

Fantasy as Defensive Mechanism: Reading Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*

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Fantasy as Defensive Mechanism: Reading Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*

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in Partial fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the titled “Fantasy as Defensive Mechanism: Reading Roberto Benigini’s Life is Beautiful” is record of studies carried out by Poornima Mohan, Reshma S Nair, Sanchana A, Sandra J P, Sharanya S R, at the Department of English, All Saints’ College, under my guidance and submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfillment of Degree of Bachelor of Arts, First Degree Programme in English Language and Literature.



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DECLARATION

We hereby declare that the dissertation entitled “Fantasy as Defensive Mechanism: Reading Roberto Benigni’s Life is Beautiful”, is a record of research work carried out by us at the Department of English, All Saints’ College, under the guidance of Dr Kavitha N, Assistant Professor, Department of English, All Saints’ College, under my guidance and submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfillment of Degree of Bachelor of Arts, First Degree Programme in English Language and Literature.

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PREFACE

Life is Beautiful is a 1997 Italian comedy-drama film directed by Roberto Benigni. The movie unfolds smoothly and as time progresses, the subtitles seem to go away. *Life is Beautiful* also proves that what the Nazis did to the Jews can be made into a comedy without making fun of the actual event. As the movie goes on, it is obvious just what the fate of most of the men and women in the camp is, but Benigni's constant flow of energy almost puts the audience into the eyes of the kid and lets us forget about those horrors. Thus film provided us with something that everyone in one or another shape or form needs –Hope.

The dissertation has been divided into three chapters. Chapter one opens into the introduction of the film, it's summary, settings and background. Chapter two of the film inspects how fantasy and imagination, employed in the film against fear and anxiety thus shedding light and insight into the beauty of love and life in general. Chapter three deals with the significance of positive approach employed in the movie and why it is important in present society.

Chapter One

Introduction

Life Is Beautiful (La Vita e' Bella) the Grand Prix winners at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, is much like two movies in one. In tone, powerful, and the other is light, airy, and a little silly. It is a Holocaust comedy directed by Roberto Benigni and the producers are Gianluigi Braschi and Elda Ferri. The script is written by Vincenzo Cerami and Roberto Benigni himself. Roberto Benigni was also the main character of this movie. Simona Paggi is the editor of this movie. It was distributed by Miramax Film and released in Italy on 20 December 1997. The main actors in the film are Roberto Benigni as Guido Orefice, Nicoletta Braschi as Dora Orefice, Giorgio Cantarini as Giosue Orefice, Giustino Durano as Uncle Eliseo, Horst Buchholz as Doctor Lessing, Marisa Paredes as Dora's mother. The duration of this movie is 116 minutes and it is a movie which is using 3 languages; Italian, German, and English. This film was inspired by the Italian author Rubino Romeo Salmoni's memoir *In the End, I beat Hitler*. The work recounts his experiences as a survivor of Auschwitz 11- Birkenau during Holocaust incorporating elements of irony and black humour.

The movie is the product of comic sensation Roberto Remigio in Benigni, born on October 27th 1952. Early years Benigni was born Misericordia, a frazione of Castiglion Fiorentino, province of Arezzo and raised in Manciano. In 1958 Benigni's family moved to Vergaio, near Parto. When he was fourteen he joined the circus, where he learned some gymnastics and pantomime. His popularity increased with another Arbore's show, *L' altra domenica* (1978), in which Benigni portrayed a lazy film critic who has never watched the movie he is called to speak of. As Filmography of director, he has made several movies such as ; *You Upset Me* in 1983; in 1984 he made *Nothing left to Do But Cry*; *The Little Devil* in 1988; in 1991 *Johnny Stecchino*; *The Monster* in 1994; in the beginning of 20th century in

2002 he made *Pinocchio*; and his latest movie *The Tiger and The Snow* in 2005.

The film was financially successful, earning 23 million euro in Italy (1997-1998). In the United States, the film earned \$59 million. The movie was shown at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival winning the Grand Prix of the Jury. It also won the nine David di Donatello Awards (including Best Film), five Nastro d' Argento Awards in Italy, and two European Film Awards the Academy Award for Best Music, and Best Foreign Language Film and Benigni himself won Best actor for his role. The film was additionally nominated for Academy Award for directing, the film editing, best picture, and best original screenplay. Despite a strong performance at the box office, many reviews were critical of the film for its use of humour in describing the Holocaust.

Hitler rose to power in Germany in the 1930s during a period of depression and discontent. Many German's felt that Germany had been unfairly treated by The Treaty of Versailles after World War One and they were suffering from the effects of massive unemployment and poverty in the wake of the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Hitler offered German's a chance to rebuild their country and regain national pride and therefore appealed to broader range of people than a right-wing political party like the Nazis would normally have appealed to. Once he took power, Hitler set Germany on a course towards war with the rest of Europe and this war broke out in 1939. Hitler set out his views and policies on race in his book *Mein Kampf*, which extolled the virtues of the 'pure Aryan race' and blamed Europe's problems on the Jews.

During the war, Hitler put his ideas into action by setting up, at first, concentration camps where Jews, slaves, gypsies and other 'undesirables' could be sent as slave labour. Later, many more camps were built throughout the conquered countries of Eastern Europe, and Hitler embarked on his campaign to eliminate the Jews. Over six million of them were killed in the death camps up to the end of the war, along with millions of prisoners of war

from Russia and people of other nationalities.

