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Life Is Beautiful
Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter

Roberto Benigni in Life Is Beautiful
Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence, and enjoy it to the full.

—Leon Trotsky

In a 1987 essay entitled “Holocaust Laughter,” Terrence Des Pres notes that “one of the surprising characteristics of the film Shoah is how often Claude Lanzmann and some of his witnesses take up a sardonic tone, a kind of mocking irony that on occasion comes close to laughter.” (279) Observing that Lanzmann “seems deliberate about it,” Des Pres concludes that “if Shoah is a sign of the times, we may suppose that artistic representation of the Holocaust is changing—that it is trying a more flexible mode of response.” (280)

Ten years later, two films would prove his uncanny intuition right: Roberto Benigni’s Life Is Beautiful and Radu Mihaileanu’s Train of Life.1 Whereas the latter has not thus far raised much controversy, Life Is Beautiful has been and is the focus of unbridled media attention, enormous popular success, surprising industry recognition (in the Oscars awarded to Roberto Begnini), and some astonishing critical venom.

The Award for the Best Jewish Experience, obtained by Benigni’s daring project at the Jerusalem International Film Festival in 1998, is truly “a blasphemy,” for “the Holocaust misrepresentations of Life Is Beautiful” are “unforgivably obscene”; but “there are further horrors beyond the movie: ahistoric film critics who slaver over it, fuzzy-thinking crowds who embrace it,” and favorable Jewish reviewers “who definitely should know better.” Thus ends Gerald Peary’s review in the Boston Phoenix, leaving those who “don’t have the honor of being Jewish” with no choice but feeling intimidated.2 That moral intimidation is Peary’s strategy is clear from his review’s opening move: “Peary? My family name was Pisarevsky, changed at Ellis Island by American officials. My parents are Russian-born Jews. What you see below is, I suppose, an angry Jewish column.” Peary’s anger, however, is less cognitive than rhetorical, a justification for dismissing the film and its author while feeling good about it. Peary even calls Benigni, whose father spent two years in a Nazi labor camp, a “revisionist.”3

Peary’s is but the extreme case in a series of negative reviews that appeared in several major publications (e.g., the Village Voice, Time, and The New Republic) upon the film’s release in the U.S.4 Their dismissal of Life Is Beautiful often adopts Peary’s strategy of moral indignation. Only J. Hoberman, in the Voice, attempted a reading of the film, his anger being a cognitive tool that produces textual knowledge rather than moral outcry. Consistent with his premises, he drags Spielberg along with Benigni into the mud, for “it was Schindler’s List that made mass extermination safe for mass consumption.”

However, the existence of a very large number of non-angry Jewish reviewers belies the assumption that being Jewish should automatically lead to hating Life Is Beautiful. Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, was approached by leaders of the Italian-Jewish community concerned by and divided on Life Is Beautiful. Before viewing it, Foxman
remarked that a comic film set in Auschwitz “cannot be done, [it] is trivializing.” (Kotzin 44) He changed his mind afterwards: “The film is so poignant, it is so sensitive, it is so informed by creative genius, that the answer is—I give it a wholehearted endorsement.” (Kotzin 45) Likewise, in the Jerusalem Report, Daniel Kotzin argued, “Throughout, Benigni is walking the thinnest of lines-taking the risk in almost every camp scene of lapsing into the offensive, of cheapening his subject. It would take only one false note, one poorly judged wisecrack, to destroy the delicate fabric. Yet extraordinarily—the more so, given Benigni’s madcap movie-star persona—there are no slips, the poignant balance is maintained.” (41)

