



"Comedy Is Tragedy + Time": Humor and Trauma in *Life Is Beautiful* (1998)

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Abstract: This essay examines how Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (1997/1998) uses comedy to represent Holocaust trauma. Taking the proposition that comedy emerges from tragedy through time as its point of departure, it considers the ethics of humor in representing collective catastrophe. Through the film's Chaplinesque performance, fairy-tale structure, restrained depiction of violence, and Guido's imaginative protection of his son, the discussion situates Benigni within Italian cinema's treatment of Fascism and historical memory. The essay revisits debates about historical authenticity and Holocaust representation, arguing that humor can invite ethical reflection as well as controversy. It considers the limits of cinematic representation and humor's uneasy relationship to historical suffering, survival, and collective memory.

Keywords: *Life Is Beautiful* (1997/1998); Roberto Benigni; Holocaust cinema; Holocaust representation; comedy and trauma; Italian cinema; collective memory



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"Comedy Is Tragedy + Time": Humor and Trauma in *Life Is Beautiful* (1998)

Frank Tomasulo

An oft-repeated maxim about humor and suffering has been variously attributed to Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, Carol Burnett, Steve Allen, Larry Gelbart, Mel Brooks, and a fictional character played by Alan Alda in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). The formulation is "Comedy = Tragedy + Time." Can we successfully explore this old cliché to see if it has any use-value in terms of trauma and terror? Can we (and should we) find humor in excruciating personal, national, and global catastrophes? What is the role of comedy in our lives and in cinema, that is, is film comedy a positive force that provides a coping mechanism for human suffering or is it just another "opiate of the masses" that conceals the true nature of reality from our eyes? These are, of course, big questions, and the jury may still be out, unless the response is "Yes, it's both!" or "It depends on the circumstances." Examining trauma and terror through comedy may help clarify an ethical question on which critics continue to disagree.

Two personal observations. Several people of Armenian heritage whom I have met have spoken early in our conversations about the Armenian genocide of 1915 under the Ottoman government. Their accounts remind me that the memory of historical catastrophe may remain

intimate for descendants generations later; the passage of time alone does not determine how grief is expressed. In a related anecdote, the first time I met the noted (now deceased) UCLA film scholar Dr. Teshome Gabriel, he greeted me with a smile and the first thing he said was, "We have something in common... Your countrymen, the Italians, invaded my homeland, Ethiopia, in 1935." Put on the defensive, I assured Teshome that I was born in the United States many years after that military foray and that my grandparents had emigrated to the U.S. in the 1890s, well before Mussolini's reign, in fact, when Il Duce was only eight years old! Teshome's smile broadened and he explained that he was just joking, trying to break the ice. The contrast between these encounters raises a question, rather than establishing a cultural rule: why might one person use humor in recalling a national trauma while another chooses solemn remembrance?

I mention these anecdotes to introduce the roles of history, personal experience, and the passage of time in shaping how individuals and communities approach trauma and tragedy. How much time needs to pass before we can wring humor from cataclysm? Today, can we joke about Lincoln's assassination? John F. Kennedy's? Malcolm X's? Is there humor, even black humor, to be found in Hiroshima; September 11, 2001; July 7, 2005; or Pope John Paul's death? (His successor should have taken the name George Ringo!) More to the point, can a film, *Life*

Is Beautiful, and a film artist, Roberto Benigni, attempt to represent the *Shoah* with humor and without overt scenes of horror and violence? I would argue, along with Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész, that "Benigni's central idea isn't comic at all, but tragic" (Kertész, 2001, p. 271). Only the beginning of the film bears any resemblance to an old-fashioned amusement. Indeed, the star's Chaplinesque slapstick antics at the outset provide a structural contrast to the numerous horrors to follow. Even though Benigni may not have been trying to "put a happy face on the Holocaust," should the mere juxtaposition of comedy with such a horrific event be the subject of critical scorn? In short, what are the parameters and possibilities of Holocaust representation? Would our answers be the same if we are Christian or Jew? Twenty-five years old or ninety-five? British, American, Italian, or German?

Life Is Beautiful (La vita è bella, Roberto Benigni, 1998 [U.S. release; Italy, 1997])

At the 1999 Academy Awards, *Life Is Beautiful* won Best Foreign Language Film, Best Actor (Roberto Benigni), and Original Dramatic Score (Nicola Piovani). According to Miramax executive Harvey Weinstein, it also became the most successful foreign film in U.S. box-office history (Levy, 1999, p. 96). How can we explain this commercial phenomenon? Is it that "there's no business like *Shoah* business"? That the Holocaust has such inherent human interest, whether in dramatic, comedic, or serio-comic form, that its stories will attract a paying audience? Or is it that sufficient time had passed to look at other aspects of the death camps, including how

prisoners coped and how survivors maintained their sanity after their unimaginable experiences? After all, how can we say that "life is beautiful" in the face of the "banality of evil" of the Nazi regime (Arendt, 1977, p. 21) and its "public euthanasia program" and "final solution" policies?