In Italy, another Fascist dictator was in power, Benito Mussolini. Mussolini had been Prime Minister of Italy since 1922, put there largely by many of the same conditions that existed in Germany during the inter-war period. During the first sixteen years of Italian Fascism, Mussolini had openly ridiculed the racial doctrines of Nazi Germany. In 1933 when Hitler came to power, Mussolini reaffirmed the importance of national pride, regardless of race. In 1938, however, Mussolini cemented a military alliance with Hitler, and Italian Fascism started to change. This is the time that *Life Is Beautiful* opens. It is a time of transition, and the dangers of German-based Fascism are still not recognised fully in Italy.

Italian Jews were excluded from public jobs, public schools and many professions. But persecution did not lead to extermination in Italy until the end of the war. In September 1943, the Italian government, seeing it had lost the war, deposed Mussolini, made a separate peace with the Allies and tried to withdraw from the conflict. The German's then occupied most of Italy and started deporting Jews. In the 18 months of German occupation, some 8,000 of the roughly 4,500 Italian Jews were arrested and deported. Compared with most other countries in Nazi-occupied Europe, a high percentage of Italian Jews survived, largely because of their close-knit ties with their non-Jewish neighbours. But the vast majority of those deported never returned.

The film is divided into two halves: the first half introduces the characters and establishes their life together; the second half of the film examines how the bonds of love and family are sustained, even under the most horrific circumstances. The film is a fictional account of actual experiences of the Holocaust.

The film opens with Guido Orefice is a young Jewish man who arrives to work in the city where his uncle Eliseo runs a restaurant. Guido is comical and sharp and falls in

love with a girl named Dora. Later, he sees her again in the city where she is a school teacher and set to be engaged to a rich, but arrogant, man, a local government official with whom Guido has regular run-in. Guido sets up many “coincidental” incidents to show his interest in Dora. Finally, Dora sees Guido's affection and promise, and gives in, against her better judgment. He steals the lady from her engagement party, on a horse, humiliating her fiancé and mother. They are later married and have a son, Giosue, and run a bookstore.

After World War II breaks out, in 1944 when Northern Italy is occupied by Nazi Germany, Guido, his uncle Eliseo, and Giosue are seized on Giosue's birthday. They and many other Jews are forced onto a train and taken to a concentration camp. After confronting a guard about her husband and son, being told there is no mistake, Dora volunteers to get on the train in order to be close to her family. However, as men and women are separated in the camp, Dora and Guido never see each other during the internment. Guido pulls off various stunts, such as using the camp's loudspeaker to send messages to Dora to assure her that he and their son are safe. Eliseo is murdered in the gas chamber shortly after their arrival. Giosue narrowly avoids being gassed himself as he hates to take baths and showers, and did not follow the other children when they had been ordered to enter the gas chambers and were told they were showers.

In the camp, Guido hides their true situation from his son. Guido explains to Giosue that the camp is a complicated game in which he must perform the tasks Guido gives him. Each the task will earn them points and whomever gets thousand points first will win a tank. He tells him that if he cries, complains that he wants his mother, or says that he is hungry, he will lose points. Giosue is at times reluctant to go along with the game, Guido convinces him each time to continue. At one point Guido takes advantage of the appearance of visiting German officers and their families to show Giosue that other children are hiding as part of the game, and he also takes advantage of a German nanny

thinking Giosue is one of her charges in order to feed him as Guido serves the German officers. Guido and Giosue are almost found out to be prisoners by another server until Guido is found teaching all of the German children how to say "Thank you" in Italian.

Guido maintains this story right until the end when, in the chaos of shutting down the camp as the Allied forces approach, he tells his son to stay in a box until everybody has left, this being the final task in the competition before the promised tank is his. Guido goes to find Dora, but caught by a German soldier and decided to murder him. While he is walking to his death, Guido passes by Giosue one last time and winks, still in character and playing game. Guido is then shot and left for dead in an alleyway.

The next morning US Army unit led by a Sherman tank arrives and the camp is liberated. Giosue is overjoyed about winning the game (unaware that his father is dead) and an American soldier allows Giosue to ride on the tank. Giosue soon spots Dora and reunites with his mother. While the young Giosue excitedly tells his mother about how he had won a tank, just as his father had promised. The adult Giosue, in an overheard monologue, reminisces on the sacrifices his father made for him and his story.

Life is Beautiful has been shown through an analysis of Guido's character that the film is a fable centred on the idea of love, and by deducing the reasons why Guido acts the way he does, it can be seen that none of the humour is aimed at any part of the Holocaust and the subject matter is indeed the human spirit. This is all while keeping in mind that much of the action onscreen is actually represented as part of Giosue's memories and therefore is not meant to be completely historically accurate. The reality of the film is unexpectedly fought against with fantasy and imagination, this interplay of fear and fantasy becomes the central point of the film narrative. There are other films of similar approach such as Radu Mihaleanu's *Train de vie* and Peter Kassovitz's *Jakob the Liar*.

