

Goodbye, Lenin! – A Review

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Introduction

This movie is relevant to post-Mormons and those in the borderlands because it is, in large part, about the effect of well intentioned falsehood, and the manner in which context conveys meaning. And, it is also a veritable clinic as to how cognitive dissonance functions.

Overall, Goodbye, Lenin! (GL) is both funny and gut wrenching. It generates enough momentum to get past its weak spots, and ends with an intestinal twist. It feels low budget by Hollywood standards. But the acting looks good to this inexperienced movie goer. Leaves lots of unresolved questions and conflict. A great flick.

The following is not a review, it is a dissection. Some may not enjoy it for that reason. I recognize that there is no "right" way to read a metaphor, and I make no attempt to the explore the length or breadth of this one. I will limit myself to an analysis of how it may shed light on the Mormon matrix.

Abstract

Happy family living in East Germany pre-Berlin Wall collapse. Mom, Dad, daughter (D) and son (S). Dad is MD. Goes to conference in West Berlin. Does not come back. Mom harshly interrogated up by East German police. Mom tells kids Dad has taken up with another woman. Children hate Dad.

Mom has heart attack and goes into coma. Remains in that state for 8 months, during which time the Wall comes down and her entire ideological world collapses. Against doctor's orders, D and S move Mom back to their apartment to protect her from the information respecting societal change that would surely find her were she to remain in the hospital. This could cause life ending excitement for her. Most of movie deals with the elaborate charade D, S and friends put on for Mom to keep her from having to deal with reality – that communism has collapsed in East Germany.

While Mom is still recovering at home, Dad buys burgers from D at Burger King drive through where she works. This is the first D or S have heard or seen of Dad since he left. Dad is obviously wealthy, with new family. Does

not recognize D. She has melted down at home as a result. Both D and S are haunted by Dad's abandonment.

Mom wants to visit family's country cottage. While at cabin all relax and remember the good times. Mom tells D and S that she lied about Dad. There was no other woman. The East German authorities were hard on Dad because he was not a party member – not faithful to the cause. He had to get out. The trip to West Berlin was planned for that purpose. She was to follow with the kids. But she was afraid. The interrogation by the East German police exacerbated this fear. All kinds of bad things might happen if she tried to follow. So, she made up the story about the other woman, and decided to stay in East Germany. Dad had written numerous times to her, and to D and S separately. She hid all of the letters and did not answer him. Mom collapses again with another attack.

GL features a variety of other big lies. The biggest lie, however, is Mom's about why Dad left the family and moved to West Berlin. She tells this lie to protect her children from a truth that might make them hate her, hate their country and want go be with their Dad. Mom's lie weakens Son and Daughter's ability to love and form relationships. It also robs them of their choice to join their father. By comparison, Son's attempt to hide the reality of East Germany after the Wall falls from Mom is a lark.

GL illustrates in multiple way how well intended deception for the purpose of solving an immediate problem usually creates much large future problems. In this case, the price exacted by Mom's lie about Dad leaving radically changes her children's lives, likely for the worse.

The psychologists tell us that perception is largely relative. Even our perception of any colour is determined largely by contrast to what it stands beside. Most females know and use this without knowing they know it. Most males cannot be convinced of it. The study of field and ground in art also illustrates this principle. Musical and mathematical theory rely heavily on it. Hofstadter's "Godel Esher Bach" is one of the classics in this regard. The movie illustrates this point in many ways. The most striking comes at the end when footage from the collapse of the Berlin Wall and related news events is placed in a context in which it provides seemingly solid support for the thesis that the West, and capitalism, have failed and West Germany is joining the East. White is made to appear black numerous times in this way.

As I watched, and then thought about this afterwards, I could not help but consider GBH and the manner in which his perspective and information managing job is made more difficult as the Mormon populace becomes aware, and the Internet and other media inject reality into Mormon culture. I

thought also of the missionary discussions and faithful LDS history in general, and how by carefully selecting the "sound bites" of information that are presented and controlling their setting and hence the perspective from which they are seen, images can be easily reversed. This movie illustrates deftly how easily this can be done, and how dramatic its effects can be.