Lest we too believe, with Peary, that Jews favorable to the film “should know better,” attitudes towards Life Is Beautiful depend less on whether you’re Jewish or Gentile than on other factors. In most cases, appreciation of Life Is Beautiful is made difficult, if not impossible, by the presence of an obstacle that often goes unremarked. To understand the nature of this obstacle, let us look at the group constituted by all those who write or talk about films from a position of some authority, from local or campus paper reviewers to academic scholars and highbrow critics. An examination of the critical judgments on Life Is Beautiful, conventionally framed within a low-, middle-, and highbrow hierarchy, reveals that, within the limits inherent in all generalizations, the higher the re/viewer’s position the more negative the re/view. A case in point is what happened in Boston and New York. The two major newspapers, the Boston Globe and the New York Times, wrote about the film in enthusiastic terms. The weekly “cultural” magazines aiming at more sophisticated readers, the Boston Phoenix and the Village Voice, panned it. Likewise, most of the film scholars that I have interviewed either shrugged their shoulders or expressed contempt. Students, on the other hand, were enthusiastic, and so were several academics from disciplines other than Film Studies (including Jewish Studies). We are faced, then, with an obstacle that does not affect popular or non-specialized audiences and those who negotiate film ratings for them, an obstacle to which middle- to highbrow film authorities are more vulnerable. This is not surprising, for the obstacle belongs to the slippery terrain that the French sociologist Bourdieu ascribes to habitus as “the incorporated form of one’s class position and the conditionings imposed by it,” i.e., taste. (112) Taking Life Is Beautiful seriously goes against high cultural taste.

Taste, Bourdieu never tires of repeating, is economic and cultural capital made body. Academic film scholars and highbrow critics (people like Peary and me) usually belong to “the fractions (relatively) richest in cultural capital and (relatively) poorest in economic capital.” Artistic consumption is for us one of the most distinctive sociocultural practices. It yields distinction in the form of symbolic profit/status and distinguishes us from those who don’t know better. By displaying refined tastes in the arts, we constantly (re)define and (re)position ourselves.

What is at stake is indeed “personality,” i.e., the quality of the person which is affirmed in the capacity to appropriate an object of quality. The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest the quality of their appropriation, that is the quality of those who appropriate them, because their appropriation demands time and skills that, insofar as they require a long investment of time—like musical or pictorial culture—cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the intrinsic qualities of the person.” (319–20)
We tend therefore to valorize those films whose consumption indicates that we do not fall for the temptations of the entertainment industry (sentimentalism, media-hype, easy-to-understand plots, immediate pleasures). To complicate things further, we do not appreciate being reminded of all this, as if acknowledging the social function of our cultural habits diminished their value. Our tastes, choices, and reactions must appear to be the result of freedom, talent, and intelligence rather than sociocultural logic, apprenticeship, and privilege.

Benigni’s physical comic style has little potential for yielding such distinction. In Italy, his films do have a mass following, but they are commonly shunned by “serious” critics. Indeed, dignified aloofness typifies high culture’s reception of Benigni’s films. For example, the intellectually sophisticated Italian film journal Duel did not offer a substantive reading of Life Is Beautiful (which they had done for Titanic). Likewise, in France, the prestigious Cahiers du Cinéma refused to give Life Is Beautiful even the negative recognition of an attack, as testified by Thierry Jousse’s report from Cannes: “A totally disproportionate Jury’s special Grand Prize for Roberto Benigni’s Life Is Beautiful, which deserves neither its detractors’ angered, grand moral declarations nor the excessive praise of its supporters, who unhesitatingly compare it to Chaplin (!).” (23)