Chapter Two

Fantasy and Imagination: A Defence Against Fear and Anxiety in

Life Is Beautiful

In many ways, the world of Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* functions as a stage upon which the affable Guido Orefice (Benigni) attempts to impose his fantasies and imagination on reality. In the film's 'romantic comedy' first half is packed with a kaleidoscope of jokes, games, role plays, moments of magic and fantasy. Guido playfully feigns the role of a royal prince in order to win the heart of Dora (Nicoletta Braschi) from her boorish and Fascist fiancé. Guido's surroundings seem kind to him in this regard, as he stumbles into luxurious rolled-out red carpet and a white horse that fill out the fairy tale constructed by him for his princepsa. In the latter half – which has attracted much more critical attention than the former, both positive and negative, given its Holocaust subject matter – set five years later, after the birth of their son Giosue (Giorgio Cantarini), Guido attempts to resignify his family's imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp by pretending that it is an innocuous game for Giosue's benefit. Although Guido is eventually killed by a Nazi guard as the camp is being liquidated, this performance is also somewhat successful. Like Guido's ability to win Dora by acting out a fairy tale in pre-war Fascist Italy, Guido's theatrical construction of the concentration camp experience as a game leads to Giosue's survival. After being rescued by American liberators and reunited with Dora on the road away from the camp, Giosue jumps into her arms with a victorious, 'We won!' As the film ends with a freeze-frame of this mother-son reunification, *Life Is Beautiful* seems to conclude with affirmation of its implicit moral that even in the most trying circumstances, '*Life Is Beautiful.*'

The first part opens with Guido and his friend Ferruccio (Sergio Bustric) are driving on a country road towards Arezzo to work for Guido's Uncle Eliseo (Giustino Durano).

As Guido naps in the passenger seat, Ferruccio recites a poem as he drives before realizing that the brakes have failed. Guido initially misrecognizes Ferruccio's expression of panic as merely a part of the poem, failing to comprehend the severity of their predicament until the car is completely out of control. This misrecognition of reality and performance quickly assumes a political stance as the two men careen towards a Fascist celebration. Guido madly gestures for the participants to get out of the way of the car, which they do, but mistakenly perceive Guido's arm movements to be a Fascist salute, which they return. After their car finally stops and Ferruccio attempts to fix the breaks, Guido meanders away and light heartedly tells a young girl that he is a prince, and that the land they are on belongs to him. He then alludes to Mussolini's brutal 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by playfully telling the girl that he will rename the area Addis Ababa, and replace the cows with camels and hippopotamuses.

Guido: Nice to meet you, I'm Prince Guido!

Eleonora: Prince?

Guido: Yes, I'm a prince. All this is mine, this principiate is the Prince's principiate. We'll name the place Addis Ababa. Out with the cows, in with the camels!

Eleonora: Camels?

Guido: Even a few hippopotamus! I have to go. I have an appointment with the princess.

Guido's make believe adoption of a royal stature is the first explicit example of how he uses his imagination, fantasies and good-natured performance throughout the rest of the film serve to distort the brutality of the danger that surrounds him. While Guido's reference to Addis Ababa suggests that the racialized colonialism of Italy's recent past is not completely lost on him, the fanciful rhetoric that he uses to present himself as royalty

hardly captures the severity of Mussolini's totalitarian regime.

The film's catch-phrase, and indeed working title during production was 'Buongiorno principessa!' ('Good morning, Princess!'), the phrase Guido impulsively invents on first meeting Dora and then breathlessly endeavours to repeat as a means to conquering her love. Here Guido creates fictitious world around him. Though they both know the truth, they both are more than willing to entertain the fantasy and play the game. In this way, Guido's fictions are a form of escapism, a way for him to cope with reality and imbue it with beauty.

Guido as an innocent bungler lurches from one situation to the next, treating his life opportunistically. His inner journey towards is directed by circumstances he finds himself in and his ability to take advantage of those circumstances. This is further demonstrated when, while making his escape, he crashes into Dora, who is with a group of school children in the town square. Although keen to get away from the pursuing official, Guido takes the time to 'woo' Dora with his greeting of 'Good morning, Princess', as he helps her to her feet. His charming smile and bow, the change in the background music to the original theme and the mid-shot of a wishful Dora looking after Guido as he runs off down the street, all reinforce that Guido's inner journey at this stage is the quest for Dora. He is inspired by any situation. He finds himself in, be it positive or negative. Dora is also on an inner journey that will change the course of her life. Each meeting with Guido is forcing her to reassess what she thinks of him. He has attracted her attention with their unusual meetings and she is taken with his open and decidedly unusual approach to life . After only two meetings, Dora has already been challenged by Guido to consider the power of imagination.

Guido has a truly unique view of romance: he approaches it almost like a game having the object of winning Dora's affection. He employs many of his skills (both real and

imagined) quick thinking, Schopenhauer's Method, wit, and humour – in his seduction of Dora, and he ultimately emerges victorious. Even though Dora is engaged to a wealthy man and moves in decidedly different social circles than Guido, she cannot help but be enraptured by his joyful approach to life and the magic that seems to follow him wherever he goes.

Very few of the characters in *Life Is Beautiful* are stereotypes; most are layered, deeply complex personalities, with a variety of political beliefs and attitudes towards life. Even in this context, Dora is particularly interesting. She is the romantic heroine and the object of Guido's adoration, but she also has some faults. She seems to be willing in her relationship with a man whom she clearly does not love, and she comes across as somewhat petulant and bratty, when told that she and Amico have been invited to the Prefect's house for dinner. Quickly, however, a different side of Dora emerges when she is around Guido: her eyes light up, and she opens herself to the magical world that he shows her. She also abandons her somewhat stuffy persona. Although she was annoyed with Amico for failing to retrieve her with an umbrella, she soon strolls through the piazza with Guido holding a cushion over her rear to cover the hole in her dress.