Figure 1: Actor-Director Benigni mugs for the camera with his two Oscars.

Benigni's title echoes a line from Leon Trotsky's "Testament," written in Mexico before his death by assassination, in which he wrote, "In spite of everything, life is beautiful. Let future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence, and enjoy it to the full" (Trotsky, 1973, pp. 158–159). The contrast between a particular death and the enormous scale of mass murder raises a related representational problem. *La vita è bella* deals with one individual, Guido Orefice, who is killed in a concentration camp, and his immediate family, which survives. That single death is a tragedy, if not a martyrdom, but the millions of other Holocaust

deaths go unseen. Does this mean that Benigni did not approach the subject with due sobriety and respect?

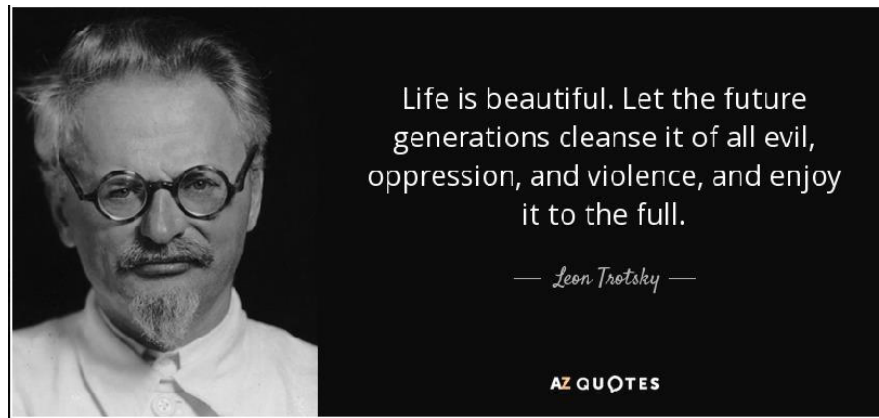


Figure 2: Leon Trotsky's "Testament".

In fact, much of the early criticism of *Life Is Beautiful* focused on the film's supposed lack of historical veracity. For example, Daniel Vogelmann, an Italian Jew who lost family members at Auschwitz, rejected the idea of presenting the Holocaust in a way that might mislead new generations into thinking the film was factual (Vogelmann, 1997, p. 1). In the United States, reviewer David Denby panned the film as "unconvincing" and "self-congratulatory," and challenged the film's treatment of Holocaust suffering (Denby, 1999, p. 96). Accompanying Denby's review was a cartoon of a concentration-camp prisoner holding an Oscar. The cartoon was drawn by none other than Art Spiegelman, the author of the Holocaust comic book series *Maus*, who called *Life Is Beautiful* a "banalization" of the *Shoah* (as cited in Polese, 1999, p. 1). Other critics offered related objections, including Kobi Niv in *Life Is Beautiful, but Not for Jews*. This dispute has also shaped scholarly discussion of Holocaust comedy and the film's

reception (Gilman, 2000; Viano, 1999). Certainly, the film adopted a visual, thematic, and comedic strategy contrary to the norms of Holocaust representation, with a few exceptions: Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940); Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942); Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1968), whose theatrical version opened in Tel Aviv to packed houses in 2004; Jakob the Liar (Peter Kassovitz, 1999); and Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties* (Pasqualino Settebellezze, 1975), another nominee for the American Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

Nonetheless, relatively few Italian films, dramas or comedies, directly depicted the *Shoah*, perhaps because of national guilt over the Fascist collaboration with Nazism. An early Italian film on the subject had antisemitic overtones: Goffredo Alessandrini's *The Wandering Jew* (*L'ebreo errante*, 1947), a portrayal of the myth of the wandering Jew who expiates his sins in the death camps. Major Italian treatments remained relatively uncommon before Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapò* (1960), which was criticized for showing too much suffering to the point of being accused of "pornography." Roberto Rossellini's *General Della Rovere* (*Il Generale della Rovere*, 1959) contained a harrowing sequence of Jews praying before their execution.

Thereafter, later Italian films presented more visually pleasing portrayals of the deportations, such as Vittorio De Sica's bourgeois Holocaust drama, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il giardino dei Finzi-Continis*, 1970), another winner of an Academy Award for Best

Foreign Film. In that film, the spectators identify with the attractive and semi-noble deportees as played by Dominique Sanda and Helmut Berger.

Benigni prepared for potential criticism of his film's verisimilitude by employing Marcello Pezzetti of Milan's Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation as historical consultant. The director also screened the movie for Jewish groups before its release. The aim was to gain the approval of the Italian Jewish community and also the expertise of its members. Benigni had seen Ruggiero Gabbai's documentary film *Memory* (Memoria, 1997), in which Pezzetti interviews Italian Auschwitz survivors. Pezzetti realized the enormous professional risk involved in aiding an actor with a comic reputation on such a delicate project; indeed, there was the danger that the film could spark a Holocaust comedy genre in the manner that Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter* (Il portiere di notte, 1974) spawned a genre of Nazi pornography films in the 1970s. If Benigni's film has roots in Italian cinema, they are in Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties*, a film that also focuses on Holocaust survival and a crude joy for life. That film opens with a depiction of barbaric executions of Jews by Nazis in which the Italians are forced to consider their own culpability as Germany's allies in the war. Wertmüller, like Benigni, was criticized for profaning the Holocaust when her protagonist, Pasqualino, is forced to have sex with the repulsive female commandant in order to survive (V. Pezzetti, 1998, pp. 1–20).