Benigni is aware of this situation, the product, after all, of the choice he made when he developed a “popular” comic style (comicità popolare). Drawing a distinction between humor and “the comic,” he likens them, respectively, to eroticism and pornography, and jokingly declares himself a pornographer, too physical and un-sophisticated to please refined spirits. (Benigni, www1) Much as he may seem at peace with the populism of his comedies, Benigni has now and then manifested his resentment at the way in which his films are rigidly typecast as “low.” Interviews with him are filled with high cultural references that often surface in his films. In fact, his respect for and increasing appropriation of a traditional cultural capital (e.g., his 1998 public readings in Florence, Rome, and New York of Dante’s Inferno) betray his anxiety over the seemingly impossible promotion of his comedies to a higher status. Benigni’s desire for a higher status is less a symptom of ambition than of a genuine wish that his ideas on comedy and laughter be taken seriously. Convinced that “laughter can save us,” Benigni resents comedy’s ancillary role (press kit 21). His latest films aim to bestow legitimacy on comedy by reframing topical issues through the subversive lens of laughter. With Johnny Stecchino (1991), for example, he confronted one of Italy’s worst scourges, the Mafia. (According to Umberto Eco, Benigni’s satire of a Mafioso’s masculinity was an effective deterrent against the fascination that the gangster image exerts on young men—more effective than the countless realistic films made on the subject. [author’s personal recollection]) In Il Mostro (The Monster, 1994), his depiction of a petty thief mistaken for a serial rapist was in many ways a regression to his earlier style of predominantly sexual jokes. On that occasion, Benigni spoke of “the big challenge of transforming a dramatic subject into a comedy.” (Benigni, www2) Life Is Beautiful constitutes Benigni’s attempt to maximize this challenge and prove his comedies’ potential once and for all: “I had this strong desire to put myself, my comic persona, in an extreme situation”; and “the ultimate extreme situation is the extermination camp, almost the symbol of our century, the negative one, the worst thing imaginable.” (Stanley 44) The Holocaust then is not an end but a means—“I did not want to make a film about the Holocaust” (Stanley 45)—the means to prove that (his type of) comedy can treat the Holocaust respectfully and suggest an outlook that tragedy is un-equipped to convey. It should be noted here that Benigni’s project, far from cheapening it, confirms the Holocaust as history’s worst nightmare and reinscribes it in the collective memory through an unusual code.

A profound historical and cultural awareness sustains the script. Take the title, for example. The film’s working title was “Buongiorno Principessa!,” a tribute to the phrase which first introduces Guido’s (the protagonist, played by Roberto Benigni) mythopoetic power to the audience. During postproduction, Benigni came across the statement “Life is beautiful” in Trotsky’s letters, written when the Jewish Communist leader, in the seclusion of his Mexican bunker, already knew that his days were numbered. Trotsky’s words immediately resonated with the spirit that animates Life Is Beautiful, and became the definitive title. As such, it operates on multiple levels. In everyday language, the expression Dai! La vita è bella! (Come on! Life is beautiful!) is often employed to cheer someone up—it asks us to look at the causes of our despair from a broader perspective. “Life is beautiful” functions on a cinematic level as well, for it links Benigni’s film with Frank Capra’s It’s a Wonderful Life and the optimism for which the Italian-American director is (in)famous.
Moreover, unlike “Buongiorno Principessa!,” the new title has no apparent diegetic justification, puzzles viewers, and forces them to ask questions. Benigni was certainly aware that, while nobody would recognize the reference to Trotsky, the title “Life Is Beautiful” would expose the film to further critical venom—“Can you imagine anyone who actually survived the camps saying that?” predictably asks Peary. Had Benigni wished to soften the prejudice and suspicion that a film portrayed by the media as “a Holocaust comedy” understandably aroused, he would have kept the original title. Evidently, artistic criteria took priority over marketing diplomacy.

Ironically, those who can make the most out of the new title—highbrow film critics and/or academic scholars—seem uninterested in doing so because their attention lies elsewhere. Benigni’s efforts are likely to go unnoticed since, superficially, Life Is Beautiful has all the qualities that most film academics despise. Their habitual distaste for Benigni’s slapstick is exacerbated by the film’s popular success and by the feel-good, Capraesque humanism that oozes from nearly all favorable reviews (e.g., “a dazzling exposition of the way in which love, tenderness and humor can sustain the human spirit under the most oppressive circumstances”). (Kotzin 40) Add to this the sentimentalism inherent in the story of a father with his innocent child in a death camp: it’s an emotional terrorism that works for “them” (the popular audience), but not for “us.” And if the obstacles of physical comedy, sentimentalism, and media hype were not enough, Life Is Beautiful is, also, not “beautiful.” Benigni is not the type of director to astonish with sweeping camera movements, against-the-beat editing, non-narrative detours. His films are not for those who value style over content, difficulty over simplicity.

