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NSW FILM AS TEXT RYAN SCOTT

## HISTORY AND MEMORY IN *LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL*

Despite Theodore Adorno's famous remark that, 'writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,' the Jewish Holocaust has remained a subject for not only poets, but novelists, painters and film-makers to this decade. There has been an ongoing fascination with this particular example of extreme, sustained and organized cruelty and the stories of survival in conditions of mass psychological and physical torture. *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1998) does not simply denounce Nazism and Fascism, but shows how the conditions inside the concentration camps revealed and reinforced the tenacity of certain human qualities and the strength of familial bonds.

The film is set during one of the most horrific chapters of our recent history, the Jewish holocaust. However, Benigni approaches his subject from the unique perspective of childhood memories. History and memory have a deeply entwined but antagonistic relationship. Grassroots history, oral history, feminist and postcolonial history, are all examples of alternative or counter-histories that have given marginal groups the opportunity to record their own histories as an antidote to dominant history with its exclusive and singular claim to truth. There is no one objective truth, and official histories once accepted have later been exposed to be the mediated accounts of largely white heterosexual men and thus vulnerable to reappraisal as narrow, blinkered and ideologically infested. It is now accepted that dominant history is generally

written by the holders of economic or social power with privileged access to the means of cultural production. Another problem that is endemic to dominant history is its use of narrative which purports history to be the simple and straightforward sequencing of factual events, rather than the present day construct of the past through mediated and invested discourses.

Alternatively, oral accounts and letters, diaries and memoirs, whether immediately retold to friends or written in private, all require the belief and verification of other people. Memories are privately formed, but require public acceptance. They are at once personal and collective, with both aspects acting on each other. Just as the study of history is impacted by present day historical conditions, the public acceptance of memories is as also determined by ideological and political conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly any consideration of the theme of history and memory invites many complex issues.

Nevertheless, memories and the past hold great attraction for poets, novelists and film-makers. L.P. Hartley once said, 'The past is a foreign country', and just like travel writers and documentarians, historical writers and film-makers look to this 'unknown land' for inspiration as well as a setting for what are considered timeless themes. The past is a storehouse for stories of love, betrayal, loss, death and courage and many of these stories come complete with a structure that simply requires dramatization.

Audiences expect to be 'transported' to a given time and place. They expect a close relationship to historical 'truth' however questionable that premise might be. But the perspective of film-makers can be affected and at times compromised by poetic licence, they can be guilty of falsification, exaggeration and simplification. Does this mean that dramatizing a real historical event through fiction is a redundant approach? Not at all, it personalizes the stories, offering a way into the past by relating it to our own experiences.

Within these considerations *Life is*

*Beautiful* can be thought of as a fictional account of actual experiences of the holocaust. The film bases its narrative on personal testimony and historical accounts and literature. However, the film also suggests that it is a fictional narrative set within an historical event by opening with the voice over:

*This is a simple story, but a difficult one to tell. Like a fable, there is sorrow, and like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness.*

We later learn it is the voice of Joshua Orefice, now a middle-aged man, speaking retrospectively. Since part of the narrative occurs before he is born, we can only assume that his mother recounted this story to him. Already, the story becomes a depiction of something transmitted and not personally experienced. Family stories are always altered by memory, what can be told and what others accept. In this way, the film not only relies on the memories of the survivors, but implies that memories are mediated and do not simply mirror truth.

The vagaries of truth and experience are present to all memoirs and historical fictions and *Life is Beautiful* approaches the holocaust with a certain amount of humour. The principle character Guido Orefice, along with his wife, son and uncle are sent to an unnamed death camp in the last few months of the war. Humour reinforces the already personal nature of the film. It draws us towards the characters and makes us sympathize with their plight. When we laugh, it is not out of insensitivity but a shared sense of the absurd premise of racism and an attestation of the humanity of the characters in face of such inhumanity.

The film is not a simple account of what happened in the death camps, since its narrative is mediated by the collective memories of survivors. It accepts the events of the holocaust in an unproblematic way, whereas historians have shown that these 'chronically abnormal conditions' are difficult to understand.<sup>2</sup> The rise of fascism is not afforded any explanation. The political situation in Italy and Europe, which serves as a

preamble to the tragedy and despair they later face, is not explored. Guido only makes one attempt at political discussion with an upholsterer, but upon finding out the upholsterer's sons' names are Benito and Adolphe, decides not to continue the discussion. When people vandalize Guido's uncle's horse, his uncle simply dismisses them as 'barbarians'. The film does not explore the psyche of the nation at that time or the motivations of the fascists and their supporters. Nazism is portrayed as a manifestation of arrogance and fear that leads to bigotry and violence

If *Life is Beautiful* can be described as a fable, its central focus is not political. The extreme barbarity of Nazism and Fascism acts as a backdrop to the narrative's central premise that to see beauty in even the most heinous conditions is to triumph over evil.

