

BERNIE: LIFE SENTENCING, LIFE HERMENEUTICS,  
AND THE INESCAPABLE INFLUENCE OF LIFE EXPERIENCE

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*Bernie*. Directed by Richard Linklater. Performed by Jack Black, Shirley MacLaine, and Matthew McConaughey. Madman, 2011. Showtime.

*Bernie*, a 2011 black comedy crime drama, is a spin on documentary reenactment that centers on a middle-aged town hero (Jack Black), and his relationship with his popularly loathed companion, the widowed senior Marjorie Nugent (Shirley MacLaine). A vast divergence from his typical performances, Black earned a Golden Globe nomination for Best Leading Actor for his portrayal of Bernie Tiede, after whom the film is named. *Bernie* strikes a shockingly brilliant balance between director Richard Linklater's consistent socio-philosophical depth and Black's humorous musical whimsy. The opening lines of the movie, which read, "What you're fixin' to

see is real,”<sup>1</sup> are as ironic as humorous in their overt tip of the cap to the story’s East Texas setting. The movie is indeed based on a true story, a screenplay adaptation from a 1999 *Texas Monthly* article titled “Midnight in the Garden of East Texas” by Skip Hollandsworth.<sup>2</sup> The story’s subject matter, however, is so odd that it demands investigation to be believed. The film is edited in such a way that documentary style interviews (given by nearly sixty authentic townspeople) are woven between scripted elements, allowing the story to unfold to the narration of a Greek chorus of town gossips. This narration, by the authentic witnesses of the real-life events, allows the audience to watch the story unfold from the unique perspective of those who were intimately involved in the events that took place in Carthage, Texas in 1996.

The film’s main character is an assistant funeral director who exudes Christian virtue in generosity, love, and kindness for others. He pours himself out in his neighbors’ service not merely in their lifetimes, but takes extraordinary care of them, and their families, even after their passing. The audience is told that Bernie was a “very charismatic man, a loving person, and he had the ability to make the world seem kind.” Bernie “just made you feel real good about yourself.” Scenes are shown in which Bernie comforts the surviving as they mourn the loss of loved ones, and he is shown leading worship as the music director of the local congregation. Bernie is a man who leads hymns, preaches, takes the Little League team for ice cream, and assists friends in filing their income taxes. All knowledge the audience gains of Bernie is constructed by authentic accounts of his public image, and Bernie’s private actions and thought-life are left unexamined in respect for the real Bernie Tiede. This effectively places the audience

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<sup>1</sup>All quotes are taken from the film, cited above, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup>Skip Hollandsworth. “Midnight in the Garden of East Texas,” *Texas Monthly* (January 1998).

behind the eyes of the citizens of Carthage. By all public accounts Bernie seems to carry himself as a man who (in love for Christ and genuine care for others) gives himself away sacrificially. An interviewee asserts, “He was about the most popular man in Carthage,” and another says that “if the people of Carthage were to make a list of those people that they thought would get to heaven . . . Bernie would be right at the top of the list.”

In stark contrast, the film introduces Bernie’s counterpart and companion, the recently widowed senior wife of a Texas oil tycoon, Mrs. Marjorie Nugent. She is said to have been “a mean, old, hateful [expletive].” By every account she is portrayed as contemptible, despised not merely by the collective townspeople, but also by her own family. One woman summarizes the town’s dismissive disdain of Mrs. Nugent saying, “There are people in town . . . that would have shot her for five dollars.” Mrs. Nugent first becomes a focus of Bernie’s attention when he begins visiting her (as he did many other widows) to comfort her after the loss of her husband. Bernie quickly becomes Mrs. Nugent’s only friend, bringing her back into fellowship at the church and travelling the world with her, and their budding friendship grows into an inseparable and toxically co-dependent pairing. The question of romance is dismissed by the town’s majority perception that Bernie is a celibate homosexual. With Bernie’s jovial influence Mrs. Nugent’s demeanor and attitude begin improving, and the two appear to be flourishing together. During this same time, Mrs. Nugent adds Bernie to her bank accounts, makes him sole heir of her will, and grants him power of attorney over her estate. These events set in motion a crescendo that builds into the “event of the season in Carthage.”