It is my contention that Benigni’s unsuitability to highbrow taste prevented, prevents, and will prevent most highbrow critics and film scholars from taking Life Is Beautiful seriously. Which is too bad. If they did, they would discover what I myself was able to discover in the wake of a fortuitous event that confirms the legitimacy of my hypothesis—I know all about the intellectual bias against Benigni’s vis comica because I had it myself.

When I was invited to be the guest speaker at a preview screening of Life Is Beautiful, I hesitated. Much as I respected Benigni’s longstanding militancy as political satirist, I was no fan of his movies. Luckily, however, I accepted, and set out to do my homework: articles, interviews, and multiple viewings of the videotape. My first impression was skeptical and had it not been for my responsibilities, I would not have watched it again. But I did, and, as every film scholar knows, it is the second viewing that tells “the truth” about a film. Released from the duty of following the plot and from the pressure of laughing at gags unsuited to my taste, I began appreciating Life Is Beautiful’s quotes, internal rhymes, and intertextual links. An allegorical structure of sorts was emerging. And, far from cheapening the Holocaust, the film prodded me to know more.

A few people I know joked about how they went to see the much-talked about, touching film about a child in the Holocaust, and after half an hour asked themselves, “Did I go to the wrong theater?” With the exception of two premonitions (immediately defused by Guido’s optimistic and childishly naive nature) the first hour of Life Is Beautiful is pure farce and fairy tale romance, with no hint of the impending tragedy. Inevitably, detractors hissed that the first half betrays the director’s real interests—making people laugh—and proves his facile approach to Jewish reality. Undoubtedly, the optimistic Guido is not a realistic portrait of the average Italian Jew in 1939. But even more unrealistic is his son Giosuè (Giorgio Cantarini) hiding out in his father’s concentration camp barrack, or the cryptic image of prisoners carrying anvils all day. Everything in this fairy tale is unrealistic, or, better, has no verisimilitude. If we go to see Life Is Beautiful expecting verisimilitude, we are in the wrong theater. That even sophisticated critics, normally suspicious of the realistic expectations typical of mass audiences, resorted to criticizing the film on the basis of its violations of credibility, proves the extent to which Benigni’s parable asked them to do what they were unwilling to do: treat Life Is Beautiful as if it had been directed by someone they respect. To many, of course, the Holocaust allows for no artistic license; its depiction must obey the rules of tragic realism—the only mode/mood commonly held fit for fictions on a reality that vastly surpassed fiction. But “according to what I read, saw and felt in the victims’ accounts, I realized that nothing in a film could even come close to the reality of what happened. You can’t show unimaginable horror—you can only ever show less than what it was. So I did not want audiences to look for realism in my movie.” (press kit 19)
In fact, *Life Is Beautiful* intentionally conceals Guido’s Jewishness for about 45 minutes and rids the film’s first half of tragedy. Benigni’s choice emphasizes an uncontested historical reality—the “Italian-ness” of the Jews, their participation in Italian history at all levels. The storehouse that Guido’s uncle Eliseo (Giustino Durano) lends to Guido and his friend Ferruccio has a bed on which Garibaldi, the symbol of the Italian unification process, allegedly slept. Eliseo also mentions an original manuscript of one of Petrarch’s biographies—Francesco Petrarca being the name of the school in which a Fascist official is to explain the Race Manifesto (a quasi-“scientific” argument for the existence of an Aryan race which concluded that since Jews were not Aryan they therefore could not be true Italians) and where Guido/Benigni gives us a funny and intelligent satire of racism’s arbitrariness.