Guido approaches life as he does most everything in life: with humour and a determination to find the magic in any situation with a touch of imagination and fancy. One of the most beautiful moments in the film occurs when Guido stops Dora from walking down a long flight of steps, fearing that she will get her feet wet; he unrolls a long bolt of cloth, creating a luxurious red carpet for them to step on as they descend into the piazza.

Even Dora puts her faith in the remarkable pattern that seems to occur whenever Guido is around, calling out to the Virgin Mary to bring her friend a dry hat. Of course, Guido has predicted that Oreste would exchange Guido's hat for his own and has seeded the situation so that the coincidence would occur. Dora's mouth drops open in shock, but

she no longer seems to question why such things happen to Guido. It is more than coincidence, luck, and careful planning in such situations; they require Guido's attitude towards the world around him and his willingness to believe that extraordinary things can happen.

At Dora's engagement party Guido continues to turn negative experiences into positive ones. He uses the green horse to rescue Dora from her stifling existence as Amico's fiancée. When he rides the horse into the ballroom, gathers Dora, and sets off into the coming morning, he transforms all the negative parts of the day into a "knight on horseback" moment. Still, the strange circumstances of the event make fun of the courtly ideal. Guido can find levity and hope in even the most oppressive, frightening circumstances.

When Dora and Guido return to Eliseo's house on horseback, it is a moment of pure magic. The early morning light gives the scene an almost unreal quality, suggesting that the two of them have entered an otherworldly place created by their love. Dora, far more lovely and calm than we have seen her before, wanders towards the greenhouse, filled with newfound curiosity and appreciation for the beauty of life. This moment, however, marks the end of the first half of the film. The half that is characterized by fantasy, light, and humour is ending. Soon the new family will be forcibly removed from this magical world and taken to a place entirely devoid of beauty and light.

In the first part, a rather delicate balance pertains between reality and fantasy maintained through a mix of pure comedy, polymorphous play, stylized and choreographed imaginary settings (e.g. the hotel) and location shoots (Arezzo), combined with a rather acute, clownish satire on the pomp and pretence of Fascist public performance and play. Guido's implicit denial of the very real threat of anti-Semitism is especially obvious in the climax of the film's opening half, when he successfully steals

Dora from her Fascist fiancé using Eliseo's desecrated horse.

The image of the couple trotting out of the engagement party on horseback suggests an icon familiar to fairy tales, a fitting conclusion for the romantic trajectory of the film's first half. However, this same image also serves as a visual reminder (via the desecrated horse) that coinciding with the fairy-tale romance is the reality of Italian anti-semitism, which will loom large during the film's second half, also witnessing the transitional sequence from Giosue's appearance to the family's arrival in the camp, the balance is replaced by a confused anxiety over the proper mix of reality and fantasy, as play is replaced by the monolith of 'the game', with its rules and conceits.

In the second half, the life of Dora and Guido have created is apparently filled with the magic with which it began. Giosue is very much like his father, and he is a perfect audience for Guido's performances. Giosue loves when his father rides his bicycle fast, and he shows his admiration for Guido by mimicking him, such as when he says to his mother, "Good morning, princess!". It is like looking at a miniature version of Guido.

Although Guido, Dora, and Giosue's life is idyllic, the specter of fascism is becoming more and more threatening. Guido still manages to deftly deflect the intrusions of a hostile world from his son's life. When Guido tells his son that they will put up a sign outside their store saying "No spiders or Visigoths," he is making light of a dismal truth about the tension and hostility in Italy.

Still, it is clear that he cannot change this situation; one day, Giosue will learn the truth. It is just a matter of time. Throughout the movie, Guido has been able to manipulate his surroundings to create a beautiful world for himself and his loved ones. Now, however, he is in a concentration camp, and, for the first time, a positive outcome seems impossible. When he tells Giosue that they are going on a trip for fun and that everything is a giant game, there is a sense of impending doom. The Fascists are in control now, not

Guido, and it seems as if their story can only end badly. The ethics of Guido's strategy suddenly come into question: if they are going to die, is Guido's decision to deceive his son cruel? As the stakes are raised, can his magical charade continue? How can he maintain his son's morale in such a bleak situation? The audience at once fills with dread at Guido's and Giosue's situation and with exhilaration at Guido's determination to find beauty even in the darkest of places.

In the first half of the movie, Guido jokes that writing "Jewish waiter" on him is the worst thing that the Fascists can do. When they actually write "Jewish store" on the entrance to his bookstore, he does not realize the error of his optimism. Even when he and Giosue are in the concentration camp, his awareness of the gravity of the situation is rarely apparent. He is always playing the part of the excited director of Giosue's birthday surprise. His optimism is so constant that one wonders how it could be entirely an act; it must be at least partly genuine. This is another example of fantasy becoming reality. By pretending to be happy and excited for Giosue's sake, Guido actually increases his own ability to deal with the difficulties confronting him. Though the specifics of his elaborate act are fictitious, the spirit behind it is real. By resolutely conveying his optimism to those around him, Guido actually becomes more optimistic, or as optimistic as one can be in such a place.

