

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL (LA VITA È BELLA) [1998]

by

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In 1939, just after Mussolini signed a military pact with Hitler and began adopting the Nazi policies of racial purity, Guido (Roberto Benigni) comes to the small Tuscan town of Arezzo and becomes a waiter. He instantly falls in love with the beautiful Dora (Nicoletta Braschi, Benigni's real-life wife) who literally falls into his arms from a hayloft. He sets out to win her from her fiancée, a local fascist town clerk while at the same time earning his living as a waiter in a posh hotel. There he meets the German Dr. Lessing (Horst Buchholz) who asks Guido to solve difficult riddles so he can show off his own intelligence to his friends. Guido wins and weds Dora. The film skips five years forward and we meet their son, Giosue (Joshua) (Giorgio Cantarini). The family is suddenly shipped off to a concentration camp where Guido tries to protect his son from the physical and psychological realities by turning the camp into a game. Dora, not Jewish, could have been spared by the Fascists, but insists on joining her husband and child. Guido tells Joshua that if he accumulates 1000 points, he wins a real tank. Just before liberation, Guido is killed protecting Joshua. An American tank driver reunites Joshua with his mother. (PG-13)

As Damocles' sword hung suspended by a thread above the heads of his dinner guests, we don't know what they wrote in their diaries after dinner. But in a similar situation three thousand years later, we do know what Leon Trotsky wrote while in Mexico waiting for his impending doom at the hands of Stalin's assassins: "life is beautiful."

Life is Beautiful is, essentially, two films that bump up against each other as much as they blend or support each other. The first half is itself a combination of slapstick and romantic comedy. It brings to mind bittersweet masterpieces of the past like Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* [1931]. Here Guido courts and wins Dora with all the romantic panache one could imagine. The second half of the film quite suddenly turns very dark when Guido, Dora and Joshua are taken to a concentration camp. Here Guido "sanitizes" the holocaust, turning it into a big game – something he hopes his young son can survive both physically and emotionally. Now the film becomes a quite odd combination of the power of positive humor and a black comedy reminiscent of *Dr. Strangelove* [1964] or *The Producers* [1967], bringing humor to ordinarily taboo topics.

There has been considerable comment on the aptness and even the taste of these combinations. Some claim that director/writer Benigni has trivialized the holocaust by both not showing its horror and by making a locus of humor. Others see the film as a

triumph of the human spirit (and other clichés) in the most dire of circumstances. I believe it is more interesting to look at specifically how Benigni did it (which the other critics have totally ignored) and I further believe it is more profitable to speculate on the public's (international) response to a film that all conventional wisdom would predict would be headed for well-deserved oblivion.

On inspection, one is surprised that the two at first seemingly desperate halves of the film are actually subtly integrated. There is a sense of cause and effect running quite clearly throughout.

As with many cleverly structured films, *Life is Beautiful* begins with a symbolic summary of the action to follow – in this case a promise and a warning. Guido and his friend drive from the country to the city in a car which loses its brakes. This summarizes the whole film quite nicely. They are riding in a political/social vehicle that is about to go out of control and which they will be unable to stop. Their only resort will be to deflect its path slightly in order to survive the ride. While waving his arms wildly warning people to get out of the way of the careering vehicle, Guido is mistaken for the President of Italy – a man who will soon be as obsolete as Guido's sense of humanity.

What follows is a delightful comedy, but if we look carefully, we can see it is laced with dark premonitions. Benigni's comic skill – a combination of Charlie Chaplain and Jacki Chan – works well to hide the coming darkness from us. In this way we participate parallel to the general populace of Italy (and the rest of the world) at the time these events were taking place. Thus, while critics may condemn the filmmakers for making light of serious situations, the film, by lulling us into being thoughtlessly entertained, condemns the audience for being so easily duped into ignoring the coming horrors of the past (and perhaps the film is also implying the horrors of the present and the future).

Guido cannot open a bookstore because of the red tape thrown in his way by the town bureaucrats. When this happens, we aren't aware he's Jewish. But obviously the officials do. Again, the film condemns our complacent interpretation of the situation and asks how many contemporary roadblocks are constructed to impede the path of specific groups around us. For instance, would a Hispanic or Black wanting to open a bookstore in Los Angeles or Akron be given the same treatment as a white?