Until the late 1930s, Italian Jews lived, loved, and laughed like anyone else in Italy. Anti-Semitism did not enter official Fascist ideology until race laws went into effect in 1938 (Mussolini himself had a Jewish mistress until 1936). “The vast majority of assimilated and non-political Italian Jews reacted to the racial laws with shock and disbelief,” reports Susan Zuccotti in what has been called the definitive study of the Holocaust in Italy. (43) Although “every Italian Jew was affected,” (43) the situation was far from being homogeneous. There was even the case of Fascist Jews who blamed the race laws on Zionism and non-patriotic Jews. (Stille 17–90) Many Jews downplayed discrimination as a symptom of Mussolini’s opportunism which was aimed to win Hitler’s favor and create the possibility of forfeiture of assets as well as bribes and corruption Italian style. (“On July 13, 1939, the government introduced an Aryanization program, by which a special commission could simply declare arbitrarily that a Jew was not a Jew.” [39]) In this tragic farce, Guido’s oblivious optimism constitutes an absurd response to an absurd reality.

The intentional creation of an optimistic Jew who averts his eyes from the signs of impending tragedy is more than a reflection on the advantages of dis-identity. It serves architectural reasons. By refusing to make Guido and his uncle Eliseo icons of a foretold disaster, the film lets comedy reign supreme throughout the first half. Cleverly, something similar, but opposite, happens in the second. Shortly after the prisoners arrive the camp, we have the film’s funniest scene—Guido “translates” for his son’s benefit the camp regulations, transforming brutal commands into elaborate rules (for survival, in fact, or, as it seems to Giosuè, for winning a grand prize) and the camp guard into one of the game’s “mean guys.” It is the beginning of the “game.” It is also the end of the film’s *vis comica*, and we practically stop laughing. “In the second half, there’s only one joke, the game,” commented an academic friend of mine. He meant it as a criticism. While agreeing with his observation, I do not regard it as a flaw—quite the contrary. The lack of jokes is, of course, a sign of Benigni’s respectful restraint. But letting go of comedy’s prime objective—laughter—serves architectural reasons. It purifies, as it were, the second half, so that tears replace laughter, fear replaces optimism. *Life Is Beautiful* has a remarkable architecture because it creates a filmic space that is virtually symmetrical.

It is, however, a weird symmetry. Far from producing the sense of balance and comforting harmony traditionally associated with it, symmetry here diverts viewers by forcing them to experience the anxiety of an unexpected schizophrenic attack. *Life Is Beautiful* splices together two halves that are, in fact, recalcitrant opposites, one the negation of the other: slapstick comedy and tragedy. The legitimacy of the film’s aspirations to be treated seriously starts here, in the deliberate and uncommon short-circuiting of two modes of representation that may tolerate, and even profit by, mixing, but cannot be merely juxtaposed without seeing their identities and effects unpredictably altered. *Life Is Beautiful* is not just tragi-comic but it is first comic and then tragic. There is quite a difference between thinking of a film as a mixture of comedy and tragedy, the tragi-comic, or as a juxtaposition of two symmetrical and mutually negating spaces. The former is a healthy if occasionally disturbing mix, aiming, as a rule, to either make comedy serious by bestowing gravity on its lightness, or, conversely, to defuse the depression provoked by tragedy. The latter is uncanny and unsettling, potentially sickening and always disorienting, insofar as spectators are forced into a schizoid experience. In a sense, *Life Is Beautiful* successfully helps its viewers to imagine what many Italian Jews must have felt, the eruption of absurdity and the transformation of one reality into its opposite. This is how *Life Is Beautiful* is faithful to reality—it dramatizes its deepest implications. It is faithful to reality in spirit and not in the letter.