Figure 3: *The Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974).



Figure 4: *Seven Beauties* (Lina Wertmüller, 1975).

Despite the possibility of offending audiences, as did *Night Porter* and *Seven Beauties*, Benigni's strategy of recruiting Marcello Pezzetti as the front man to the Jewish community seems to have paid off. Although *Life Is Beautiful* received some criticism for its sentimental trivialization of the Holocaust, most Italian reviewers and audiences applauded it. The movie also won important awards at international film festivals in Cannes, Jerusalem (for Best Jewish Experience), Warsaw, and Hollywood. After all, Benigni did not set out to make a historically accurate movie. As he put it, "It is a fable invented from the truth" (as cited in Milvy, 1998, p. 21).

Even the president of the Anti-Defamation League defended the movie as "an important contribution to our understanding of the lessons of the Holocaust" (Foxman, 1999, p. 8).

Apparently, some felt that being absolutely faithful to some litmus test of verisimilitude was not required; just being, in André Bazin's phrase, "an asymptote to reality" was good enough (Bazin, 2004, p. 82).

As Benigni's historical consultant, Pezzetti was well aware that the overwhelming majority of Jewish children deported to Nazi killing centers were murdered and that the idea that a parent could save a child in such a setting was extremely unlikely. Yet Pezzetti claims that there were children found alive upon the liberation of the death camps, including some children at Auschwitz, several of whom had been subjected to medical experiments. In fact, accounts of children surviving Nazi persecution have also been compared with the exceptional fictional situation in *Life Is Beautiful*. For example, Joseph Schleifstein was four years old when American troops liberated Buchenwald in 1945. He had been hidden by his father in a story similar to that of Guido and Giosué, except for the fact that Buchenwald was not an extermination camp. Pezzetti also put Benigni into contact with two sisters, Anna and Tatiana Bucci-Perlov, who as four- and six-year-olds survived Auschwitz without undergoing experiments despite being separated from their mother (Celli, 2000).

According to Pezzetti, some of the most effective Holocaust films have deliberately eschewed depictions of graphic violence and horror to evoke the imagination of the spectator. Examples include *Ambulance* (*Ambulans*, 1961) by Janusz Morgenstern and *The Passenger* (*Pasazerka*, 1960) by Andrzej Munk (M. Pezzetti, 1996, p. 135). Benigni's screenwriter Vincenzo Cerami has written on the manner in which the increasing technological ability of film to portray any event has actually decreased the evocative power of the medium (1996, p.

15). With the advances in special effects and computer-generated imagery (CGI), material previously considered obscene or not shown because of the logistical expense of creating a believable representation is now readily depictable. Thus, by not showing the real horror of the Nazi camps, *Life Is Beautiful* avoids seeming fantastic. According to Cerami, the decision to limit realistic displays in the film was a conscious effort to avoid the manner in which the "hyper-reality" of the contemporary cinema has led to a lessening of film's poetic qualities (Cerami, 1996, p. 15). Even the depiction of the facility as a series of stone buildings, rather than a more realistic and historically accurate wooden frame complex, adds to the storybook setting. In addition, Benigni has defended himself against charges relating to the film's suspension of disbelief by citing Marcel Proust and Edgar Allan Poe, who felt that a story should never provide all the details but allow the participation of the reader or spectator's imagination (Grassi, 1998, p. 1).

In fact, *Life Is Beautiful* rigorously avoids scenes of overt violence or cruelty. The film largely withholds direct depictions of Nazi violence. For example, Guido is machine-gunned off-camera, our last view of him shows him hamming it up and smiling for his son. The scenes in gas chambers are of the antechambers where victims undressed and showered, not the actual death rooms where poison gas (hydrogen cyanide released from Zyklon B or carbon monoxide)

was used. Essentially, Benigni adapted an approach that recognizes the event as so vast and incredible that it defies description, especially in an era in which many contemporary spectators have become accustomed to explicit cinematic violence. The central problem of representing the *Shoah* is that the level of horror required for a realistic depiction would be so explicit that it would prevent the public from acquiring a sense of solidarity and political consciousness. Ishayahu Nir, a professor of communications at Jerusalem University, made comments in this vein on the television program in which Benigni, Pezzetti, and Cerami also appeared as part of a panel discussion (Pinocchio). One striking departure from the film's usual visual restraint occurs near its end: at one point, toward the end of the film, a stark and brutal image is shown, a mound of fog-shrouded dead bodies, but even that shot is compromised by its cinematic aestheticization. The comic register is immediately elided.



Figure 5: The camp's brick buildings in *Life Is Beautiful*.