Unable to open his bookstore, Guido is reduced to earning a living as a waiter. One of the film's subtleties enters at this point and should be a warning to us to be on the lookout for others. The hotel in which Guido works is an all-white, art-deco edifice. This is a reference to the "white telephone" movies produced in Italy during the Fascist era.

The lowering of Guido's position from nourishing the mind the nourishing the body has multiple implications. The insular majority only wants input from itself; it doesn't want to hear from an "outsider's" bookstore. Its prospects for expansion and growth are thus severely limited. Without reference to the outside, there is a great danger that they will evolve in a direction that is both unhealthy for themselves and for the world

around them – as clearly happened in Italy in 1939. By this seemingly trivial disappointment of Guido’s goals, the film points out some of the root causes of the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe. And, again, *Life is Beautiful* warns us about our own world, in our own day.

Another incident that is rife with premonition, both positive and negative, is Guido and Dora’s courtship and wedding. By manipulating what appear to be random events, Guido convinces Dora that he belongs in her life rather than the Fascist she is engaged to. Dora finds herself in this situation because he has been around since childhood and, because she has slowly become accustomed to him, she doesn’t see his inherent evil. Seen this way, it becomes a warning against becoming “engaged” to any political stance without occasionally inspecting it from an outside perspective (here provided her by Guido).

Guido and Dora’s marriage is a symbolic one – a hope for a combination of human beings beyond religious differences. The film makes it clear that the differences between them are artificially imposed from the outside. It is ironic that Dora’s decision to marry Guido takes place in a small, tight, enclosed space (under a table) which mimics the physical appearance of the concentration camp. When she says to him, “Take me away,” the film again anticipates her statement to the Nazi officer when she insists on joining her husband and son on the train to the camp.

Another example: Fascist vandals paint Guido’s uncle’s horse green and cover it with anti-Semitic slogans. (One wonders if the term “horse of a different color” has an equivalent in Italian.) Like the runaway car at the beginning of the film, we can see that their means of movement, symbolized by the horse, has been severely damaged by the Fascists. However, Guido uses this same horse to ride into Dora’s engagement celebration and “rescue” her from her fascist fiancée. They ride out together, their clothing cleverly covering up the fascist slogans. By covering up and ignoring the fascism (which Guido will continue to do throughout the second half of the film), they have turned a damaged means of movement into a means of escaping the very forces that caused the damage. Not only does the horse provide physical and psychological transportation, its green color becomes understandable as the symbolic color of growth.

We now realize that the hour-long prologue is not simply a display of Benigni’s comic gifts nor is it a simple introduction of the characters we will meet later. Instead, it is Guido’s – and by implication, humanity’s – inventory of first, the slow, almost invisible encroachment of fascism upon liberty and, second, the weapons against fascism available to a single individual. Not being a soldier or a statesman, Guido’s major weapon is humor.

Once inside the camp, Guido constructs an elaborate, fictional, child-like game to comfort and protect his son. The comedy continues, but whereas before it was in the context of a more-or-less normal life, it now becomes a pointed weapon to confuse the enemy and to protect his own soul. Once inside the camp, Guido uses his talent at humor to create hope, life and perhaps even pleasure where none of these could possibly exist.

When a Nazi soldier arrives at the prison barracks to announce the camp rules, Guido feigns being able to translate the German barking into Italian. In a take on Charlie Chaplin's pidgin German speech in *The Great Dictator* [1940], Guido reduces the probably lethal interdictions into totally silliness like, "And no asking for you mommy!" Later, when Joshua hears horror stories about buttons made of human bones and the death ovens, Guido laughingly dismisses them as the other players' attempts to psych Joshua out and get an advantage in the game.

Ultimately Joshua survives intact, physically and apparently psychologically. Guido's fantastic game – of winning a real tank after gathering 1000 points – comes true as an American tank rolls into the concentration camp during the liberation. And a kindly Yank reunites Joshua and his mother.

Now, the above discussion has been of the film. But the circumstances surrounding it are equally, if not more interesting. It has, as of this writing, been nominated to several Academy Awards and has received several others. It is swelling in popularity and repute. All this has happened despite the film's several strikes against mass American audience popularity: it is a foreign film, it has little action or blood, it has no recognizable stars, and it is subtitled (on my viewing people were walking away in droves on learning they would have to read a few words in English). One must ask why, beyond the comedic entertainment value, has this film and its odd look at the Holocaust succeeded.