Cut ahead two years, and the honeymoon phase of the relationship has clearly passed. The dynamic of Bernie Tiede and Marjorie Nugent’s relationship has shifted drastically. Marjorie is now depicted as having taken ownership of Bernie, manipulating him into a glorified

servant. Mrs. Nugent has returned to her former contemptibility, and Bernie has become a personal whipping boy. Bernie waits on Mrs. Nugent hand and foot while enduring her constant denigration and possible psychological abuse. “She was demanding, condescending, or even conniving; and she had intentionally put him in a dependent position. She was jealous of his time, envious of his community status, and overly generous to him so as to make him stick around.” This unhealthy relationship dynamic climaxes in a scene in which Mrs. Nugent throws a temper tantrum likened to that of a three year-old child, during which she locks the electronic driveway gate so that Bernie cannot leave the property in his car. As the bars close, the visual depiction of Bernie’s imprisonment tangibly illustrates his fully grown despair. “Basically it was like Bernie had become her property.”

In Mrs. Nugent’s final denial of Bernie’s dignity, she very unsympathetically declines to attend an important dress rehearsal for a play in which he is cast. This becomes the last straw for Bernie, who seems to have come to the end of his psychological rope. Thus, the stage is set for the town hero to become the story’s very unusual antihero.

In the next scene, Bernie shoots the 81 year-old woman four times in the back with a .22 caliber armadillo rifle. He then proceeds to store Mrs. Nugent’s body in her deep freeze to preserve it for “a proper burial.” The next time Bernie appears he is cast in an eerie celebration of his new found freedom. Bernie is shown, head thrown back, legs kicking up and down as he sings and dances a musical number for the local play. Here, in one of the director’s only veiled attempts to cast questions on Bernie’s motives, Linklater shows Bernie performing “Seventy-Six Trombones” as Harold Hill in the *Music Man*. This is more than slightly significant, as *Music Man*’s main character is a gifted con-man who rolls in from out of town, and through much false presentation, charm, and manipulation comes to compel the personal investment of the town’s

people. When he is exposed as a fraud, Hill is saved only by the towns' markedly skewed perception of the hope and transformation he has brought to the town. It is necessary at this point to question just how much similarity Bernie Tiede holds to Harold Hill.

For the next nine months, the disappearance of Marjorie Nugent draws little concern as Bernie tells those concerned that she has moved into a nursing home. "The only person looking for her was her stockbroker." During those nine months Bernie went on to disperse Mrs. Nugent's wealth throughout the town, sewing into everything from local businesses, students' tuition, children's playground equipment, and the church building campaign. While Bernie had given a ridiculous amount of Mrs. Nugent's fortune away, the film gives no indication that he had spent it on himself. Whether these were purely acts of generosity, attempts at penance, or efforts to buy the peoples' favor, Bernie's motives are left to the viewers' interpretation. Eventually, Mrs. Nugent's stockbroker, who was not getting his regular commissions on her trades, stirs up the family and local authorities and a search ensues. Upon the discovery of Marjorie Nugent's body, Bernie makes a full confession.

The town of Carthage's unexpected response is where the plot gets interesting. "From the day that deep freeze was opened, you haven't been able to find anyone in town saying, 'Poor Mrs. Nugent,'" said city councilman Olin Joffrion, a respected Carthage insurance agent. People here are saying, 'Poor Bernie.'"<sup>3</sup> In a reaction too bizarre for fiction, the people of the town unanimously side with the killer. Some could not believe he had it in him to kill a person. Others flatly refused to believe, even given the evidence. Summarizing the way in which the town processed the news, one man says, "I don't claim to know what Bernie did or did not do. I

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<sup>3</sup>Hollandsworth, Skip. "Midnight in the Garden of East Texas," *Texas Monthly* (January 1998).

figure that's between him and God Almighty. And the way I figure it, that's where it should stay." In the weeks following, it becomes abundantly evident that, despite his confession, there is not a potential juror in town willing to convict Bernie of his crime. By the movie's account, this was a first. "Trials are generally moved when the defendant can't get a fair trial locally," Bernie's defendant says. "Now that's usually because the crime is so egregious, and so well known, that everybody in the community has already convicted the . . . accused. But in all the years I've been doing this for a living I have never heard of the state seeking a change of venue because the defendant was so well liked that they couldn't get a conviction."

Enter District Attorney Danny Buck (Matthew McConaughey). Knowing he cannot get a conviction in Carthage, Buck convinces the state to move the trial 47.7 miles down the road from Carthage to San Augustine County, the "Squirrel hunting capital of the world." A Carthage resident explains that the jury would now be comprised of a bunch of "cousin counting rednecks," with "more tattoos than teeth . . . without a brain in the whole dozen of them." Buck, the multiple term District Attorney, upholder of justice, and defender of order, becomes the town villain.