I propose to look at the film’s formal arrangement as a spatio-temporal allegory. Spatially, the two opposites are kept separate and yet overdetermine one another, a bit like the Yin-Yang symbol, where the black and the white are well defined and symmetrically juxtaposed, but each contains a speck of the other as a memento of their interdependence. Temporally, as Benigni himself reminds us through a humorous pun that works
only in Italian, we are reminded of the devastating wisdom of the Old Testament’s most mysteriously modern book, the Qohelet: “A time to laugh, a time to cry.” Life Is Beautiful’s architectural schizophrenia suggests the irreconcilable duality in human history.  

Seen in the light of the film’s architectural allegory, both ending and beginning deserve attention. The ending seems to repose schizophrenia by first violating and then upholding the rules of comedy. Predictably, detractors concentrated only on the happy half, on the “many, many from his camp (too many) who survived” and who “seem immediately happy.” (Peary) True, there is a sunny feeling about the last few minutes of the film, but it cannot be seen in isolation from the fact that Guido, the protagonist of what is perceived as a comedy, dies. And the abbiama vinto! (we won!) at the end of Life Is Beautiful is not the happy ending that seals a trivialized Holocaust—it is the griefstricken cry of triumph with which a people marked for extinction transformed their darkest hour into a new beginning.  

The film’s beginning is retrospectively so revealing that viewers should be forced to see it again after the end. The credits flash on the images in an unusually slow and unpredictable manner, and cover three sequences. In the first, we get a shot of Guido, in a camp uniform, walking with his son asleep in his arms. Fog makes vision difficult and a voiceover reminds us that the film we’re about to see is a fairy tale (and therefore demands the suspension of the rules of realism). As if to make sure that we don’t miss the prescription of fabulous semiotic lenses, the word fairy tale is uttered twice in the space of one short sentence. Also, (Italian) viewers are immediately aware that the voiceover is not Benigni’s. Whose is it then? Only by the film’s very end, in the scene of the “many, many, too many” survivors in the sun, do we find out that the voiceover is Giosuè’s, Guido’s son, who then retrospectively becomes the narrator of the film. Life Is Beautiful is the grateful recollection of a son who commemorates his father’s sacrifice in a spirit that would have pleased him.  

Giosuè’s voiceover begins and ends the film, imparting a circular shape to it. But the first shot’s pivotal function extends beyond the voiceover. It is also a flash forward, for, some twenty minutes before the end, we return to the same shot. Walking with Giosue in his arms, Guido mutters to himself, “What if this were nothing but a dream?” And immediately we get a POV-shot of a heap of corpses: what looked like fog is in fact smoke from incinerated bodies. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a more effective way of making the first sequence resonate with the rest of the film.  

The second sequence contains, barely disguised in the sudden eruption of freewheeling slapstick, a ritual invocation to the creative muses and another prescriptive gesture. The scene per se is unfunny, a predictable brake failure in a car speeding downhill. In the allegorical scheme, it draws a tempting analogy between the zig-zagging vehicle containing the author and the film itself. The image of a car without brakes that cuts through the fields downhill, however silly, is then at once the material support of a slapstick routine (it has, in other words, a diegetic role) and an apt allegorization of the text as an intoxicated/intoxicating fairy tale that will stray not only from the rules of realism but also from those of fairy tales themselves.  

The third sequence shows Guido’s accidental encounter with his Princess-to-be, Dora (Nicoletta Braschi), and offers the first example of what is in fact the true common thread uniting the two halves, the one thing capable of running through both “the comic” and “the tragic,” that is, the game. The game does not start in the camp, it starts with the courtship of Dora—hence the film’s working title “Buongiorno Principessa!” The game is the ability to transform each event into another story, the possibility that what happens in the unfolding narrative called reality may have another meaning in the make-believe text spun by Guido’s imagination.  

The game opened by “Buongiorno Principessa!” consists then in the art of living life as if it were an allegory to which our imagination can provide the key. Each occurrence can be lived in its humdrum, material significance, and/or it can also be seen as the indication of another text. When Guido calls out “Maria!” and a much-needed house key drops from a window as if by magic, he is successfully superimposing his own mythical story onto normal, everyday events. By saying “Buongiorno Principessa,” he spellbinds Dora into believing that she too is part of a fairy tale. “Buongiorno Principessa” is the invitation to enter a mythical world in which our life overflows with secret connections and possibilities within our reach, provided that we awaken to them.  