Another aspect of this reduction of horror was the decision to present the story as a fable. Benigni has noted that *Life Is Beautiful* was inspired by the stories his father, Luigi, told him about his experiences in a Nazi work camp in Germany. The conditions in the elder Benigni's work camp were similar to those in the extermination camps, with the important difference that there were no death chambers. Benigni recalls that his father never told the story of his internment in a frightening or sad way, so as not to depress his children. This paternal use of humor and humanistic anecdotes to protect the innocence of childhood had a profound impact on Benigni, who repeated his father's approach to the subject (Simonelli, 1998, p. 7).



Figure 6: Guido's death is off-screen, his last moments are spent keeping up appearances for his son.

Of course, Luigi Benigni was not an Italian Jew but a member of the Italian Fascist Army occupying Albania. When Italy surrendered to the Allies in 1943, 600,000 Italian soldiers were deported to German camps. These prisoners "received no Red Cross aid and were ranked only above Jews, Russians, and Poles in the ethnic hierarchy of the camps" (Bendotti, 1992, p. 48).

Ten percent of those Italian prisoners died, and Benigni's dad weighed only eighty pounds upon release (Ben-Ghiat, 2001, p. 260). It is therefore unsurprising that Luigi Benigni used protective denial to tell his "war stories" to his family, and it is no wonder that Guido Orefice used the same defense mechanism to shield his son from the racial hatred that surrounded them. Perhaps it is also no wonder that writer-director Roberto Benigni used the protective denial of the fable form to protect his contemporary Italian audience from some of the ruthless repercussions of Italian fascist history and popular memory. Benigni and Cerami's script therefore functions as a parable, in which Benigni's trickster, Guido, defeats the ogres of Italian fascism and German Nazism in a fairytale format, until the very end.



Figure 7: Guido comes upon a huge pile of fog-enshrouded corpses in the camp.

By contrasting the evil of the Shoah with the innocence of a child, Benigni harks back to the greatest films of Italian neorealism: Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (Roma, città aperta, 1945) and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (Ladri di biciclette, 1948), which both

relied on the moral authority of children. Benigni's film and his co-star, the child actor Giorgio Cantarini, are clearly in the tradition of neorealist dependence on the reactions of young boys.

However, if Benigni's film owes a debt to neorealism, it is to its more poetic or magical side seen in De Sica films like *Miracle in Milan* (*Miracolo a Milano*, 1951) and *The Last Judgment* (*Il giudizio universale*, 1961), or Rossellini's *The Machine That Kills Bad People* (*La macchina ammazzacattivi*, 1952). In these films, realist filmmaking is adapted to a story with elements of a fable. In fact, Benigni has stated that his goals and approach to the cinema are quite the opposite from neorealism by citing his apprenticeship with Cesare Zavattini and his experience in Federico Fellini's last film, *The Voice of the Moon* (*La voce della luna*, 1990) (Celli, 2000).

Although, for the most part, *Life Is Beautiful* attenuates graphic depictions of evil, the horrors of the Holocaust are presented through other, less overt means. For example, the film identifies the Nazi destruction of classical German civilization. Guido spots Dora (Nicoletta Braschi, Benigni's wife in real life) in a box at an Italian performance of *Tales of Hoffmann*, by German-born composer Jacques Offenbach, who was Jewish. The "Barcarolle" theme is played, reminding the audience of the beauty of German high culture. Later, Guido becomes an aficionado of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose ideas were distorted and

demeaned by the Nazis. Indeed, Guido's re-creation of the prison rules as a game seems to be an application of Schopenhauer's lesson on the power of the will to represent or imagine (Vorstellung) the world.



Figure 8: Guido turns away from the stage and spies Dora.

The character most identifiable with the decline of German high culture, however, is Dr. Lessing (Horst Buchholz), a guest at the *Grand Hotel* (a reference to the Oscar-winning movie, *Grand Hotel* [1932]), who shares the surname of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), one of the greatest exponents of the German Enlightenment, precisely the cultural tradition that was destroyed by the Nazis. In fact, Benigni's film could be interpreted as an artistic representation of Jean-François Lyotard's idea of how the barbarity of Auschwitz rendered obsolete the scientific optimism that grew out of the Enlightenment (Lyotard, 1986, p. 12). Early on, the Lessing character appreciates Guido's company and quick wit, and he speaks Italian in the

tradition of German artists who made Italy a second home. Lessing reappears in the second half of the film as the camp doctor, a figure akin to war criminals such as Dr. Josef Mengele. Indeed, the physician's lab coat does not even hide his Nazi uniform beneath it. Because of Lessing's previous friendship with Guido, there is the expectation that he will be a "good German" who might reject the insanity of the Nazi system. Of course, Lessing is by now a broken man who is only preoccupied with solving meaningless riddles. The enigmas from the first half of the film are quite beautiful, even poetic. Nevertheless, the final nonsensical duckling riddle that Lessing asks Guido to solve suggests the failure of rational judgment in the face of Nazi barbarism. Benigni has explained the riddle as a "nonsense" that appears at a point when Guido expects a more rational response from Lessing. As Lessing's name recalls the German Enlightenment, the character's retreat into this absurdity is a deep blow for Guido and emphasizes the utter irrationality of the *Shoah*.



