on the psychological nature of lying within the context of this film.

Lying is complex. Lie, lying, liar – the irregularity of the spelling of the various forms of this word seems to reflect the complexity of the concept. As we grow up, we find that what we were told as children about “always telling the truth” goes only so far into adult life. This dictum would work well were this a perfect world inhabited by perfect people. Unfortunately, this is not the way of our world. Thus, the subject of lying becomes complicated by reality. Risking simplifying it too far, I want to consider three levels of lies. There seem to be three distinct loci in the psyche from which a lie can come.

The first are lies of everyday survival, lies from the Persona. In the real world, we all tell lies – lies of various degrees and consequences. But few of us really do damage with these “lite” lies. In fact, we often find that we can do more harm or hurt by telling the truth than by lying. These “Persona lies” come from that outer portion of the personality we present to the public and use to protect the more vulnerable inner core. The Persona is the face we present to the outside world in order to oil our common, everyday social interactions. We often don our Persona in the morning as we would our clothes in preparing for our job or other daily functions – in fact, clothes are often symbols of the Persona. A normal, functional Persona generates a number of lies: “Nice suit,” “Cool tie,” “New dress?” fit into this category if you don't really like the clothes. In fact, these lies may actually do good; after all, a false compliment *does* make the receiver feel better and costs the giver little in the form of guilt.

There comes a time, of course, when this doesn't work. This tactic can be used to avoid telling a necessary but painful truth. For instance, “Nice suit,” when the suit in question is a hideous, baby-blue polyester leisure suit and about to be worn during a presentation to a hip New York ad agency could ruin the wearer and his career. However, “Your suit sucks,” is difficult to say and difficult to receive. So, from the point of view of the perfect world, it may seem ironic that this type of mild lie causes less pain, damage, and guilt, than would truth.

Liar Liar addresses this type of lie, showing its necessity to everyday survival. Entering his office, Reed meets an outrageous hairdo, which he compliments, and overweight fellow worker, who he also complements, another employee with Everest-size acne on his nose, which he ignores. In this way, the film demonstrates that our everyday life of normal interactions is oiled with the grease of little lies that do not originate from any deep place in the psyche, but from close to the surface, the Persona.

The film also deals with the next level of lies – lies from the Ego. Actually, many lies come from what Carl Jung calls the Shadow, that portion of the psyche which

contains what we have repressed in order to survive in organized society (and all our undeveloped potentials and possibilities – but the former is more relevant here). Here, the Shadow speaks through and masquerades as the Ego. These are calculated, plotted, and purposeful lies. They affect the victim at a different level – they allow him or her to continue in a state of deprived knowledge. Were the victim aware of the lie, he or she might be hurt, but their overall functioning in life would ultimately be improved. A bad driver told “Your driving is just fine,” falls into this category. Lies from the Ego also affect the teller differently. Lies from the Persona are quickly forgotten, while these lies are charged with a burden of psychic energy. They must be remembered – for next time, given the same circumstances, the same lie must be told.

In *Liar Liar*, the Ego-based lies are those which Reed undertakes as a lawyer (in an almost endless stream of “lawyer jokes”). Knowing his client is guilty of initiating adultery, he manages to twist the truth to make her look like the victim. The film implies that this is the basis of the practice of law. However, what is oddest about the film is its treatment of the third level of lies.

The third source of lies is much deeper, seemingly from the very core of the personality. Here the Shadow imitates the Self, the deepest core of the personality. These lies have the potential to do serious damage to the collective and effect all of humanity. “Kill the Jews and unemployment and inflation will be solved.” “I have in my hand a paper listing 275 members of the Communist Party working in the State Department.” “I am not a crook.” These lies are as massive as they were massively believed. Their power is immense, and that power, I believe, comes from the Shadow at best imitating, at worst linking itself with the Self. These lies, since they don’t come from the rational areas of the psyche like the Ego, are often believed as much by the teller as the hearer.

In *Liar Liar*, Reed dismisses the lies he makes from his Persona (as we all do) which he passes around to his fellow workers like bon-bons from a box of chocolates. He accepts the lies from his Ego which he tells his clients and uses in court as a necessary part of doing business. But the lies he himself believes are those he tells his 5-year-old son. Once we realize this, we begin to understand the depth of psychosis this film presents.

While Jung says little about lying outside of its part in psychotic episodes, he gives us this description of Hitler, “All these pathological features – complete lack of insight into one’s own character, auto-erotic self-admiration and self-extenuation, denigration and terrorization of one’s fellow men (how contemptuously Hitler spoke of his own people!), projection of the Shadow, lying, falsification of reality, determination to impress by fair means or foul, bluffing and double-crossing – all these were united in the man who was diagnosed clinically as an hysteric, and whom a strange fate chose to be the political, moral, and religious spokesman of Germany for twelve years.”

While no strange fate elevates Reed to an exalted political position, it did elevate him to an equally high post in the admiring eyes of his son. And his son reacts to his lies exactly as Jung describes: “A more accurate diagnosis of Hitler’s condition would be

pseudologia phantastica, that form of hysteria which is characterized by a particular talent for believing one's own lies. For a short spell, such people usually meet with astounding success, and for that reason are socially dangerous. Nothing has such a convincing effect as a lie one invents and believes oneself, or an evil deed or intention whose righteousness one regards as self-evident.”

Reed's forced journey into truth delves into all these issues. However, what we must consider are the conclusions the film makes. Released from the magic that enveloped him, Reed's Persona returns to being functional, he can get through the everyday world by conforming to the polite expectations of others. His Ego has become aware of the damage he has been inflicting not only on his sleazy clients, but on himself with the burden of guilt such lies must inevitably carry, as well as on the collective by undermining the hopeful, progressive (but sometimes all too slow) march toward a higher ethical level. And it is through his interaction with the innocence of youth, connecting both with his son and the child-like aspects within himself (often hidden because of Jim Carrey's manic acting style), that he manages to sever his Shadow from using the energy of the Self to delude himself and damage his son. Thus, couched within this seemingly trivial comedy is actually a complex story of psychic healing that doesn't deny or idealize the existence of the demands of the real world which seemingly oppose the healing we all seek.

Unfortunately, *Liar Liar* paints itself into a corner from which it cannot escape. Reed cannot complete his plans to make a low-life, promiscuous woman look like an innocent victim in court. He tries unsuccessfully to keep his true feelings about the case from pouring out. He objects to his own arguments! However, he wins the case on a technicality . . . by telling the truth. Thus, *we* never really have to consider the consequences of the curse/blessing of truth in our own lives. The film escapes on a technicality.

Liar, Liar. Directed by Tom Shadyac. Distributed by Imagine Entertainment. 1997.