

L I M I N A

Rationality, Representation and the Holocaust in *Life is Beautiful*

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Roberto Benigni's 1997 film La Vita è Bella (Life is Beautiful) was met with mixed reactions, from popular acclaim evinced in the film's 1998 Academy Award, to accusations launched by both academic historians and the popular press of sentimentalising the Holocaust. This article situates Benigni's movie within its filmic context and explores La Vita è Bella in comparison with Claude Lanzmann's Shoah, Linda Wertmuller's Seven Beauties and Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List. I argue that far from sentimentalising experiences of the Second World War, Benigni develops the cinematic structure of a fable to purposefully avoid representing the worst atrocities. Absence is an essential element of La Vita è Bella, allowing Benigni to present a film which resonates with the idea that non-representation is the most significant strategy a film can deploy and that when used to its fullest effect it emphasises the idea that 'Silence is the most powerful cry.' In effect, the film thus develops a consistent moral and epistemological argument that the horror of the Holocaust is beyond representation.

Silence is the most powerful cry

*Life is Beautiful*¹

Omer Bartov has pointed out, even though over half a century has passed since the end of the Second World War, one of the central debates which still rages in Western intellectual circles is not *how* the Holocaust should be represented, but *if* the Holocaust can, or should, be represented at all.² One of the major lines of this argument

involves questions of whether Auschwitz is in any rational way an understandable event. For many, including J. F. Lyotard, Adorno and Habermas, the Holocaust 'is in some sense *outside* rational inspection'; certainly all three consider it fundamentally beyond representation.³ Following the argument about unrepresentability is the notion that the Holocaust marks an epistemological rupture, whereby central concepts of modernity, including rationality, representability, and linear historical causation are all shattered by the seemingly ahistorical, irrational and unrepresentable horror of the death camps (and other related atrocities). By contrast, Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the Holocaust is not outside of modernity, but rather was the logical result of what he describes as the 'barbarism' of modernity and rationality.⁴ Within the context of intellectual debates over the representation and rational understanding of the Holocaust, it is hardly surprising that any cinematic attempts – which by their very nature are inescapably media of representation – to engage with Auschwitz, provoke polemical reactions. Moreover, the ostensible idea of Italian filmmaker Roberto Benigni to set his comedy *Life is Beautiful* in the midst of the Holocaust seems not only an extremely odd choice, but also highly provocative. Responses to *Life is Beautiful* ranged from popular acclaim, exemplified in the movie's Academy Awards, including best foreign film, to ardent criticism of the trite 'sentimentalism' and unbelievability of the film, which is accused of re-writing history and, in extreme cases, of being 'a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgement and moral acuity.'⁵ This essay will investigate the position of *Life is Beautiful* in relation to the ongoing debates about representation and rationality in terms of the Holocaust, as well positioning Benigni's film in relation to its cinematic predecessors.

Among the cinematic antecedents of *Life is Beautiful* are the commercially unsuccessful *Seven Beauties*⁶ (1976), the nine and a half hour film documentary *Shoah*⁷ (1985), and the Hollywood hit *Schindler's List*⁸ (1993). Linda Wertmuller's *Seven Beauties* actually shares considerable common ground with Benigni's film in that it not only deals with the Holocaust, but is also made in Italy by an Italian, and uses the mode of comedy, albeit a far darker humour than the Chaplin-like slapstick in *Life is Beautiful*. However, *Seven Beauties* did not enjoy the mainstream release and subsequent popularity of Benigni's film, but rather had a minuscule film distribution and while the implicit critique of passivity in the face of Italian fascism

appealed to some, it was widely considered in bad taste, historically inaccurate, and morally ambiguous (at best).⁹ While similarly limited in distribution, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, received far more critical acclaim. However, rather than seeking to represent the Holocaust, Lanzmann's film documentary, following Primo Levi, deals with the death camps as a moral and representational 'grey zone', and rather attempts to document the *memories* of the Holocaust through the testimony of the survivors. Lanzmann constructs an account of Auschwitz built entirely on 'the immense importance of memory', arguing for the singular authenticity of the survivor experience.¹⁰ Thus, *Shoah* is explicitly constructed around the premise that cinema *cannot* represent the Holocaust, nor is it in any way understandable or rational in any sense other than through direct survivor testimony.