One of the most moving moments in the movie is when Mom confesses re Dad, and we realize that S's deception is child's play in terms of its long term consequences when compared to Mom's. While I am not a movie or literary expert by any means, it seems to me that many of the most moving experiences in those genres (or life itself) are created when one piece of information causes us to reappraise the meaning of many other pieces previously thought to be understood. The larger the reappraisal, the greater the impact of the moment. That is why this bit in the movie stands out. It reverses the roles of Mom and S; shows that they are playing the same game with each other; and indicates that Mom's game makes S's appear like a cap gun beside an atom bomb. I am reminded in this regard of the ending to Yan Martel's "The Life of Pi", which I also highly recommend. It won the Booker Prize last year. I remember my own sickening discovery of Mormonism's reality. This caused the most massive information reappraisal of my life. And, I recall the subsequent beautiful epiphanies I experienced as I discovered the wonders of spirituality, and reality, that lay outside the walls of perception that had bound my mind. These moments all derive their impact from the forced reappraisal of the previously "understood". Gadamer called this "undeception", and says it is usually painful. He is a dour German. There is at least as much of this powerful slice of life that is thrilling and joyful.

The movie shows how dramatic a collapse of a system based on trust and information control can be, and how much damage it can inflict on the older members of a society, in particular. Kind of like a hard winter thinning the herd. It also shows how adaptable the young are. I doubt many, a generation or two down the road or even now, will suggest that East Germans would have been better off under communism.

A lot of solid research has been done as to how societies that depend on information control risk collapse in spectacular fashion as that lever comes under pressure and fails. At one time I thought that might happen to Mormonism. Now I doubt it will, largely because of what history has shown us with respect to other religions.

Plot Summary

I only watched this movie once, and so no doubt have some of the details wrong.

Happy family living in East Germany pre-Berlin Wall collapse. Mom, Dad, D and S. Dad is MD. Goes to conference in West Berlin. Does not come back. Mom harshly interrogated up by East German police. Mom tells kids Dad has taken up with another woman. Children hate Dad. Mom goes into severe depression. Recovers. Becomes ultra devoted Mom and uber-communist. Is given award on national television for public service. Is a local hero and wise-woman.

Kids grow up from young socialists into rebels. Just before Wall comes down, Mom happens upon a riot and sees S beaten by police and dragged off. Mom has heart attack on the spot and goes into coma. Remains in that state for 8 months, during which time the Wall comes down and her entire ideological world collapses. When she comes out of it, doctors tell D and S that any material excitement could cause another attack and end her life. Mom's memory has been damaged, and even if she fully recovers, she may only have partial and sporadic access to her short and long term memory. The plot is faithful to this prediction.

Against doctor's orders, D and S move Mom back to their apartment to protect her from the information respecting societal change that would surely find her were she to remain in the hospital. This could cause life ending excitement for her. Most of movie deals with the elaborate charade D, S and friends put on for Mom to keep her from having to deal with reality – that communism has collapsed in East Germany. They create a virtual world that resembles East Germany pre-Wall collapse in her bedroom. As reality presses in around them, and Mom becomes more sentient, the ruses become more elaborate.

While setting up one ruse, S learns that Mom was demoted at work because she was too idealistic. D and S also learn that Mom did not trust the East German banks, and so hid her money in the house instead of putting it in the bank. This confuses them since she was apparently so faithful to the commie cause. They can't find the money in time to exchange it for Dmarks, and so Mom's life savings are lost.

While S is setting up and executing ruses, we are shown how at least one, and perhaps two, generations of East Germans have been decimated by the wrenching changes that occurred within their society. The older people simply can't adjust – the gap that had to be leapt was too large for them.

They have been sacrificed – "sold down the river" as one old man puts it numerous times. The younger generation, however, take to the new life as ducks to water. And various excessive behaviours that are implied to result from sudden freedom, and what many will no doubt interpret to be a vacuum respecting values, are on display.

While Mom is still recovering at home, Dad buys burgers from D at Burger King drive through where she works. She used to study economics. We are told that now she practises them. This is the first D or S have heard or seen of Dad since he left. Dad is obviously wealthy, with new family. Does not recognize D. She has melt down at home as a result. Shows signs of serious physical (regular nose bleeds) as well as mental stress. S comforts her. Both are haunted by Dad's abandonment.