At the trial of Bernie Tiede, Linklater's audience now becomes unquestionably aware that *Bernie* is recapitulating a crime story riddled with philosophical questions and social implications. To this point Bernie has been portrayed (through the eyewitness accounts of Carthaginians) in a unified positive light. Playing on the emotions of the "cousin counting rednecks," Danny Buck brings before the San Augustine jury the deep freeze, pictures of the dead Mrs. Nugent, and her crying relatives. Buck proceeds to forge an image of Bernie as a first-class-flying, uppity snob, who used Mrs. Nugent as the means to fund his expensive tastes. Bernie was a Ritz Carlton living, Les Miserables watching, fancy word using, white wine

drinking lover of extravagance. Bernie was “a liar, a coward, and a back shooter,” who shot a little old lady in the back . . . four times. Buck depicts Bernie as an inhuman, evil, con artist . . . a monster. Danny Buck had created two different worlds and painted Bernie as being of a world to which members of the jury could not relate. Bernie becomes dehumanized. Given this perspective, the jury unanimously convicts Bernie of capital murder, and sentences him to life with parole in 50 years (a conviction and sentencing typically reserved for premeditated and other more egregious acts than that which Bernie committed).

Where in Carthage, “Bernie became the town’s Robin Hood” (a character in a historic story that holds its own set of debatable ethical implications), Danny Buck convinced the people of San Augustine that Bernie was not an angel, but instead an “angel of death.” What the film captures is one group of people, with a specific set of influences, who cannot bring themselves to the exercise of reasonable justice. Another group of people, given a different set of influences, issues a sentence that unjustly exceeds the circumstances of the case. Where the truth of the matter, and appropriate justice, likely falls somewhere between the two positions, both groups exhibit grossly perverted judgments (which are heavily influenced by their specific experiences) and show themselves incapable of mustering objective responses. The reality is that there *is* an objective truth to be known. Relative “truth” is a crime in itself, and this crime has victims of its own. Many people suffer from the inability of others to see truth, and likewise when others take as dogma that which is false.

In the end, *Bernie* is a film that poses more questions than it answers. “If anything it is a film about the selective application of moral judgement based on personal prejudices. Even as the film ends it is difficult to say if it’s a story about an entire community that was deceived or if it is a story about a remarkable individual who paid dearly for his kindness through one deadly,

momentary lapse in reason.”<sup>4</sup> What is more broadly evident, however, is that Bernie is a microcosmic demonstration of the way in which societies’ worldviews drastically shape their interpretations, ethics, judgments, and their subsequent outcomes. *Bernie* raises questions about the way in which social context, personal relationships, and emotions impact the way in which people rightly or wrongly interpret reality. This movie is a commentary on life hermeneutics, the method (or unconscious lack thereof) by which people interpret the events of the piece of history in which they live. Further, people without a firm grasp on truth and morality are prepared to excuse blatant wrongdoing, or to condemn right-doing, based on grounds that lack any coherence with truth. This film illustrates that without objectivity, the “truth” becomes whatever people say it is. This translates into people being what others say they are, and justice being what the collective says it is. Like Bernie, the truth is silenced, sentenced, and ruled upon; branded anew by perverted perspectives.

This inability to escape the influence of circumstances has innumerable applications. A person cannot interpret anything apart from accessing his worldview in order to formulate his construct of reality, and his worldview is formed by the influences and circumstances of his life experience. Beyond the failure of justice demonstrated in the case of Bernie Tiede, this issue has direct application to the way in which people make moral decisions. A person’s individual bias and conditioning has a very significant impact on the way in which he interprets the Bible as well as other literature. In some way, these biases inform the way in which people interact with every thought. The ultimate question becomes, “Is it possible to set aside bias in order to interpret information in such a way as to essentially get to the truth, despite bias always

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<sup>4</sup>Brody, Richard. “Bernie in the Heart of Texas,” *The New Yorker* (April 26, 2012).

remaining technically present? Or are people always inevitably predisposed to perverted interpretations?” Will there be no ability to attain perfect truth or perfect justice this side of eternity? For the Christian, perfect truth is found in Christ and His Word, and the Christian’s desire is to have his mind transformed by the Word’s renewing power. The Christian’s hope is in Christ’s promise that “if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The Christian’s hope is for the renewing of our minds that we might be able to see more clearly what is right and good. The only answer that *Bernie* offers is that knowing what is right and good certainly won’t be the case for those who make interpretations and judgments according to the status quo. An uninformed foundation, uncritical analysis, and lack of diligence in the pursuit of truth results in real victims and drastic consequences.