Figure 9: Dr. Lessing's lab coat hardly conceals his Nazi uniform.

But evil in the film is not limited to the failure of German civilization. *Life Is Beautiful* does not gloss over the responsibility of the Italian Fascist regime that permitted and aided the Nazi crimes. Indeed, the first half of the film is set in the Italy of Mussolini's victory in Ethiopia, which is celebrated at the engagement party for Rodolfo and Dora. Thus, *Life Is Beautiful* confronted Italian audiences with the image of Italy as an aggressive, warmongering nation.

Although obviously comedic in intent, Guido's disruption of the festivities (by riding a green horse into the hall) satirizes both the absurdity of Dora's arranged marriage to a fascist and the whole fascist enterprise. The film also references the regime's 1938 racial statutes (*leggi razziali*), under which Jews were prohibited from intermarriage, owning much property, and attending public schools. Again, Benigni parodies these discriminatory ethnic laws in Guido's explanation to Joshua of the signs prohibiting Jews and dogs from entering stores by making up other farcical exclusions: "No Chinese and kangaroos," and "No spiders and Visigoths."



Figure 10: Joshua reads the sign: "No Jews or dogs allowed."



Figure 11: Guido turns all prejudice into an arbitrary absurdity.

In addition, the director uses subversive satire during the minister's speech on racism at Dora's school. During the engagement party scene celebrating *Il Duce's* conquest of Ethiopia, an Italian teacher mentions the skill of German children in mathematics. According to her, the elimination of unhealthy students would save the state the money needed to sustain them. Of course, as in so many Italian movies about World War II and its aftermath--including De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, Italian war guilt is lessened by the comparison with Germany's greater culpability (Tomasulo, 2000, p. 168).

The theme of the abuse of Italian power has appeared in earlier Benigni films. In his previous films, the contrast between Benigni's jocular approach and the underlying terror of his subjects (the Mafia, serial killing) provided occasions for comedy. In spite of this, with *Life Is Beautiful*, Benigni tackled a subject whose aura of evil was much larger than the topics he had chosen before. To handle such a subject, Benigni had to challenge public and critical concepts of film genres by reversing expectations.¹

In this same self-critical vein, *Life Is Beautiful* examines the progressive dehumanization in Italy that led to the deportations of Jews and other “undesirables.” Instead of depicting fascism as the exclusive realm of brutal soldiers and brown-shirted thugs, Benigni portrays the pervasiveness of fascist and racist ideology in everyday life. For example, government service deteriorates, starting with the official Rodolfo's refusal to issue Guido a business permit to the appearance of plainclothes policemen who harass Guido with endless paperwork before his deportation. There is a jump from arrogant government service to the idea that elite functionaries can appropriate the right to eliminate entire populations because of an insane ideology. This process culminates in the transportation of the Orefice family to a Nazi extermination camp. For most of his reign, Mussolini resisted the deportation of Italian Jews to Germany. After the Allied landings on mainland Italy, however, and the subsequent armistice with Italy, the Germans occupied northern Italy and deported thousands of Italian Jews, many to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In addition, between September 1943 and April 1945, at least 23,000 Italian soldiers (including Benigni's father) were deported to work as slaves in German industry, while over 10,000 partisans were captured and deported during the same period to Birkenau. By 1944, there were over half a million Italians working for the Nazi war machine (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).

Pezzetti has defended the elimination of horror in *Life Is Beautiful* by stating that the comedic elements are limited to the first half of the film and that Benigni never laughs at the *Shoah* but rather portrays the laughter within the *Shoah*. In fact, survivors such as Viktor Frankl have described humor as a means of creating a momentary psychological distance from suffering (Frankl, 1984). In this context, Benigni's exposure to Gabbai's documentary *Memory* helps us understand the film's approach. Gabbai's film documents survivors, such as Romeo Salmoni, who describe their attempts to retain their identities through song and humor in the midst of the tragedy, an extreme example of the happy-go-lucky Italian idea of *canta che ti passa* (sing and it will pass). Still, Pezzetti concluded that Benigni was interested primarily in making a film about the love of a father for his wife and son, rather than a Holocaust film per se. Given this reaction by Benigni's own historical consultant, one is tempted to accept Vogelmann's criticism that the film might give a false impression of the evil of the Holocaust to an ignorant audience (Vogelmann, 1997, p. 1). Yet the very idea of realism in the *Shoah* is paradoxical because no amount of technical artifice can adequately portray the intrinsic evil of its cruelty and suffering. Benigni therefore decided to rely on the evocative power of the spectator's imagination to avoid the "hyper-reality" of the contemporary cinema.