By far the most widely viewed film about the Holocaust has been Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. Indeed, the enormous popular success of Spielberg's film has led some critics to claim that it now has a 'hegemonic status in defining the meaning of the Holocaust'.¹¹ Such a statement may appear excessive, but Loshitzky Yosefa's parallel of the film with Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*¹² (1925) provokes the salient point that Eisenstein's film is undoubtably the dominant cultural 'memory' of the Revolution of 1905.¹³ Moreover, the cultural 'taboo' against attempts at 'realistic' representation of the Holocaust, especially in mainstream cinema, mean that *Schindler's List* has little competition in terms of mainstream representation. Although commercially successful, the film attracted much criticism: one more extreme argument was that only Israel could 'speak for' and thus represent the Jewish experience of the Holocaust¹⁴; others criticised the construction of the central 'good Nazi' and the relegation of the Jewish people to 'extras in their own tragedy'¹⁵; so, too, was the 'Americanisation' of the Holocaust criticised in that it should not be simplified to Hollywood cultural capital¹⁶; and, most predicably, the film was attacked for historical inaccuracies. However, the strongest and most consistent criticism can be seen in a statement made by Claude Lanzmann, the director of *Shoah*, after viewing *Schindler's List*:

there is a certain ultimate degree of horror that cannot be transmitted. To claim it is possible to do so, is to be guilty of the most serious transgression. Fiction is

a transgression. I deeply believe that there are things that cannot and should not be represented.¹⁷

For Lanzmann, Spielberg has tried to represent the unrepresentable, and the process, no matter how delicately handled, is argued to diminish the experience of the Holocaust by even suggesting that it can be captured in any medium, especially mainstream film. Given such a controversial reception for the first mainstream film to deal directly with the Holocaust, Roberto Benigni's decision to set not only a film, but a comedy, during this period guaranteed that *Life is Beautiful* would immediately attract much critical attention.

For Maurizio Viano, a self-consciously 'highbrow' film critic, the reception of *Life is Beautiful* was predictably bifurcated between the 'lowbrow' popular press, who generally embraced Benigni's film, and the 'highbrow' cultural critics, who generally looked down on the film due to its popular appeal, sentimentalism and comic mode.¹⁸ Like *Schindler's List*, the popular appeal of *Life is Beautiful* became apparent in the various awards it received, including the Cannes Jury's Special Grand Prize, and three Academy Awards. However, as Viano points out, 'highbrow' critics criticised the attempt to find humour in the Holocaust, the overt sentimentality and reductionism of the mainstream production values, and Benigni's representation of Italian Jews. For Richard Schickel, *Life is Beautiful* makes a mockery of the Holocaust by creating concentration camps where the 'brutal reality is never vividly represented.' Moreover, while the appeal of Benigni's 'genial spirit' resisting totalitarianism is obvious, for Schickel it can only succeed if the filmmaker 'rewrite[s] the past and in the process travesties tragedy.'¹⁹ Michael Fox adds the criticism that in Benigni's representation of Italian society is the 'implication that the Italians ... were the victims of Nazi occupation and in no way complicit in the Final Solution.'²⁰ In examining *Life is Beautiful* in more depth, however, these criticisms will be addressed and shown to be either intrinsic to the internal logic of the film, or unfair criticisms altogether.

Life is Beautiful has two distinct halves: the first set in 1939 in the Italian village of Arezzo where Guido (Benigni) meets and courts his fairy-tale princess Dora; the second set in late 1944, where Guido, Dora, and their son Giosue are deported to a German concentration camp, and Guido struggles to maintain the façade for Giosue that the camp is actually an elaborate 'game' where managing hardships will

eventually lead to the prize of a tank. While Fox's criticism that the film paints the Italians only as victims of the Holocaust may appear valid in terms of the second half, where there is a marked division between the Italian speaking Jews and German guards, the first half, however, frequently points to the broader Italian population's complicity in (at least the early stages of) Fascism. In the very first scene in Arezzo, where Guido and his friend arrive to stay with Guido's uncle, the racial tension in the village is apparent because when Guido arrives, his Jewish uncle has just been attacked. The first images of the village show posters of Mussolini covering the walls, and the local offices also have large images of the dictator on the walls. Similarly, Guido has ongoing antagonisms with the local Fascist official – who may appear comically incompetent but nevertheless points to influence of Italian Fascism – and with the local upholsterer whose sympathies are obvious in that his children are named Adolph and Benito.