During the journey to the camp, it is difficult for Guido to convince Giosue that there is no danger. He realises that he must produce something elaborate that will engross the child and distract him from the reality of what he is seeing around him. He invents the game. 'Whoever wins a thousand points to win a tank', and with this he is able to construct an inner journey of imagination that will appeal to Giosue. In other words, the terrifying every day of the camp is unexpectedly fought against with fantasy, and this interplay of fear and fantasy becomes the central point of the film narrative. In *Life Is*

Beautiful the father Guido (Roberto Benigni) creates an imaginary world for his son, in which hunger and camp rules are passed off as a game to score points and win a prize. This game can only work because Giosue is a child, with a child's view of the world. It is not that he does not see the horror around him; it is that Guido can constantly deflect his attention onto the next aspect of the game, and this takes a priority in Giosue's mind.

Guido uses his creative imaginations to preserve the pleasure principle which follows from the principle of constancy. Using a fantastic shield as a defence mechanism, they are the carriers of the pleasure principle which seeks to avoid the unpleasure of the surrounding reality and desperately tries to restore the earlier state of affairs, that is, the more or less harmonious family or communal life of the times before, which function, in Sidra De Koven Ezrahi's words, as a romantic Edenic centre of gravity. Even when the reality principle of the camp, is seeking to be the dominant and more powerful one, the central figures manage to push their imagination to the limits. This keeps their game working, prevents their own and their nearest ones' fears from gaining bigger dimensions, and keeps the viewer's attention focused on the comical aspects of this mechanism. A comical switch thus functions like a translation process, where anxiety and fear are – through the creative translator / mediator – passed on as a joyful fantasy about winning a game against life – threatening enemies.

Talking about the translation of fear through fantasy into the comic, a sequence of *Life Is Beautiful*, in which Guido voluntarily offers to translate commander's words from German into Italian, serves as a good example of the transferral of the unpleasure of the reality to the pleasure of the fantasy. The sequence is shot from inside the camp barrack, which is claustrophobically narrow, grey, dirty, and full of exhausted and famished men. An armed camp commander yells the rules in German, which should be translated into Italian. His appearance and instructions turn him in to a representative of the reality

principle of the camp. Even though the content of the commander's orders might not be understandable to every viewer (if the German sentences are not subtitled), the commander's uniform, hoarse voice and gesticulations, in a setting where he is obviously the one in power who decides about life and death, appear threatening. Yet, Guido translates the language of the reality principle into the language of the pleasure principle, that is to the commander's orders, which tell of hard labour and death punishments, are passed off by Guido to others (primarily to his son) as rules of a children's game, in which a real tank could be won, nobody should ask to eat marmalade or lollipops, and the biggest offence is to carry a sign marked "donkey" on one's back. The funny (but possibly dangerous) translation makes Guido's son wonder about what his father is translating. Other barrack inmates do not say a word as accomplices in protecting the child from the reality, and the viewer laughs about the subversive act of undermining the rules.

This sequence of translation is more than just a defensive mechanism for the sake of the child: it also functions as a critique, which Millicent Marcus describes, in what follows, as a contrastive perspective on ways of organizing experience:

As the translation process proceed , the ostensible gap between the German and Italian versions is really a gap between diametrically opposed of organizing experience .In Guido's translation, the German system of oppression turns into a system of play, the regime of forced obedience becomes one of voluntary adherence, the imposition of arbitrary punishment gives way to reassurance of familiar behavior guidelines, and the audience of victims becomes a team of possible winners.

Through the fantastic translational act, the dominant system – the inhuman system of the Nazi regime in the camp – gets destabilized (even if only temporarily, since the rules of the camp continue to be valid and those in power can still decide between life and

death for the inmates). Still, in these few moments of the comical translation a certain satisfaction overcomes the demand of the reality.

The translational shifts of comical fantasy thus also depict the very mechanisms and constructed nature of the symbolic itself – the commander’s authoritative yelling shows itself to be no different from Guido’s blabbering on about lollipops and marmalade, except that the former is destructive, while the latter brings hope, or as Aaron Kerner puts it, “Guido’s system was designed to save life, whereas the Nazis’ systemized brutality was designed to humiliate and kill”.

The other does not vanish completely from the scene though; it is our knowledge about the power relations at stake that keeps it in the state of suspension, impotence, non-intervention, that is, from not disappearing entirely. Still, more than just having a laugh over Guido’s childish translation, it is actually laughing at the other that brings so much humorous joy to the viewer. The other is degraded; it is “ hanging, dangling suspended in the air, powerless to do anything, to stop or clear up this mess and confusion, unable to exercise its ‘office’, its function”, as Alenka Zupancic describes it, “This is a place where the comedy manages, as an agent of pleasure, to produce certain, unexpected, surplus doses of satisfaction.”

In the camp, Guido is not only concerned to protect Giosue; he also tries to reassure Dora whenever he gets the opportunity. Guido’s ability to turn the moment to his advantage results in his ability to send two messages of love and reassurance to Dora. His use of the loudspeaker system to speak to her and let her hear Giosue ’s voice reassures her that they are both still alive. He plays the music of Offenbach to her to send her a message of love and remind her of the joy of their life together before the camp. So much of Guido’s inner journey involves preserving the welfare of his family.