It must also be remembered that the film is narrated from the perspective of the now-grown-up child, Joshua, who recites the opening voice-over, "This is a simple story.... Like a fable, there is sorrow, there is wonder, and there is happiness"--and the final words: "This is my story, the sacrifice my father made for me." It may be a cop-out but to examine history through the lens of a child's eye allows for the chance that reality and fantasy can be merged. Benigni in fact uses the naiveté and inherent cheerfulness of childhood to show the sharp contrast between the peaceful imaginings of youth and wartime reality. The comforting illusions that Guido gives his son in place of a more downbeat assessment of the life-or-death situation they are in is certainly an attempt to preserve the boy's innocence, but it is not just to hide Joshua from the unvarnished truth. Part of the basis for Guido's (and Benigni's) strategy seems to be the sense of harm that might result from the premature destruction of childhood illusions.



Figure 12: Guido looks for Dora as the whole family is deported to a concentration camp.

Just as important as the thematic messages these opening and closing voice-over narrations provide, they also add an element of omniscience that conditions the spectator's interpretation of the following sequences of the film (Chion, 1994, p. 6). The viewer is basically informed that there will be a happy ending in the opening scene since we become aware that his retrospective tale proves that the narrator, Giosué, will survive. Although Pezzetti actually voiced his opposition to the decision to allow Giosué to live, the director felt that the death of his character, Guido, was enough to imbue the film with a final sense of tragedy, especially since Benigni, who had always been a comic actor, had never died in a film before.

Pezzetti later commented that most films on the *Shoah* are portrayals of exceptions. One such example is Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa* (1991), the story of Solomon Perel, the only Jew to join the Hitlerjugend (Hitler youth, a paramilitary organization with eight million members that involved compulsory membership for all Aryan boys, aged 10-18). There is also Jack Gold's *Escape from Sobibór* (1987), a film on the only documented prisoner revolt and escape from a death camp, and, of course, Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film about the only German industrialist to save Jews, *Schindler's List* (1993). More recently, Roman Polanski's Academy Award-winning *The Pianist* (2002) portrays another exceptional situation, a Jew who escapes execution because of his musical abilities, a situation foreshadowed by the TV

docudrama *Playing for Time* (1980) with Vanessa Redgrave. In the even more recent past, two films about Jews during World War II have been released: *Defiance* (Edward Zwick, 2008), the story of a group of Bielski partisans, led by four exceptional Jewish brothers who saved and recruited Jews in the Kresy region of Poland, and the somewhat over-the-top *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), which fictionalizes the Second World War so much that it posits a special U.S. Army unit of Jewish soldiers on a mission to kill and brand Nazis in France and a grand finale that involves Hitler, Goebbels, and the entire Nazi high command being vaporized in a fire in a movie theater in 1944! A more realistic portrayal of the Holocaust should perhaps be compared to the documentaries from the Allied armies and the hidden-camera interviews of the death camp personnel in Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985); Lanzmann's account of the Sobibór revolt, one of only two successful uprisings at a German extermination camp, Sobibór, October 14, 1943, 4 PM (2001); or Alain Resnais's horrifying yet poetic and cinematic *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1956).



Figure 13: Guido tries to warn the crowd of the careening car, but they mistake it for a Fascist salute.

The visual style of *Life Is Beautiful* also makes an important political point, a factor overlooked by most critics. The first half of the film is brighter and more colorful than the scenes in the netherworld of the concentration camp. Life is relatively beautiful when there are no Nazis around: the sky is blue, not gray; flowers bloom, they are not absent. Likewise, camera and subject movement are clearly at their peak at the beginning of *Life Is Beautiful*. The film opens in 1939 with a car driving out of control. Literally, the car's "brakes are gone" but, figuratively and politically, this opening suggests that there are no brakes on Italy's Fascist dictatorship. The auto's dangerous maneuvers and the camera's movements right-to-left, against the grain of the viewer's natural eye movement, combine with the funny musical accompaniment to provide a perilous but lighthearted tone that continues as the hapless pair of men drive through a Fascist rally. Guido tries to back the crowd away from the careening car with dramatic arm gestures, but the ralliers mistake

his stiff-armed signals of warning for the Fascist salute and they automatically gesticulate back. This humorous scene makes the serious point that conformity and mesmerism were behind the public acceptance of Mussolini and Hitler. Later, Guido meets two unruly young boys named Benito and Adolfo, again underscoring and poking fun at Italian adulation of the Fascist leaders.



Figure 14: Dora falls from a hayloft and lands on Guido, who breaks her fall.

The fairytale aura is continued in the relationship between Guido and his "princess," the lovely schoolteacher Dora, who falls out of the sky (actually a hayloft) into his arms. The mistaken identity trope that often finds its way into fables occurs when Guido is mistaken for a Fascist education minister at Dora's school. Though ludicrous and absurd in performance, Benigni deconstructs and pokes fun at the myths of all racial prejudice.



Figure 15: Guido disrupts the dual celebration of Dora's engagement and Italy's conquest of Ethiopia.