Benigni's position on Italy's complicity in the Holocaust becomes more apparent in two key scenes. In the first, in order to meet with Dora again, Guido pretends to be an Italian Inspector and visits her school, the Francesco Petracca School. While there, he is also called on to explain the new 'Race Manifesto.' At first startled, Guido comically explains that he was 'chosen, I was, by racist Italian scientists, in order to demonstrate how superior our race is. ... Why did they choose me, children? Must I tell you? Where can you find someone more handsome than me?' Guido then goes on to point out his anatomical perfection starting with his ear, muscles, hips, through to his belly button: 'What a knot! But you can't untie it, not even with your teeth. Those racist scientists tried it, not a chance!' This scene highlights both the fundamental irrationality of racial discrimination through Guido's arbitrary explanation, and points to the fact that there were both 'racist Italian scientists' and racist manifestos in Italy as in Germany. Similarly, when Dora is at dinner one night, the headmistress from the school is explaining a problem solved in German schools: 'A lunatic costs the State four marks a day. A cripple four and a half marks. An epileptic three and a half. Considering that the average is four marks a day and there are 300,000 patients, how much money would the State save if these individuals were eliminated?' Dora exclaims that she cannot believe that children are asked to deal with such things and the headmistress replies, 'That was my exact reaction! I can't believe a seven-year-old child has to

solve this kind of equation.' For Dora, the shock was at the moral content of the question, but for the headmistress and others at the party (including the Fascist official) the problem is shocking because the maths are too hard for a seven-year-old. This exchange points to the fact that Italians were quite aware of the policies of Germany, and their Fascist leader, and that Italians either knew but chose to stick their heads in the sand and do nothing or they knew and did not mind the policies which were becoming law in Italy as well. Far from painting a picture where Italians were only victims of the Holocaust, the first half of *Life is Beautiful* clearly demonstrates the complicity of the Italian population in either not opposing or, in some cases, supporting the policies which led to the Final Solution.

The two scenes described above, as well as a number of other examples in *Life is Beautiful*, explicate Benigni's position on the debate as to whether the Holocaust can be understood in a rational framework. A further example is when Giosue and Guido are walking through the village and Giosue sees a sign saying 'No Jews or Dogs Allowed.' He asks why, and Guido replies that some people simply do not like certain others. He continues that one shop does not allow Spanish people or horses, another has banned kangaroos and Chinese people. Guido and Giosue then resolve to put up a sign banning spiders and Visigoths, as the pair dislike both. This exchange shows the arbitrary and irrational nature of the racial discrimination and vilification in the Holocaust. When the film shifts to the concentration camp, it should be noted, it shifts from a comic mode to a tragic one. Although the 'game' of trying to protect Giosue dominates Guido's life there, the 'game' is the only joke, and the laughter from Guido has shifted from heartfelt to borderline hysterical.²¹ During the camp scenes, Giosue confronts his father saying he overheard someone explaining that they 'burn us all in the oven ... [and a] man was crying and he said they make buttons and soap out of us.' Guido responds by saying the claims are irrational and ridiculous: 'Just imagine ... tomorrow morning I wash my hands with Bartolomeo ... Then I'll button up with Francesco. ... I've heard of a wood oven, but I've never seen a man oven before!' Thus the context of the 'game' allows Benigni to illuminate exactly how irrational the Holocaust was; Guido's success in convincing Giosue relies on the fact that the camps were spaces of completely irrational horrors which cannot be explained. Thus in both the context of the film and the broader context of ongoing debates about the status of

the Holocaust, Benigni's film explicitly agrees that the Holocaust was fundamentally irrational and beyond explanation.

The irrationality of the Final Solution can be seen not only in the sympathetic characters in *Life is Beautiful*, but also in the complicated character of Doctor Lessing. In the first half of the movie, Dr Lessing is staying at the hotel where Guido is working as a waiter. Lessing is obsessed with riddles, and he and Guido swap them throughout Lessing's stay. Guido appears much quicker at the word games than Lessing, and thus he calls Guido 'Genius', and is frequently impressed by his quick lateral thinking. However, in the concentration camp, Lessing re-appears, but now as a medical doctor who inspects the Jewish prisoners. When Lessing recognises Guido, ostensibly there appears hope that Guido and his family will have assistance to escape the camp. When Guido is made to wait tables for the Nazis in the camp, Lessing signals his urgent need to talk to Guido. Perhaps because the image of the 'good Nazi' Oskar Schindler had so recently graced mainstream cinema, the expectations of Dr Lessing aiding Guido are strong. However, when Lessing finally does talk to Guido, rather than offering to help Guido escape, Lessing explains a complex word game that he cannot solve alone. He appeals for assistance: 'Help me, Guido. For heaven's sake, help me. I can't even sleep.' Guido walks away, dumbfounded. This scene further reinforces the irrationality of the camps. Lessing, a Nazi doctor, appears to have completely cut himself off from the events of the camp, withdrawing into his own obsessions. Lessing is a complex character in that the earlier scenes in the movie suggest he is not intrinsically an evil person. Rather, he is interpellated in a completely irrational system, that of the concentration camps, and thus seemingly most 'rational' awareness, including his needs and worries in comparison to Guido's far more perilous position, appear to have dissolved. Lessing, muttering to himself in frustration over a word puzzle is quite a sad character. In some way (albeit on a completely different level to the prisoners) Lessing, too, is a victim of the 'grey zone' of the concentration camps.