Guido has to work hard to sustain Giosue ’s belief in the game. After being told the

truth by one of the men, Giosue has become increasingly skeptical of Guido and his stories. However, the truth itself sounds so fantastical that Guido is able to weave an alternative explanation for Giosue. But Giosue declares he has had enough of the game and wants to go home. His inner journey, created by Guido, is constantly being challenged by the reality he sees and hears around him. Guido now has no choice but to try to divert Giosue's attention and agrees with his demand to go home. He gambles on the fact that he has so successfully constructed another reality for Giosue in the game, with the tank as a prize, that he will want to stay and defend it.

Later, when Guido sees the German children playing, he constructs an elaborate story for Giosue, using similar opportunistic methods to those he used while wooing Dora – that is, by taking advantage of events which he already knows will occur. Thus Giosue's inner journey is sustained on a level outside reality; an imaginative level that protects him from the world of the camp. Guido's instructions about the silence game. 'You are never to speak', are, in reality, a matter of life and death, but for Giosue they are a challenge to be achieved to win a prize. Giosue's inner journey is constantly supported by Guido. When he makes a 'mistake' in the game and speaks, Guido is there to repair the damage, a fairy godmother-like figure who can do the seemingly impossible.

Guido's faith in human nature is most strongly shaken in the camp, not by the scene of horror he witnesses, but by his encounter with Dr Lessing. Because of his connection with Lessing before the war and because Guido values human relationships, he automatically assumes that Lessing is going to help him. When he finally engineers a meeting with Lessing, he discovers that his interest in Guido is only because he wants to solve a riddle. His ironic cry, 'Help me! For heaven's sake help me!', to Guido reflects the indifference of the whole Nazi regime to their victims.

In the next scene, which is recognisable from the opening scene of the film, Giosue

is already asleep on his shoulder, 'Good boy, Dream sweet dreams', Guido tells him, something that would never be possible for Giosue had it not been for Guido's efforts. As Guido wanders in the misty fog, he has not only lost his way back to his quarters, he has lost his way in life. The horrors of the camp have overtaken him, illustrated in the long – held, close – up camera frame of his shocked face. So fantastical is the sight he sees. He can only speculate that it is not real: 'Maybe it's only a dream'.

Guido's inner journey will not permit him to give in to reality. His life of fantasy in the game he has created for Giosue is an important one to him as it is to Giosue. To outwardly acknowledge and give in to what he witnesses would destroy Guido. His strength lies in his ability to always find the alternative explanation: maybe the next morning Dora will wake them with milk and cookies. This is, of course, also a denial of reality. But it is not that Guido does not know what is happening to him. He deliberately chooses to step around it and construct the world the way he wants it to be. Before the camp, this ensured his happiness; in the camp it ensures his and his family's survival.

Guido remains the optimist to the end. He is willing to use the full range of his tricks to try for their survival. He hides Giosue in the box, makes himself an ingenious disguise, nimbly avoids the spotlight and even uses Schopenhauer's methods to get rid of the guard dog, but in the end his tricks cannot protect him in the world of cruelty and horror. Magic does not always work, and this is hinted at when Guido thinks he has found Dora, but it turns out to be another woman with the same name. Guido is caught because he exposes himself trying to help the other women on the truck by telling them to jump off as soon as they can. The scene with Guido caught in the spotlight, crouched against the wall, is one of the saddest in the film. His small figure is overwhelmed by the huge building behind him. Guido still manages to wink reassurance at Giosue as he passes the box at gunpoint on the way to his death.

Giosue last view of his father, looking through the slit. Guido is seen doing the ‘silly walk’ he did back in Arezzo, remaining defiant until the end for Giosue’s sake. The next morning when Giosue leaves the box and walks out into the silent and deserted camp, he walks into the sunlight and for the first time since the film moved to the camp, the coloured sunlight and it is obvious that his future is assured. The inner journey through his imagination which has been created for him by Guido comes to a climax with the arrival of the American tank. The close-up camera on Giosue’s astonished, open-mouthed face and shining eyes, attests to his joy at having ‘won’ his life and his innocence thanks to Guido’s efforts.

The triumphant, marching music played as Giosue climbs aboard the tank and set off on a journey towards the rest of his life, reinforces Guido’s victory. Giosue’s cries of joy when he is reunited with his mother, ‘We won! We came first. We’re taking the tank home!’ reminds of Guido’s hard-fought battle to save his family and the fact that they did ‘come first’ in everything he did. The final panoramic shot of Dora and Giosue embracing against the beautiful country background scene reassures that, whatever happens, *Life Is Beautiful*. All Guido’s efforts have been worthwhile. Dora and Giosue have been saved from certain death in the camp.

What makes the Holocaust comedy different from other more traditional comedies is that it declines the happy ending. In the film, expose themselves as unreliable storytellers, who fantasized a happy or heroic ending for their sufferings. In Benigni’s film, however, the narrative frame is given to Giosue, Guido’s son, whom the viewer can hear as an adult voice – over at the beginning and at the end of the film, thanking his father for the amazing rescue and introducing the film as a fable with sorrow, as well as with wonder and happiness. Even before the very end of the film – which is partially happy, since the son and the mother are reunited, but the father is missing –the disturbing reality intrudes on

Guido's game. Although he does his best to hide his own fear from the son, he cannot find the means to keep it away from himself, except for taking a little comfort in saying "Maybe we are only dreaming", and eventually opening his eyes wide in fearful surprise when he runs into a shocking night scene. The special features of the medium ensure that an atmosphere of seriousness is provided – a point of view shot, blue colour filters, melancholic music, and a short, but still long enough, frame accentuate the overwhelming scene as Guido accidentally discovers a pile of skeletal corpses in the camp. The protective fantasies turn out to be a foggy curtain around the briefly visible, in what for Guido is certainly a shocking, possibly even traumatizing event "outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and mastery". For the first time in the narrative, Guido appears speechless, powerless to make another game out of this discovery. It seems as if his framework, which so far functioned well against all odds in the camp, brakes at this very moment. And it is sleep that coincidentally shuts down the boy's eyes in front of a pile of corpses, not the father.