That prejudice does not go away, though. Uncle Eliseo's horse Robin Hood is painted green with an inscription: "Achtung, Jewish Horse." Because Guido has seemed so acceptably assimilated, this is our first real indication that he is part Jewish. This incident, which Guido jokes about, is a foreshadowing of the more serious persecution to follow. In fact, Guido turns the tables on his oppressors by using the graffitied horse to rescue Dora from the clutches of her Fascist fiancé when he rides off with her from her engagement party, which is simultaneously a fête of the Italian colonization of Ethiopia.



Figure 16: Like James Joyce's Leopold Bloom, Guido is a keyless Jew.

Taking Dora to his home that night to consummate their idyllic fairytale romance, Guido finds that he does not have his house key. Like another Jewish "keyless citizen," Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Guido is symbolically left outside by the dominant Catholic society. Benigni shows Guido and Dora alone at night in the home's greenhouse but holds on that exact composition to show the long passage of time, and the constitution of the family, with the magical appearance of five-year-old Joshua. The day is sunny and the mood bright as Guido takes his wife to her school on his bicycle, but we also see armed troops marching through the streets and signs on the shops prohibiting "Jews and Dogs." Despite their smiles, they seem oblivious to the Italian soldier in the background menacing a shopkeeper with a rifle.

Despite this flippant attitude, the reality of racial persecution begins to impinge more and more on Guido's family life. Fascist plainclothesmen order Guido to the office of the Prefect,

his house is ransacked, and a truck finally sweeps up Guido, Joshua, and Uncle Leo for deportation.



Figure 17: Despite the family unity seen in the foreground, the background shows the Fascist context.

The sharp juxtaposition of Guido's life-affirming Italian *joie de vivre* with the Fascist scowls is not, in my opinion, a case of making light of the Holocaust or wringing humor out of inhumanity but, rather, an artistic choice to show the sharp contrast between the potential beauty of ordinary life and the dehumanization and contempt for the Other under Mussolini's totalitarianism.

As father and son are driven to the railroad station, Guido must explain the circumstances to his son. He insists that the trip is a birthday surprise for Joshua, an excursion into the country, and he elaborates further on that fantastic scenario. At the same time, director Benigni reveals more of Dora's character. Although she is not Jewish, the fairytale "princess" who was about to

marry a Fascist bureaucrat demands to accompany her loved ones to the death camp. The train is stopped, and she is allowed to board it. That train ride is a Dantesque descent into hell, with a mise-en-scène of cramped quarters, foreground bars, and barrier images that entrap the Orefice family. As the train enters the camp at night, its headlight is the only illumination in a dreary, steam-drenched infernal milieu. This shot, the first inside the prison, is such a visual contrast to life in Arezzo that it makes the cinematic distinction between freedom and slavery obvious.



Figure 18: The father tells his son that they are going on vacation, not heading to a death camp.

The women are separated from the men, and this also shows the barbarity of the Nazis, especially in the context of the strong romantic bond between Guido and Dora. Guido uses his guile to communicate with his spouse, though. He manages to briefly commandeer a microphone and broadcasts "Good morning, Princess" ("Buongiorno, Principessa," his trademark greeting) to the entire camp, a cheerful salutation that helps Dora endure her

separation anxiety and leads to her reaction shot as she listens lovingly and intently. Later, Guido plays Offenbach's "Barcarolle" theme over the prison loudspeakers to send her a private message, since they had attended the opera together. She reacts by tearing up at an open window. (Of course, a disk of "Jewish music" would probably have been banned at a Nazi camp.) What may appear to be childish pranks in perfect keeping with Guido's silly sense of rebellious humor are thus transformed into desperate acts of love by the strained circumstances and the emotional reaction shots of Dora.



Figure 19: Father and son are trapped behind bars; Dora demands to accompany Guido and Joshua

Once assigned to a barracks and given a prisoner number, Guido is subjected to the camp's dehumanizing administrative order. In one of the funniest scenes in the entire film,

Guido volunteers to translate the prison rules into Italian as they are barked out by a burly Nazi guard.



Figure 20: Guido broadcasts his love for Dora over the camp PA system.

This justly famous scene makes a farce of the strict German regulations because Guido uses the opportunity to explain the "fun and games" cover story he wants his son to believe. Here, Guido's funny "translation" is a means to an end: to make the harsh conditions more endurable for Joshua, and for Guido himself. That he takes this risk is evidence not of his insensitivity to the situation but of his protective affection for his five-year-old child.



Figure 21: For Joshua's benefit, Guido translates the guard's cruel regulations into less-harsh camp rules.

Those who complain that *Life Is Beautiful* does not present an accurate picture of life, and death, in the "work" camps may have slept through the scenes of Guido performing backbreaking physical labor and lugging heavy forges over long distances and up staircases. There are no smiles or jokes during these scenes. Neither are there any gags when Dr. Lessing returns to the plot and examines three dead inmates. Other scenes in which the atrocities of prison life filter through Guido's fanciful evasions include: Dora's awareness that the showers are actually gas chambers; Joshua's understanding that inmates were turned into "buttons and soap" and "cooked in the oven"; and Uncle Eliseo's off-screen death, when he is led to the showers by a female commandant. In that case, the guard trips as she passes Leo, who reaches out to help her up. The Nazi woman disdains his human concern and stares chillingly at the elderly Jewish captive.