Turning from the question of rationality, to the broader question of whether the Holocaust can be represented at all, Benigni's chosen mode of comedy becomes extremely significant. *Life is Beautiful* begins with a voice-over: 'This is a simple story, but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable there is sorrow, and like a fable it is full of wonder and happiness.' The narration is overlaid on a brief scene

of Guido wandering through the fog holding Giosue, a scene which only becomes meaningful later in the context of the concentration camp scenes. This opening serves to distance viewers expectations from the mode of realism, and rather establishes that the film is an artistic 'fable.' Moreover, when the film ends with the unknown narrator explaining that he is Giosue grown up, *Life is Beautiful* is in effect framed within the child's experiences, suggesting that the story should be read as childish imaginings. Within the 'fable' context, any attempt to realistically portray the Holocaust would no doubt fail, and thus Benigni finds another way to address the tragedy. When Guido meets his uncle in the first scene in the village, the uncle has just been attacked, but did not cry for help. When Guido asks why, his uncle explains that 'Silence is the most powerful cry.' Guido's uncle's statement works as a metaphor for all the remaining atrocities the film addresses: *Life is Beautiful* takes place in a camp where the gas chambers, torture, mass death and related horrors are never visually represented on screen, but rather their absence creates audience anxiety as they know that these horrors are waiting, just off-screen. These elements of the Holocaust are all that much more dramatic because of their representational absence. Benigni's choice *not* to attempt to represent these extreme horrors aligns his film with the philosophical position that the extremes of the Holocaust are, indeed, beyond representation. Certainly for Benigni, they are beyond what can be ethically engaged with in the context of a fable.

Three more scenes reinforce the reading of the Holocaust in *Life is Beautiful* as fundamentally beyond representation. The first occurs when Dora is in the women's barracks and one of her fellow prisoners explains that the older people and children are rounded up for 'showers', but are actually gassed to death. At this point Dora stares out the window, looking, the audience is led to believe, at the smoke stacks of the gas chambers. However, the shot never shifts from Dora staring out the window. The smokestacks are present only in the imagination of the viewers; the scene, however, is just as powerful as the expectation of the gas chambers and smokestacks outside is as disturbing, if not more so, than actual attempts to visually represent these icons of mass death. Similarly, when Guido's uncle is separated from the other men and is taken with the elderly to 'shower', although the audience sees a room in which the prisoners are forced to undress, the movie does not attempt to

follow the prisoners into the actual chamber itself. However, the inescapable cultural knowledge of what awaits Guido's uncle means that the lack of representation is, in many ways, more powerful, leaving the audience to imagine the horrible fate that would shortly befall these prisoners. The final example is the extended scene which was partially seen in the opening sequence. Late at night, Guido is holding Giosue and they are returning to their barracks. Guido is saying, 'Maybe it is only a dream! We're dreaming Giosue...', but at that point, through the fog (or possibly the smoke caused by the burning of bodies) Guido sees through the haze and we very briefly, see an enormous mound of human corpses. The scene only lingers for a moment, before a shocked Guido retreats into the fog. Here, Benigni shows that the atrocities of the death camps were never far away in the film, but that the film never sought to directly engage with them. In *Life is Beautiful*, the cultural knowledge of the Holocaust underpins the film, and Benigni relies on the fact that audience already know of the horror of the Holocaust. The brief, but shocking, image of the mass of bodies serves to highlight that the true terror of Auschwitz was never far from the film's surface, always hidden just below the actual events represented. As Benigni has commented in an interview:

according to what I read, saw and felt in the victims' accounts, I realised 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.²²

Thus Benigni in *Life is Beautiful* has created a Holocaust story that epistemologically situates the Holocaust as fundamentally beyond representation. In terms of the ongoing tensions about representation, Benigni philosophically shares more with *Shoah's* director Claude Lanzmann than with Steven Spielberg, since the latter attempted to construct a mimetic reality, while Lanzmann and Benigni treat the extremes of the Holocaust as spaces outside of representation and rational understanding. Of course, in the early twenty-first century, debates about the Holocaust and representability have been re-opened with Roman Polanski's Oscar-winning picture *The Pianist*²³ (2002). It purports to tell a true story, and is

framed by black and white documentary-style footage to begin the film, and a textual epilogue narrating actual historical events, suggesting that while Benigni never attempted to represent Holocaust as it 'really happened', Polanski has no such qualms.