Life is Beautiful goes further than most films in having us identify with a negative character. Alfred Hitchcock manipulates the audience into rooting for the thief Marion Crane in *Psycho* [1960] just as John Boorman beguiles us into rooting for heist thief in *Point Blank* [1967] (something which director Brian Haggerty couldn't come close to achieving in his execrable remake, *Payback* [1999]). Benigni takes this process a step further. We don't identify with a single character, but with the general populace of the time who let such horrors happen. The film's comedy lulls us, just as the ordinary events of the day lulled the 1939 populace. And then, once it is too late, we find out that we have been laughing when we should have been shouting – just as the historical populace of Italy (and elsewhere) should have been. But it is too late; we are now as guilty as they were. (Fortunately for our souls, we are only watching a movie.)

Once we understand the true subtextual messages of *Life is Beautiful*, we can also understand the forces behind the criticism of the film from both the political right and the political left.

The film's clarion call to alertness to any creeping infringements on civil liberties and rampant non-conformity would obviously threaten the Right. This message, though well hidden in the subtext, did not prevent the film from being recognized by the establishment (and usually conservative) film world: it earned its director the Grand Jury Prize at this year's Cannes Film Festival, and it won eight David di Donatellos (the Italian Oscars).

The Left has accused Benigni of callously and inappropriately combining comedy and the Holocaust, of making death-camp-lite, of the ultimate in bad taste. Indeed, the worst thing that happens to Guido is that he must carry around some very heavy anvils (in an environment calculated to remind us of Vulcan's fiery underworld workshop).

At this point I should point out that the greatest and most influential films about the Holocaust haven't been documentaries (*Night in Fog* [1956] is certainly a great film, but not very influential beyond the only place it is currently shown – the film history classroom). None of the dramas about the Holocaust have been graphic: Costa-Gavras' *Music Box* [1989], Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa* [1990], Alan Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* [1982], Vittorio De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* [1970], Louis Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* [1974] and many others have never depicted the slaughter of the Jews. Only *Schindler's List* [1993] approaches the horrors of the unimaginable head on. At the other end of the spectrum, we can see that there's nothing wrong with laughing at the Nazis or even the Holocaust. Lubitch did it in *To Be or Not to Be* [1942]. Mel Brooks did it in *The Producers* [1967] (and in his remake of *To Be or Not to Be* [1983]).

Clearly, the Left's criticism of *Life is Beautiful* can be seen as a defense mechanism against their own currently muddled stance. The American Left, now in moral disarray after having to decide whether or not to defend a philandering, lying but liberal President, has decamped the field and retreated into the ethical woodwork to let others make the moral decisions. I suspect that if Benigni had his way in America, a good portion of our cars would be sporting bumper stickers reading, "Impeach Kenneth Star."

While Guido creates a false reality, the film does not. This key difference can be seen in the person of Dr. Lessing. He is the representation of falseness in several different ways (aside from his obviously symbolic name). As a physician, he should have the welfare of others at heart. Yet he works for the Nazis as a concentration camp doctor presumably deciding who is able to work and who is unable . . . and thus who will be slated for extermination. Furthermore, Dr. Lessing is fascinated with riddles. He is interested in Guido only for his riddle-solving abilities; he has no interest in him as a human being – rather shocking for a physician. Dr. Lessing is the film's bridge between the two realities – the fantasy world generated by Guido for his son and the harsh reality of the holocaust. While Dr. Lessing's blindness to what is going on around him is one of introversion, he cares for nothing but his trivial mental exercises in solving riddles, Guido's blindness is consciously self-imposed and for the benefit of others.

While at the conscious level, *Life is Beautiful* is an uplifting and hopeful filmic paean to the strength of the human spirit dedicated to the idea that the soul can survive anything and that the future, especially for our children, will be better than the present. In our currently politically confusing and morally dispiriting times, this is a more than welcome message – especially when so charmingly presented. However, this is the sugar coating on a fairly bitter pill. The film's subtext indicts the audience through a clever manipulation into taking responsibility for the evil happening around us.

Directed by Roberto Benigni. Written by Vincenzo Cerami and Benigni. Cinematography by Tonino Delli Colli. Edited by Simona Paggi. Costumes, production and set design by Danilo Donati. Music by Nicola Piovani. Distributed by Miramax Films, 1998.