

Life is Beautiful

Director: Roberto Benigni, Italy

Historical context

Benigni was surprised at the worldwide success of his film *La vita è bella*. The success of the film is all the more astonishing given the premises on which it was founded, premises that push the limits of what is tolerable.

In an interview, Benigni declared the following: “When this idea took hold of me, like an illumination, a revelation, I immediately recoiled. It was a reaction of fear, as though in self-defence. But I held to the idea, it kept me from sleeping, it was a sentiment so strong that the fear dissipated.”

Benigni is a breaker of taboos. With this story, Benigni, in the character of Guido, plays with danger by telescoping in the same story the ultimate horror of the Nazis’ Final Solution and the complete innocence and naiveté of a child playing a game. It is an explosive combination.

Others have tried to combine childlike humour with the theme of the Holocaust, but never with as much success. For example the French artist and Roland Topor, himself a Polish Jew whose family went into hiding during the Nazi regime, wrote a short story about a Jewish child during the Second World War who believed that the yellow cross given to identify him as a Jew was the sign that he has become “ the sheriff” of his neighbourhood. This work was highly criticized. Likewise, Yann Martel’s novel *Beatrice and Virgil* a Holocaust allegory using animals as central figures, has been criticized as being offensive and trivializing the Holocaust.

The impact of the film is no doubt related to its historical context. One might easily assert that this film would not have been accepted or produced even ten years earlier, when the pain and suffering of the concentration camps was still unbearable and still fresh in the collective memory. It may also be argued that in fifty years, when all the concentration camp survivors are long dead, the immediacy of the horror will have weakened. In this sense, one might see *Life is Beautiful* in itself as a historical turning point in the general perception of the Holocaust and the beginning of a change in the collective memory of the event. (Note: The film was in fact criticized for its treatment of the Holocaust, however ultimately its inspirational and hopeful character is what seemed to triumph in the general perception.)

What were the relations between Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany, before 1939, and after 1939?

Both ideologies (Fascism and Nazism) took hold during a national period of social and political chaos. As depicted in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, there was also a sort of a personal rivalry Hitler and Mussolini, both being personalities with exceedingly large egos. Their leadership style was also very similar: enflamed rhetoric in their public speeches, a taste for mass demonstrations, often not very tasteful but with a distinct

style, the cult of the “superior race”, obsession with largeness and grandeur, use of pomp and ceremony.

In 1936, Hitler and Mussolini concluded a strategic military alliance, the Rome-Berlin Axis. In 1939, Japan joined the Axis powers; Italy, Germany and Japan formalized their alliance with the signature of the Tripartite Pact in 1940. These three nations, at varying points joined by some other European countries (e.g. Hungary, Romania, , Slovakia, Finland) formed the main military opponent of the Allies (Canada, the US, Britain, etc.) during the Second World War.

In the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, how were non-conformist or minority groups (e.g., Jews, Communists, homosexuals) viewed?

Fascism, in the same way as Nazism and Communism, began as populist ideologies, that is, grass-roots movements that appealed to the people. (In contrast, the single-party authoritarian state of General Franco, which took hold in Spain from 1939 to 1947, relied on the traditional social structure of the Spanish power élite.) These populist movements offered to the masses of workers and the poor, mostly unemployed, the promises of a glorious future where they would take their rightful place in society. Arising out of the period of economic and social crisis following the end of the First World War and into the 1930s, these movements offered a vision of a restructured society and renewed prosperity to the working class. In the case of both Fascism and Nazism, government became single party states dominated by a single authoritarian figure. In many Communist states a similar authoritarian model was advocated. .