Life is Beautiful, despite accusations of sentimentalism and reductionism, actually contains a consistent moral and epistemological argument regarding the nature of the Holocaust. Roberto Benigni manages to convincingly overcome the seeming paradox of using cinema, a medium of complete representation, to position the Holocaust as outside of the bounds of representation. In doing so, *Life is Beautiful* engages in the broader intellectual debates about Auschwitz and through numerous examples, Benigni points to the irrationality, unrepresentability and complete lack of comprehension which surround the Holocaust. While Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* championed documentary as a mode which can cinematically engage with the Holocaust without attempting to represent it, Benigni uses the mode of comedy to achieve similar aims, especially useful in illuminating the underlying irrationality of the Final Solution. While *Life is Beautiful* shares the popular mainstream success of *Schindler's List*, in terms of representation the two films are disparate, the former avoiding any attempt at direct representation, while Spielberg attempted to mimetically re-create the concentration camps. Benigni's position that directors 'can't show unimaginable horror' in film by no means impedes the success of *Life is Beautiful*, and while the worst excesses of the camps are never represented, they have an almost deafening volume in the imagination of viewers who would already be all too aware of what the Holocaust entails.²⁴ In *Life is Beautiful*, Benigni has created a sensitive and sophisticated film which never turns away from the epistemological point that '[s]ilence is the most powerful cry.'

Notes

¹*Life is Beautiful (La Vita è bella)*, (dir. Roberto Benigni), 1997.

²Omer Bartov, *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford, 1996, pp. 125-126.

³Gail Jones, 'Mourning Rationality: allegory, redemption and *Life is Beautiful*', unpublished paper, 1999.

⁴See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989.

⁵Richard Schickel, 'Fascist Fable: A farce trivialises the horror of the Holocaust', *Time Magazine*, vol. 152, 1998, <http://www.time.com/magazine/1998/dom/981109/>

the_arts.cinema.fascist4a.html, accessed 28 October 2000.

⁶*Seven Beauties*, (dir. Linda Wertmuller), 1976.

⁷*Shoah*, (dir. Claude Lanzmann), 1985.

⁸*Schindler's List*, (dir. Steven Spielberg), 1993.

⁹See Vaarunika Dharmapala, 'The Portrayal of an Italian Holocaust in *Seven Beauties* and *Life is Beautiful*', *Contemporary European Studies Association of Australia Review*, vol. 26, 2000, p.28.

¹⁰Bartov, pp.128-129.

¹¹Mark Rawlinson, 'Adapting the Holocaust: *Schindler's List*, intellectuals and public knowledge', in Deborah Cartmell & Imelda Whelehan (eds), *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Routledge, London & New York, 1999, p.120.

¹²*Battleship Potemkin*, (dir. Sergei Eisenstein), 1925.

¹³Loshitzky Yosefa, 'Introduction', in Loshitzky Yosefa (ed.) *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1997, p.1.

¹⁴Haim Bresheeth, 'The Great Taboo Broken: Reflections on the Israeli Reception of *Schindler's List*' in Loshitzky Yosefa (ed.) *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1997, p.198.

¹⁵*ibid.*, p.201-202.

¹⁶*ibid.*, p.206.

¹⁷Claude Lanzmann from an interview published in the *Manchester Guardian*, 3 April 1994, quoted in *ibid.*, p.200.

¹⁸Maurizio Viano, '*Life is Beautiful*: Reception, Allegory and Holocaust Laughter', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 53, 1999, p.28.

¹⁹Schickel, 'Fascist Fable,' accessed 28 October 2000.

²⁰Michael Fox, "'Beautiful' Italian fable dumbs down Holocaust', *Jewish Bulletin*, 30 October 1998, <http://www.jewishsf.com/bk981030/etabeautiful.htm>, accessed 28 October 2000.

²¹Viano, p.31.

²²Benigni quoted in *ibid.*, p.30.

²³*The Pianist*, (dir. Roman Polanski), 2002.

²⁴However, as generations are born further and further historically from the Holocaust, it might be argued that what audiences are imagining may actually be drawn from the dominant cinematic representations in *Schindler's List* rather than from other sources.