The comical fantasy of Holocaust films can be seen in a double perspective. First as an "imminent reaction" of the fictional world to the terrifying circumstances, that is, as the story of Nazi persecution, where the victims subvert the imposed, life threatening rules through their comical behaviour, and even manage to survive it. The enjoyment of this comical subversion on a fictional level potentially releases the viewer from the burden of history – one laughs at Nazis being ridiculed, and at their inhuman rules and practices, and enjoys for a moment that the victims are not only victimized, but winners in a comical fantasy. The comical fantasy also manages to suspend not only the fear, but also the other, covering it as a powerless, laughable spectator.

In the film fantasy and imagination is employed as a defence mechanism against fear, anxiety and potential trauma, and this – bringing calming hope to the frightened

(whether persons in the story or the viewer) – challenges and subverts reality/history. A notion of comical fantasy as a pleasure and fearlessness preserving mechanism corresponds to Sigmund Freud's argument on humour. For Freud, the joke is a contribution made to the comic by the unconscious, whereas humour contributes to the comic through the agency of the super – ego: "Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it, but it also has something of grandeur and elevation." Humour, in this tradition of thought, also signifies the triumph of the pleasure principle.

The genre of the Holocaust comedy refers not only to comical fantasy and laughter as a source of resistance to the fear, to deprivation of one's individuality and to death, but also functions as a meta - comment on the problems and challenges of depicting the Holocaust . Just as many jokes show the mechanisms of language at work, the Holocaust film comedy questions the very construction of cultural/collective remembrance, which can be very much influenced by fashions and shifts of power and dominance. Next to the traditionally preferred genres such as survivor autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, documentaries and dramas—as dominant master narratives of the Holocaust until the very end of the twentieth century – the film comedy proves a challenging form, willing to resist accusations and fears, and able to fight back with its own fantastic means to gain a deserved place among the ways in which remember and depict the Holocaust.

Chapter Three

Conclusion

Life is Beautiful is a courageous film that portrays a fable of love and one man's determination and dedication to his family; the film inspires laughter despite its setting rather than at the expense of its setting and ultimately attempts to convey the message that there is always a place for love and hope, even when it seems futile. The movie celebrates human spirit through its unique perspective. What Benigni is after is not yet another Holocaust cinematographic representation like *Schindler's List*, but rather a fable-like innovation about the significance of boundless family love in the face of institutionalized lunacy. Benigni's aim is to construct a portrait of invincibility of the individual under the most disheartening circumstances, rather than a satire or indictment of Nazism. It really represents a love story, about the ties that bind a man, his wife, and their son, and how not even war criminals can destroy those emotional links ; a personal tale about one family's plight in the face of evil, and it is precisely that microscopic focus .The thematic point of the film is the power of the human mind ,the power of imagination and fantasy under the most unfavorable circumstances. Throughout the movie Guido uses his fantasy and imagination as a tool to manipulate the reality for the happiness and inner peace of his dear ones. His charisma continuously transforms casual interactions to magical moments. He even successfully manipulates the entire holocaust terror in to a prize winning game for little Giosue to protect his innocent childish mind from the traumatizing harsh realities of holocaust creative imaginations to preserve the pleasure principle which follows from the principle of constancy. Using a fantastic shield as a defence mechanism, they are the carriers of the pleasure principle which seeks to avoid the unpleasure of the surrounding reality and desperately tries to restore the earlier state of affairs, that is, the more or less harmonious family or communal life of the times.

Benigni's this protective approach towards holocaust received both criticism and acceptance. The irony is that this innovative approach is the reason behind it's wide audience all over the world . After these much years people still watch and enjoy this movie and often find them selves relating to the plot and approach. The question is why this holocaust comedy is still relatable in the present scenario, why it is discussed in such a entirely different world for whom holocaust terrors are beyond their imagination. The answer is the beautiful portrait of unconquerable human spirit embedded in the minds of the viewers after watching the movie. The terrifying everyday of the camp, ghetto or banishment is unexpectedly fought against with fantasy, passing a message for the viewers that there will be always a spark with in us that is enough to vanish all the darkness we are afraid of. Time only changes the form of terror, it can not be completely destroyed or wiped away from the society. The tension , the struggle is always there in the society. The world is getting tougher day by day with its increasing arrogance , impatience and judgements. People are struggling to deal with both internal and external conflicts. Everyone deserves little bit motivation to find their own sparks for inner enlightenment and when it blends with the epic contradiction of harsh realities and humour ,the result is a therapeutic work of visual art.