Mom appears to be almost better, and is still unaware that her world has changed due to the massive effort, orchestrated by S, to control the information she receives. D has tired of this process and wants to end it. S refuses. He is adamant that Mom must be protected from the information that may harm her, and accuses D of wanting to kill their mother. Stress re this is driving D and S apart. D decides to move out, and leave S to deal with the escalating problem he has created. Mom is getting mobile. They have redecorated her room to look like it did before and can control her access to information there. Is he going to do that with all of East Berlin now that she can get out? S is determined to try.

Mom wants to visit family's country cottage. Have not been able to do that for years due to no car. D's boy friend just got a car – on Burger King wages – while Mom has been waiting years for her turn to buy one. While at cabin all relax and remember the good times. We shift gears abruptly when Mom tells D and S that she lied about Dad. There was no other woman. The East German authorities were hard on Dad because he was not a party member – not faithful to the cause. He had to get out. The trip to West Berlin was planned for that purpose. She was to follow with the kids. But she was afraid. The interrogation by the East German police exacerbated this fear. All kinds of bad things might happen if she tried to follow. So, she made up the story about the other woman, and decided to stay in East Germany. Dad had written numerous times to her, and to D and S separately. She hid all of the letters and did not answer him. Mom collapses again with another attack.

D goes wild, tearing house apart in search for letters. Finds them. Melts down. S goes to hospital with Mom. D brings letter from Dad to S. They know where he lives. D can't bear to see him. S takes cab to Dad's house. Sees new family; wife; lovely house; many friends who are respectful of

Dad's accomplishments in life at a party in his honour. Dad waited for word from his family each day for three years before moving on with his life.

Dad goes to hospital to see Mom, at her request. Just before he arrives, we catch a glimpse of S's girl friend (G), a nurse, telling Mom that East and West Germany are unified, etc. G has gone along with the ruses, but felt that they were wrong.

D comes across Dad in hospital hallway. She is carrying her baby, and is expecting number two. She sees him and stops with a look of terror on her face. He does not recognize her initially, and as the lights come on in his eyes she panics and leaves. He starts after her, and stops. Completely deflated. Dad and Mom have their reunion, which we do not see. Dad returns to his family, and life, in West Berlin. It appears that Mom still has not caught on to what has happened in East Germany.

Mom is still sick. The final ruse has to be the most elaborate yet. It will bring Mom into the real world. This is set up with the help of friends who stage a news conference that in terms plausible to Mom announces that East and West Germany are unifying, but this because the West has collapsed and wishes to join the East. Footage from the Wall's collapse and crowds pouring through and over it is shown during a made-for-Mom news conference. But in the context in which the information is presented, the assumption is that the flow is from West to East. Several times as this broadcast is played out, Mom is seen lovingly looking toward S.

Mom dies. Her ashes are blasted into the German sky on a small rocket, against the law of both East and West Germany.

Analysis

As noted above, this gem is in large part about the effect of well intentioned falsehood, and the manner in which context conveys meaning. And, it is also a veritable clinic as to how cog dis functions.

It is suggested that Mom and Dad are not ideologically in the same place. She is a party member – he is not. But he has decided that the situation is intolerable, and so must leave. She agrees to go with him. However, once threatened, she does not have the strength to follow through. And he is gone.

We don't know much about how this part of the story played out, but in light of the movie's clear theme, here are a few things to consider. Did Mom underestimate her ability to follow Dad, to the extent of self deceit? Perhaps

he was so insistent on leaving (the movie implies that he was) that she could not bring herself to admit to him, or herself, that she could not go. So by agreeing to follow and sending him off, she eliminated a source of conflict. But as is so often the case, the refusal to acknowledge and deal with reality may solve an immediate problem while creating much larger long term difficulties.

Cog dis theory would predict in this case that once Dad was gone and Mom had decided she could not follow him, that she would justify her decision by strengthening the values she seemed to have chosen over Dad, regardless of whether it was these values or simply fear that motivated her actions. This she does. She becomes an uber-communist party member in a sense, and yet exhibits her dedication to communist society by criticizing it for not living up to its own standards. She does not want it to become western. She wants it to be truly communist, and so devotes huge amounts of energy to encouraging more dedication, better production, advocating for the rights of marginalized groups, etc. within the framework of communist ideology.