Figure 22: There are no laughs as Guido performs backbreaking hard labor.

Nonetheless, it might still be said that the film avoids explicit scenes of violence or cruelty. The film's depiction of Nazi violence otherwise concentrates on verbal abuse and exhausting forced labor. Toward the end, though, Guido stumbles upon a pile of dead bodies, shrouded in fog, or perhaps in smoke from the ovens. That single image of corpses can be criticized for sanitizing mass death through aestheticization.

Rather than show the "squalid results of genocidal rage" (Ben-Ghiat, 2001, p. 255), the skeletons are arranged in a theatrical, circular composition through a dense fog, an effect that softens and poeticizes Hell in the same way that Benigni's literary hero, Dante Alighieri, did. In this scene, Guido does not try to invent a farcical explanation for the screen-filling pile of emaciated corpses to mollify his son. In this case, he does not offer a comforting illusion; instead, he just steers his sleeping son away from the gruesome sight. Hiding these ghastly realities from his son's eyes is a means to shelter Joshua's innocence and preserve the boy's childish world of

illusion, of which no child should be deprived. For the most part, the film avoids explicit scenes of cruelty. When the film alludes to gas chambers, it shows approaches and antechambers rather than the killing rooms themselves.

Ultimately, one of the harshest injections of reality is Guido's off-screen murder by a prison guard. The father's commitment to preserving his son's life and spirit, while trying to locate his wife as the camp's regimentation falls apart, results in his own demise. When Guido is taken into custody by a German guard, Joshua is hiding in a utility box nearby. Once Guido realizes that he is visible to his son, he winks and performs a comic march with a broad smile for the boy's benefit. Joshua again accepts his dad's showman-like version of reality, and the boy laughs as Guido is taken away for execution. Benigni chooses to use the off-screen sound of machine-gun fire in the alley to represent Guido's death, rather than a more sensational visual depiction. The poignancy of this finale is far subtler than actually showing Guido's demise and it also leads the viewer more easily into the concluding scenes, which focus on Joshua's rescue by a literal and figurative *deus ex machina*, a U.S. Army tank, and his joyful reunion with his mother. As the freed prisoners march down the winding road, they proceed in a slow shuffle. Some lean on their cohorts in order to walk, a far cry from the opening images of an automobile speeding down the twisty highway of life. Yes, life goes on, and, as the poetic Trotsky said, "Despite it all, life is beautiful."

Conclusion

That conditional phrase, "despite it all," represents History and, as Fredric Jameson has said, "History is what hurts" (1981, p. 102). But that "despite it all" and that "hurt" are the preconditions to humor, the "given" against which almost all comedies are enacted. As one critic put it, "Any consideration of the comic must engage with...its counterhistorical pretense, its daring attempt at erasure in the foreground of its historical backdrop" (Ezrahi, 2001, pp. 287-294). After all, where does it say that poetic license is a form of mendacity as harmful as falsification of the historical record? Where is it written that acts of the imagination must stress Thanatos over Eros?

And, in terms of *Life Is Beautiful*, comedy is used as an acceptable manner to address the still-sensitive historical subject of Italy's participation in World War II and Nazi internment camps. As is typical of the Italian cinema--from neorealism to today - *Life Is Beautiful* mainly scapegoats the Germans as the perpetrators of genocide - although it does remind Italians of their complicity through their enforcement of the Fascist racial laws, which were, by the way, approved by the Vatican as part of a return to the old papal policies of segregation, expulsion, and coerced conversion of Jews. And there are constant reminders of Il Duce throughout the movie: his photos on display in the Prefect's office, the Futurist portrait of Mussolini in sunglasses, and the monumental bust by Adolfo Wildt, not to mention the Fascist mass rallies, parades, and parties attended by ordinary Italians.

Perhaps *Life Is Beautiful* demonstrates the limits of what can be remembered and represented in Italian cinema and society, even after several decades. After all, "Comedy = Tragedy + Time," but that equation does not specify how much time needs to pass before we can deal with traumatic personal or historical realities. And until we know how much time is enough time, nach Auschwitz (after Auschwitz), then perhaps a film about the Holocaust with some comic scenes need not be judged on the basis of its historical fidelity but on its ability to become a building block of a "post-*Shoah* universe" (Ezrahi, 2001, p. 294). And that seems to be wholly within the tradition of Jewish recuperation epitomized by Sholem Aleichem, who "laughed off the trauma of history" (Roskies, 1984, pp. 163–195). Jewish traditions of humor, like those of many other communities, may thus provide a language for negotiating trauma and mourning without erasing historical suffering.

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ENDNOTES: ¹ Benigni would continue his criticism of the arrogance and cruelty of Italian imperialism in *Asterix & Obelix Take on Caesar* (1999), in which he plays Detritus, a villainous Roman officer occupying Gaul during the period of Italian history (the Roman Empire) idealized by the fascist regime.