The game, then, has a name: spirituality. Spirituality, of any kind, is going to demand a similar move
from you: that you stop thinking that our life has only one dimension/reading. You can reject the game/spirituality, and roast and boast in the material world; or you can conceive the possibility that everything that happens here and now, in history, can be wrenched away from a narrative that is increasingly devoid of sense, and can be grafted onto another story, another realm. Indeed, our take on the game depends on our willingness to take seriously the sudden eruption of spiritual needs that characterizes this end of the millennium: Where do we stand? And the question of Life Is Beautiful’s alleged revisionism should be thus reformulated: Is it morally legitimate, when representing the Holocaust, to suggest that spirituality provides the key to unlock the camps’ doors? The game is also at one with the fairy tale—or better, the game consists in being able to live your life as if it were a fairy tale, a mythical world populated by gods and monsters. The Holocaust was the result of Nazi terror and Judeo-Christian history; but it was also the possession of some humans by the very demons they had unleashed. It is not a matter of choosing one reading instead of the other—both explain what happened. That’s what life as an allegory means. That is why Life Is Beautiful’s fairy tale can lift us from the Holocaust—not because the Holocaust has been cheapened but because our spirit has been enlarged. And furthermore, as a fairy tale, Life Is Beautiful is itself an enactment of the game. Benigni’s film is the dream that comedic imagination triggers in our minds once we take seriously the question Guido asked shortly before discovering the heap of corpses: “What if this were nothing but a dream?” Differently put, the film/fairy tale/game suggests that we regard even the worst of nightmares as parts of a dream.

Life Is Beautiful is not the first film to try a comedic approach for the depiction of Nazi monstrosity. Chaplin’s The Great Dictator (1940, Guido’s number in the camp is the same as Chaplin’s Jewish barber’s), Lubitsch’s To Be or Not To Be (1942), and Mel Brooks’ 1983 remake of the latter had already done that. Of course Chaplin’s and Lubitsch’s films were pre-Holocaust, but they can be considered as predecessors of Life Is Beautiful. Their authors thought that comedic spirit and laughter would constitute a weapon and a medicine, a resilient response to an enemy who expected only tragedy’s lament.

In addition to these films, a small but significant body of literary works has dared to stray from realism and high drama to introduce “the comic”: Tadeusz Borowski’s This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen (1948!); Andre Schwarz-Bart’s The Last of the Just (1959); Jurek Becker’s Jacob the Liar (1969); Leslie Epstein’s King of the Jews (1979); Aron Appelfeld’s Badenheim 1939 (1980). Art Spiegelman’s Maus (1986) successfully proved that even comics could respect the Holocaust and provide yet another tool for the dissemination of its memory.

Of course, the crucial theoretical piece in the debate sparked by the juxtaposition of laughter and the Holocaust is Des Pres’ “Holocaust Laughter,” in which he argues that This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, King of the Jews, and Maus not only respected the Holocaust in spite of their generic transgressions but turned out to be more effective than most tragic, realistic portrayals of it. For “it’s not fear and sorrow we need more of, but undaunted vision. The paradox of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits us a tougher, more active response.” (286) Des Pres finds that “tragedy and lamentation affirm what is and proceed largely in a mimetic mode” so that we are “forced to a standstill by the matter we behold.” (279) But these three books “as works of art that include a comic element . . . give us laughter’s benefits without betraying our deeper convictions.” (286) Des Pres’ brilliant discussion opens up fascinating questions. If realism is all that is allowed in cinematic representations of the Holocaust, where can we go next? Should we expand the Schindler’s List model, piling horror on horror, pity upon pity? Should we escalate the representation of violence by becoming more graphic and tragic? Aside from the fact that realistic films may give the false impression that the Holocaust can be represented, “serious” comedy (which, like Life Is Beautiful and Mihaileanu’s Train of Life, does not laugh at the Holocaust but against its deadening weight) may constitute a viable option. Provided of course that we take it seriously.