In the case of Nazism in Germany, a policy rapidly emerged of ascribing blame to groups that were identifiably different, such as Jews, homosexuals, Communists, the disabled, gypsies. The exaggeration or invention of differences between “The People” and “The Other” became the tools of a mass propaganda machine. In Italy as in Germany, anti-Jewish policies were popularized and enforced by reviving anti-Semitic sentiments that were already present in some quarters, as well by the identification of a scapegoat for the economic and social troubles of the time. (In Italy the Jewish community was well integrated into Italian life when the Fascists first came to power in 1922; anti-Jewish racial laws began to be imposed in 1938.) In Germany the ideology was tied to the notion of a superior Aryan race, and the supposition that other races are inferior. In Italy, Fascist ideology was tied to an extreme Italian nationalism and militarism. Benigni recounts that in his research about growing anti-Semitism in Italy during this period, often it was students who, exalted by the idea of belonging to a superior race, and seduced by Fascist ideology, perpetrated and supported anti-Jewish acts.

Were there ever concentration camps in Italy?

There were four concentration camps in Italy: three of these were transit camps, where Jews were assembled before being sent to extermination camps. On camp, the Risiera de San Saba, a former rice mill outside the city of Trieste, was equipped with a crematory and was operated by Nazis. Although Roberto Benigni has said that he did not base his depiction on any particular camp, it is clear that the factory style installations of this camp were used as a model for the film’s setting.

Questions for Reflection*

1. How does this film make you feel? What is the main impression that remains with you after viewing? Refer to specific scenes that made you feel the way you did.
2. Is this film realistic?
3. In this film, are there 'good' and 'bad' characters? What distinguishes them? Is there a continuum of characters who seem to be more, or less, evil?
4. What do you think of the character of Guido? Do you relate to him? Would you have been capable of doing what he did for his son?
5. Benigni has said that the film is a tragi-comedy. Find some examples that illustrate that this is the case.
6. In this film, is there a message? What is it? Is there more than one message?
7. It is impossible – or wrong – to use humour when we are dealing with a subject such as the Holocaust OR In a situation of extreme suffering or cruelty, only humour can save us from despair.

*Examine these questions and make notes on them while you are watching the movie. Complete your responses to these questions in your journal following your viewing of the film.

Suggested Responses to Reflection Questions

Is this film realistic?

*If students carefully view this film more than once, they may be struck by how it is bathed in an atmosphere of unreality, much like a fairy tale or fable. This unreality is reflected in the stylistic elements of the setting and décor, which call to mind the settings of Chaplin films such as **The Great Dictator** or *Modern Times*, or even some elements of Fritz Lang's **Metropolis**. This impression is reinforced by scenes such as those in the concentration camp where the prisoners are marching along as zombies, much like the workers in *Metropolis*. They may also note elements of unreality and dream in the décor that resemble the style of films by **Fellini**.*

*Benigni has openly stated that there is nothing intended to be realistic in this film. He maintains that there is nothing more powerful than evoking terror. As Edgar Allen Poe observes, when we come to the edge of a cliff and do not look, the horror is immeasurable. If we show the horror, it becomes what we show. Benigni observes that, based on what he saw, heard and felt in the accounts of concentration camp prisoners, nothing could approach the reality they experienced. (**primary sources**) Since nothing could truly capture their experience, he realized it would be pointless to try to depict it 'realistically'. How could he be realistic about a horror that was unspeakable?*

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Clearly, Guido, his family and friends are the good characters, and the Fascists are the evil characters. In the first part of the film, the fascists are shown as pretentious and somewhat ridiculous characters, much like the burlesque characters of Chaplin's old comedies, which were a source of inspiration to Benigni. But in the second half of the film, everything falls into tragedy. We see that the Italian fascists are ridiculous versions of a much more dangerous entity: the Nazis. Here, comedy gives way to tragedy. The German soldiers are cold and cruel. However, Dr. Lessing, Guido's former customer at the Grand Hotel, is somewhat different. He liked Guido and treated him with consideration. Nonetheless, in the camp he is obsessed with his games and does not even see the horrors in which he is participating and to which the Jews, including Guido, are being subjected. He seems to represent a sensitive, educated man, but one who has turned a blind eye to any sense of morality.