I suggest that Mom's inability to deal with fear, and her subsequent increase in dedication to her ideology, mirrors what we see in many Mormon families that break up as a result of one spouse grasping Mormonism's "reality" while the other can't. One of the things that makes Mom's case so interesting is that we are invited to assume that she sees a lot of the East's problems. She had agreed to go to the West; she did not put her money in the East's banking system; her form of patriotism was to mount the most strident critique of her society possible while staying with the rules; etc. Thus, she was aware, and seems to have suppressed that awareness, in order to live as she had decided she must. This describes precisely the position of many relatively knowledgeable and still more or less active Mormons of my acquaintance.

Having not been able to follow through on her promise to follow Dad to West Germany, Mom is in a brutal spot with her kids. If she tells them what happened, they will hate her, hate their country, etc. And Dad is gone. She has decided that she can't follow him. So, he is the logical one to sacrifice. This she does, without doubt, in a sincere effort to protect her children and make bearable the life she has decided is necessary for all of them. By so warping reality and solving the immediate problem, she causes tremendous angst and likely impairs D and S's ability to trust and love. This is hinted at in various ways as we see the relationships between S and G, as well as D and her common law spouse develop. D's pathos in this regard is particularly well displayed. And the collapse of the Wall and reconnection of this family lays bare the damage Mom's well intended deception has caused. We are left to wonder if she could have managed to bring her children into touch with

reality gradually as they matured. And, we are invited to consider how much less damage might have been caused had she found a way to do that.

One of the many cog dis themes that are illustrated in this film shows up here relative to this point. Once Mom decided to stay in the East, the forces of cog dis would kick in and change her attitudes in a real way. Her pretence would harden into real belief in order to make it more conformable for her to live with her choice. It is too hard for most people to live with the idea that they made a fundamental mistake. So, most of the time at least, that idea is suppressed. This would make it less likely that Mom would ever disclose the reality of her choice, because the choice would become justified by the benefits cog dis would cause her to perceive remaining in East Germany provided to her and her family.

Another Mormon related issue that arises here is who should have the right to choose. Mom took from her children the right to choose to be with their father. This, no doubt, had a lot to do with her desire to be with them, and perhaps when they were young, her more justifiable belief that they would be better off with her. But, as they matured this choice should have been theirs. The Santa Claus and sex analogies are again useful. At this level, the movie is about control. As long as D and S did not know where Dad was and why he left, they were much more likely to remain with Mom. This was an important control point for Mom. Most of the time when information is controlled, the real issue is behaviour control, and the party controlling the information believes that this is necessary in order to maximize the probability of the outcomes that she deems "good". Information control usually gives a benefit to the controller, and harms the controlled. This is clearly the case respecting the LDS Church and its members.

S has hidden from Mom the extent of his discontent with East Germany. The shock of seeing him in combat with her society gives her a heart attack. Had she understood the nature of his position and more about what he was doing, she would have been prepared for what she saw and perhaps not suffered as she did. Most pain is the result of frustrated expectations. Mom's attack can be fairly said to have been caused by a reality gap. S later becomes the one most adamant about keeping reality from Mom, no doubt because he feels responsible for the damage caused by his innocent deception. So, one deception causes damage, and leads to another.

Mom's choice to remain in the East and deception of her children in that regard puts her into cog dis related denial as to the nature of her society. She becomes an ideologue to the point that even her co-workers find her annoying, and she is demoted. This attitude in her also creates harmful space between her and her children as they mature. The culture of deceit

she has created, with all the love she can muster and the best of intentions, does a number of harmful things. For example, cog dis theory indicates that if we are put in situations which overpower our morals and so we lie, or cheat, this engenders further lying and cheating because our mental process will be to deny that what we have done - lie and cheat - is so bad. The alternative (that we are bad people because we lie and cheat) is not possible for most of us to contemplate. So, the kind of lying and cheating we did must be ok, right? Think about JS and his polygamist cohort in that light. You get supercharged cog dis if that comforting little voice in your head is the voice of God.

In any event, Mom's ideologue attitude is likely to cause her more reality based children to hide their real views from her - to lie to her. They would do this in part at least to save her from the pain of dealing with their beliefs - another reality. Thus, her ideologue nature causes their lying, at least in part. Once they have learned to do this, it is shown to be likely to spread to other aspects of their way of living, such as, for example, the way in which S reacted to Mom's need to avoid stress by constructing an amazingly elaborate lie. The process that we start by distorting reality usually does not remedy itself by fizzling out. Lies tend to grow, not shrink.