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Different versions of this article will appear in Annali d’Italianistica, and in Jewish Social Studies.

Notes

1. Train of Life will be released in the U.S. later this year. It played at the Boston Jewish Film Festival in November 1998 and the Mill Valley Film Festival in October 1999. It tells the story of a French Jewish village whose elders decide to dodge the Nazi by “deporting themselves.” They buy a train, make German uniforms for half of their men, and pretend that the entire village is being deported to Auschwitz, when, in fact, the train is trying to reach Palestine. Despite its failure to do so, there is still a bravura, upbeat feel to the film.
2. Legend has it that Chaplin, asked on the occasion of the release of The Great Dictator whether he was Jewish, replied: “I don’t have that honor.”

3. My using Peary on Life Is Beautiful as the exemplary “bad review,” has nothing to do with what I think of his other writings. My attack is ad positionem and not ad hominem. Besides, his review of Benigni’s film is exemplary to the point of unconscious self-parody and I could not avoid making him into a strawman of sorts.

4. Stanley Kaufmann, New Republic, November 23, 1998, pp. 26–7, another mixture of poorly digested press kit and thundering anathemas. Kaufmann goes so far as to suggest that “apparently he [Benigni] couldn’t devise enough material to set the whole film in the camp, so he fills the first half of the picture with his slapstick (silhouette) adventures.” Richard Schickel, Time, November 9, 1998, pp. 116–17. Arguing that the film “trivializes the holocaust,” Schickel suggests that “sentimentality is a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgment and moral acuity, and needs to be resisted.” With all due respect, I would like to remind Schickel that he writes for a magazine which is a transparent vehicle of dominant ideology and as such does what he accuses Beginni of doing: it robs its readers of judgement and, yes, moral acuity. J. Hoberman, the Village Voice, Oct. 27, 1998, p. 98. I mention his review here only because he ultimately voiced a negative judgment. I have, however, no problems with this stand, since he takes the film seriously enough to turn the review into a site for useful information and stimulating opinions. When he concludes that “in its fantasy of divine grace,” Life Is Beautiful “is also nonsense,” he actually uncovers what most reviews (positive or negative) missed: the film’s spiritual dimension. Indeed, it is a tribute to Hoberman’s intelligence and professionalism that his “negative” review does a better job on Life Is Beautiful than many of the opposite sign.

5. I accessed this interview on the WWW. It can be downloaded from: http://www.isg.it/pubb/2001/intb/intben.htm. This is one of the interviews that fueled my conviction that Benigni has a wide range of cultural interests ranging from Buddha to Schopenhauer, from Dante to St. Francis, etc. Considerations of space kept me from providing a history of Benigni’s cultural/cinematic career (see Simonelli & Tramontana, and Martinelli, Nassini & Wetzl).

6. Due to lack of space, I cannot discuss writer Vittorio Cerami’s vital collaboration with Benigni in the film script (cf. bibliography on Benigni). Already a collaborator of such directors as Pasolini (e.g., Hawks and Sparrows) and Amelio (e.g., Open Doors), Cerami co-wrote Benigni’s last four films. Everything I say about the script must be thought of as the result of a collaboration rather than the work of a single auteur.

7. This image, actually, is a visual quote from Accattone. During his ill-fated attempt to reform, Accattone tries working. He has to unload huge scraps of iron, all day. After a while, he collapses with fatigue and exclamations, “Where are we, in Buchenwald!”

8. Un tempo per ridere, un tempo per piangere: In Italy, film showings include a break in the middle, the two segments of the film being called “primo tempo” and “seitndo tempo.”

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