Guido is the trump card in the hands of Benigni through whom he is affirming that the life is actually beautiful. Guido welcomes all with open arms and treats each person he meets as if said person was Guido's deeply-loved brother. He wants the best outcome for everyone. He does not always get this right , but not once in the entire movie does he say a negative word about anyone. Guido never once thinks about himself; there is no greater example of unconditional love than that. When he pretend as an inspector from Rome, he did not attempt to impress Dora with his knowledge of Italian superiority. He did, however, make the entire room of schoolchildren laugh. When riding his uncle's horse into

the restaurant to steal Dora away, he may have only come for her, but as he left everyone present was wildly applauding and smiling. Within Guido's love for Dora, he finds a desire to impress everyone and make everyone's day just a little brighter. He always does everything in his power to deal fairly with others, even if they are not always fair with him. He is an entertainer with a deep love for life and unconditional love for his son. Nothing about the Holocaust is laughable, but Guido does not laugh at the Holocaust. He is a desperate father who manages to find the superhuman strength to smile and to tell his son that it is going to be okay, and yes, he even somehow finds the strength to make jokes and laugh. This is all done in the midst of the Holocaust, but the humor is not present to trivialize it. The humor is present because it is the one thing Guido believes he can do that has any chance of keeping his son safe. In the concentration camp, no one is safe. With every breath of life there comes the chance of death, too. That is why the second part of the film is set in the concentration camp. The human spirit is so easily victimized, and yet it still exists and radiates and protects. Guido understands the implications of his situation, and that is why he jokes.

Much of *Life is Beautiful* is actually inspired by Rubino Romeo Salmoni's experiences at the hands of the Nazis. Salmoni was himself an Italian Jew along with his two brothers. All three were prisoners in World War II, but only Rubino Salmoni survived. His memoir "*In the End, I Beat Hitler*" also recounts his experiences, incorporating elements of irony and black humour. He wrote, "I came out of Auschwitz alive, I have a wonderful family, I celebrated my golden wedding anniversary, I have twelve splendid grandchildren— I think I can say I ruined Hitler's plan for me". The title itself makes clear the positive outlook of the author, even though he is narrating his holocaust experiences he also cherishes the fact that he is alive. He identifies himself as a winner who ruled out the tyrant Adolf Hitler by surviving, by wrecking his dream, the complete distribution of

Jewish community. Through his work he is encouraging his readers to enjoy simple pleasures and every single moment because life is short but precious.

The idea of the movie is also inspired from Benigni's childhood .His father Remigio Benigni was also a victim of Nazi terror .He was a soldier imprisoned for two years in a German camp and he used to narrate his experiences to his children. Benigni's mother was afraid for her children and suggested to his father to narrate them in a lighter way that will probably spare them from the scare. So he only narrated cheerful stories to preserve the innocence and childishness spared them from horror and trauma.

It is true that these fictional narratives offer adaptations of the subject matter of the Holocaust which do not adhere to that 'conservative doctrine of verisimilitude'. Instead, they highlight the role of creativity in responding to trauma by showing at once how imagination can be used as a tool for coping by preparing or suspending the process of anticipation of fate that is too difficult to confront, as well as the problems inherent in imposing those psychic tools on children. As a point of comparison to the films *Life is Beautiful* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, then, considering *The Fairy Tales from Auschwitz* (2009), a little-known collection of children's stories secretly written and illustrated by Polish prisoners of the Auschwitz concentration camp . The prisoners' Holocaust experiences permeate these children's narratives in the form of cautionary tales and a symbolic longing for justice and good prevailing. They also express paternal longing and a final gesture of optimism in the fearful anticipation of the writers' own deaths. These men resorted to creative works as a form of 'escape' and the struggle for hope amid their traumatic circumstances, but their illegal project presented a grave risk to their own fate within the camp. Originally intended to reach the prisoners' children outside of the camps, the *Fairy Tales* signify creativity as a coping mechanism which enacts a symbolic gesture of individual freedom and survival through legacy. These can be perceived as not only a

denial of traumatic events but also a creative erasure of the real. This way the genre of the Holocaust comedy refers not only to comical fantasy and laughter as a source of resistance to the fear, to deprivation of one's individuality and to death, but also functions as a meta-comment on the problems and challenges of depicting the Holocaust.

Life is beautiful stands at the basis of human freedom: Holocaust insanity does not make any sense, does not have fuels not only the desire to continue living, but the need to make something out of one's life reason, or any purpose. It fuels not only the desire to continue living, but the need to make something out of one's life. The capacity to escape the irrational world through imagination is well presented through Guido as he constantly tries to further his child's hope, pushing it up to the very last day, finally to reach his goal at the end of his long exhausting endeavor. The combination of Guido's clownish charisma with the cruelty of the Holocaust is both bleak and utterly frightful, yet it functions because the storyline never overlooks its target. Maurizio Viano correctly explains:

“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,” and adds further in his article “That is why *La vita è bella*' s fairy tale can lift us from the Holocaust, not because the Holocaust has been cheapened but because our spirit has been enlarged.”

The movie is gaining more importance in the present world which is struggling with the pandemic besides other traditional hurdles. The pandemic not only ripped individuals physically but also shattered them mentally. People need to know how to cherish their survival and explore the beauty of life, this classic art work will make everyone realise it. The film comedy proves a challenging form, willing to resist accusations and fears, and able to fight back with its own fantastic means to gain a deserved place among the ways in which we remember and depict the Holocaust.

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