So, S decides that at all costs he must protect Mom from the reality of East Germany. He is told that this shock might kill her, and so again is acting out of sincere intent. However, he seems to fail to consider the possibility that as she becomes more aware, he could feed her a little information at a time and help her to gradually adjust. This is what we do with little kids, Santa Claus and sex. Instead of doing this, S keeps playing the game until Mom is at a point of awareness and still so immersed in disinformation that a large, harmful shock becomes increasingly likely. And so his game becomes more desperate. He unknowingly mirrors Mom's behaviour in this regard. Mom in many ways, as she comes out of her fog, is like a child. In this state, her consciousness is malleable and it seems to me that S missed his chance to, gently and naturally, connect her to reality. This is one of the movie's weak spots. No plausible explanation is given for this aspects of S's behaviour. The doctors all but told S and D this Mom's mind would be putty by indicating that Mom's memory and other mental capacities would be spotty. As Mom's consciousness sharpened and she reformed her impressions of reality, S created a problem for her that required increasing efforts on his point prevent her from having to confront. While this behaviour made sense in Mom's case since her disclosure would cause her to lose control, it does not make sense in S's case. But, without this he would have had no reason to put on the great show he did for Mom.

S's behaviour calls to mind JS, GBH et al. No one can tell where a path will lead. Tell a small lie, and then scramble to try to construct a world that is consistent with it, which involves bigger lies, then scramble again, etc. Chaos theory and the law of unintended consequences then come into play, and it is easy to see how a massive deceptive edifice can result. Adam Smith's invisible hand in economics is the classic example of the law of unintended consequences – the selfish behaviour of each individual creates an efficient way of distributing resources throughout society and encouraging production. Think of Mormon polygamy in this regard. A reasonable case can be made that JS was merely an alpha male doing what alpha males do in human society – getting lots of sex – and the fact that he was also a religious leader caused him to invent polygamy, which led to extreme hostility with the neighbours, which led to JS's death, which led to the Mormon migration to Utah, which gave Mormonism the monopoly environment all religions need to reach critical mass, etc..

In the end, Mom appears to have been killed by a shock created by her own deception. She has her second attack after a moment of clarity in which she remembers the manner in which she deceived her children and lost Dad. She tells them that her decision to not follow Dad to the West was the single biggest mistake of her life. The same evening she has her second attack. After all of S's effort to save her from current reality, it is the cumulative burden created by her own distortion of past reality that appears to do her in. But as is so often the case, her initial actions are linked to S's deception that causes her shock and attack, and there are so many other variables that cause and effect become too murky to more than guess at.

The psychologists tell us that perception is largely relative. Even our perception of any colour is determined largely by contrast to what it stands beside. Most females know and use this without knowing they know it. Most males cannot be convinced of it. The study of field and ground in art also illustrates this principle. Musical and mathematical theory rely heavily on it. Hofstadter's "Godel Esher Bach" is one of the classics in this regard. The movie illustrates this point in many ways. The most striking comes at the end when footage from the collapse of the Berlin Wall and related news events is placed in a context in which it provides seemingly solid support for the thesis that the West, and capitalism, have failed and West Germany is joining the East. White is made to appear black numerous times in this way.

As I watched, and then thought about this afterwards, I could not help but consider GBH and the manner in which his perspective and information managing job is made more difficult as the Mormon populace becomes aware, and the Internet and other media inject reality into Mormon culture. I thought also of the missionary discussions and faithful LDS history in

general, and how by carefully selecting the "sound bites" of information that are presented and controlling their setting and hence the perspective from which they are seen, images can be easily reversed. This movie illustrates deftly how easily this can be done, and how dramatic its effects can be.

One of the most moving moments in the movie is when Mom confesses re Dad, and we realize that S's deception is child's play in terms of its long term consequences when compared to Mom's. While I am not a movie or literary expert by any means, it seems to me that many of the most moving experiences in those genres (or life itself) are created when one piece of information causes us to reappraise the meaning of many other pieces previously thought to be understood. The larger the reappraisal, the greater the impact of the moment. That is why this bit in the movie stands out. It reverses the roles of Mom and S; shows that they are playing the same game with each other; and indicates that Mom's game makes S's appear like a cap gun beside an atom bomb.