What do you think of the character of Guido? Do you relate to him? Would you have been capable of doing what he did for his son?

The character of Guido is an exceptional being and somewhat unreal. On the one hand, he is human; on the other hand, he seems almost not human or even superhuman. Guido is a Jew, fully integrated into Italian society, who profoundly loves his life. He has a strong sense of family and friendship; he loves his neighbour and does not seek to harm anyone. He falls madly in love with Dora and proceeds to win her over with personality, charm, imagination and humour. He then has a wonderful relationship with her as his wife, and with his young son Giosuè. He is affectionate and caring and would do anything to protect his son's innocence and his life. And we find ourselves moved by this concern.

At the same time Guido is a superhuman character, in that it is virtually impossible to imagine any human being is capable of doing what he does to protect his son. This would require a will of steel, and the capacity to face the worst kind of adversity without crumbling. These are the kinds of characteristics we see in the heroes of fairy tales or fables. Even in the first part of the film, we see that Guido has a special role in society: he goes beyond the normal in his devotion to fantasy and imagination. Wherever he goes, he introduces an element of fancy. He is capable of imposing his own vision and his own rules of the game on reality: this is evident in the scene with the key and the hat, for example. At times, his audacity is incredible, for example the scene in the school. Up to this point, Guido is in the world of Chaplin's little tramp character. It is in the concentration camp that he passes into the tragic side of reality.

Benigni has always maintained that Life is Beautiful is not a realistic film. Guido is the same character throughout and never changes, true to himself in all circumstances, much like the characters in fairy tales. He retains the same characteristics whatever happens, a bit of a wily trickster, always talking, always pretending, never realistic, never serious, even in the face of tragedy. .

Benigni has said that the film is a tragi-comedy. Find some examples that illustrate that this is the case.

There are numerous examples: one of the most evident is the scene in which a German officer calls for a translator. Guido volunteers, and with remarkable aplomb he announces the rules of the game he has invented for his son rather than translate the camp rules (which he could not translate because he does not understand German). This scene could be typically comic if it were part of a film such as Gérard Oury's The Great Stroll (La grande vadrouille), which makes fun of the Germans during the war. However, in this case, the scene takes on a tragic dimension as we share in the realization of Guido and the other prisoners that this is not a game.

More than perhaps any other film, this film plays upon the contrast between what some characters know (Guido, the other prisoners) and what another of the main characters does not know (Guido's son). This complicity of knowledge between the viewers and the adult characters in the film is unique in the history of cinema in its intensity and its implications. It engages the viewer in a very profound way, because the viewer, even more than Guido himself, knows exactly what the horror of this camp is.

In this film, is there a message? What is it? Is there more than one message?

Benigni has said that one of the messages of the film is that "Laughter saves us, seeing the other side of things, the unreal and amusing side of things, or succeeding in imagining it – this helps us to not be destroyed, not be crushed, helps us resist the worst and still sleep at night, even when it will be a very long night. In this sense, we can make people laugh and not do harm to anyone."

Another message is that the love of parents for their children is immeasurable, powerful, and a kind of salvation. This kind of love can not only save an individual, but it can also bring salvation with respect to the realities of history, to the human condition.

Another message may be seen in the title of the film itself: ultimately, that life is beautiful, and even the most terrible tragedies cannot take away that fundamental beauty of life.

In this film, pick out some scenes that have contrasting atmospheres or moods, and explain these differences. (There are many examples: e.g., the scene where Giosuè is hiding at home in his parents' house - a happy scene - and the scene in the camps where she is hiding in the letterbox, until the arrival of the Americans liberating the camp.

Choose the scenes that had the most impact on you and explain why these scenes were so powerful, and what their functions were in the film.

It is impossible – or wrong – to use humour when we are dealing with a subject such as the Holocaust.

OR

In a situation of extreme suffering or cruelty, only humour can save us from despair.