I am reminded in this regard of the ending to Yan Martel's "The Life of Pi", which I also highly recommend and won't spoil for you. It won the Booker Prize last year. I remember my own sickening discovery of Mormonism's reality. This caused the most massive information reappraisal of my life. And, I recall the subsequent beautiful epiphanies I experienced as I discovered the wonders of spirituality, and reality, that lay outside the walls of perception that had bound my mind. This moments all derive their impact from the forced reappraisal of the previously "understood". Gadamer called this "undeception", and says it is usually painful. He is a dour German. There is at least as much of this powerful slice of life that is thrilling and joyful.

The movie is full of paradox and full bodied, good-mixed-with-bad characters and events. For example, Mom did not trust the commie banks because she knew at some level that the system was bad. So, she kept her savings at home. This caused her, and so her kids, to lose out in a huge way because they missed the deadline for exchanging into Dmarks after unification. Had Mom trusted the bad system she seemed to trust, all would have been better off. The bad commies did a good job in this case.

The movie shows how dramatic a collapse of a system based on trust and information control can be, and how much damage it can inflict on the older members of a society, in particular. Kind of like a hard winter thinning the herd. It also shows how adaptable the young are. I doubt many, a generation or two down the road or even now, will suggest that East Germans would have been better off under communism.

A lot of solid research has been done as to how societies that depend on information control risk collapse in spectacular fashion as that lever comes under pressure and fails. At one time I thought that might happen to Mormonism. Now I doubt it will, largely because of what history has shown us re other religions. See "Religious Belief: Enlightening or Blinding?" under the Spirituality (Post Mormon) button at <http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm> for a summary.

I particularly liked the movie's ending. We are given a glimpse of G telling Mom that Germany has been unified. We know that Mom and Dad had a long chat. Mom does not let on that she "knows" during the Mother-of-All-Ruses at the end of the movie. But, during it she sends a number of loving glances S's way as he pretends to be absorbed by his creation. Perhaps she does know, and in classic fashion protects S from knowing that she knows, since it would nullify his spectacular effort if she knew. But, the movie (for me at least) left that one hanging. Maybe Mom was sufficiently impaired by her two attacks (as the doctors suggested would likely be the case) that she could not know.

The idea of what I have elsewhere called the "reality gap" is central to this movie. Reality gaps are usually not good and are caused by many things. Preventable reality gaps are most lamentable. When we deceive others with good intent, we often create preventable reality gaps that can haunt us and those we most love for generations. The movie brilliantly illustrates this process, as played out over part of one generation.

Sometime ago I wrote a letter to Elder Holland that is reproduced on the website noted above. Here is a quote from it re the reality gap.

The Reality Gap

What about the cost in terms of human suffering that is inflicted by the Church's continued suppression of its history, and insistence that the members not question or look? The gap between the faith picture and the real picture will continue to widen, and ruptures like the one I experienced will become more common. And then marriages will founder on the rocks of that same reality gap, as one spouse is less able to navigate the treacherous waters surrounding them than the other. And other family relationships will also suffer, as have mine.

I note a tremendous irony with respect to this reality gap. The greater the gap, the more at risk a person is respecting the kind of things I have just outlined, and the more painful the experience will likely be when reality comes crashing in. For whom is the reality gap the

greatest? Those who are most faithful to admonitions such as your "don't look, don't question, don't doubt" advice in your talk last April. That is, the most obedient to what the Church tells them are in a sense those harmed the most.

I was faithful. My faith for a long time trumped all else. However, as it became increasingly clear that living as I was would lead to spiritual death and moral dysfunction in my case given my individual makeup, I began to try other things. Many of my friends, who are still active members of the Church have told me that my main problem was that I was too obedient and did not read "faith threatening" materials, and that had I done so (as they have for many years) that I would not have experienced the rupture I have, and that my spiritual life would have been more healthy all the way along. That is, were I less obedient I would have been better off. I suggest that any religious system that produces this kind of result is out of kilter.

Conclusion

I am starting to lose focus, even more than usual, and so had best end here.

Oh, I almost forgot. Dad's name is Robert.

As you can tell, this movie touched a nerve.