In the first half of the film, before Joshua's birth, the audience is introduced to Guido as a comical character, unfettered by reality. Upon meeting the young farm girl at the beginning, he announces that he is a prince, who owns all the land and intends to replace the horses and goats with camels and hippopotamus. The young girl is delighted, if not a little incredulous, at his intentions. He is a character who twists perceptions of reality wherever he is. Before arriving at the farm, as he and his friend career out of control in a car, Guido orders people out of the way, gesturing in a manner very similar to the fascist salute. The crowd moves but only because they believe the car contains the Italian King, who does arrive moments later to a confused crowd.

This scene immediately establishes Guido's irreverent nature. He is someone who doesn't take a literal view of the world. No wonder he's so at home in puzzles. He sees the subtle nuances of words, and the other meanings they might hold. This less than realistic perspective helps him arrive at the answers. When he asks the doctor the riddle: 'How long would it take to serve the seven dwarfs again', the doctor becomes



instantly perplexed and sets out to solve it in a systematic fashion on paper. After the doctor leaves, Guido tells another diner the answer, 'seven seconds', explaining it is a play on words. There are seven dwarfs and Snow White is serving them seconds.

This world view is most obvious in his pursuit of Dora, his 'princepsa'. He interprets their chance encounters, and later the ones he orchestrated, as though it was fate. After he tricks her into getting into his friend's car, he says that she keeps appearing wherever he is. Both know the irony of this statement, but it takes their meeting beyond the banality of chance. He distorts reality to his whimsical views when walking with Dora. He tells her that he can speak directly to the virgin Mary, asking for the key to Dora's heart, knowing that they are standing beneath a window where a woman, named Mary, throws a key to a man who calls for it. This trick adds a 'magic' dimension to his courting. After tricking her into his car at the theatre they arrive at the gates to her house, soaking in rain. He tells Dora to ask Mary for a dry hat for him, knowing that the man from the theatre, whose hat he stole moments earlier, is approaching wearing Gui-

do's dry hat. The man takes his own wet hat and places Guido's dry hat on his head, to Dora's amazement. Guido's elaborate illusions eschew reality and express that his feelings for Dora transcends the everyday.

His fantastic view of the world is tried by the political reality of the times. He keeps his son sheltered, as much as himself, from the anti-Semitism that has afflicted Italy. He seemingly pays no heed to the graffiti on his security door that reads 'Jewish Store'. He is equally oblivious to the defacement of his uncle's horse, noted earlier, and rides in triumphantly like some kind of Don Quixote, but one who is aware of the fantasies he weaves. His illusions make the world a more bearable place, a panacea to the barbarism and small mindedness he sees around him. After Guido, his uncle and Joshua are taken; reality is no longer just small minded—it has become brutal. The stories Guido tells Joshua are to preserve the boy's innocence, and perhaps his own, adding to the film's fable like qualities.

Guido's efforts to protect the boy from the truth begin as soon as they are lead away. Lined up and forced to enter the trains, Joshua pleads





with his father to know where they are going. Guido tells Joshua that it is a surprise for his birthday, and calls to the front of the line to make sure they leave room for him and his son, knowing full well that they will be forced on with everyone else. The levity that Guido brings to the moment is ostensibly to calm Joshua. However, it also affects how we perceive the Nazi programme of genocide. It makes it appear foolish and unreal. Humour defies analysis, but one thing that can be said about it is that it undermines people in positions of authority. To use an Australianism, it 'brings them down a peg or two.' Small wonder political figures are so frequently lampooned. Humour is an equalizer, by which everyone becomes equally ridiculous.

Guido's use of humour begins to take over when they arrive at the death camp. Guido tells Joshua that the surprise he organized for his birthday is in fact a game. The object of the game is to score one thousand points, and Guido improvises the way to score. This elaborate lie may in retrospect seem irresponsible, especially when Joshua is told the truth by some of the other prisoners. Guido's deception makes the events of the death camp appear absurd. How can his 'game' be any less incomprehensible than what really happened? The humour undermines the omnipotent image of the Nazis and presents their project not only as barbaric, but as a

barbarism spawned from nonsense.

There is an historical reference in Guido's inability to comprehend what is happening. When the death camps were revealed, many people refused to believe that they were true. As Bauman says:

*People refused to believe the facts they stared at. Not that they were obtuse or ill-willed. It was just that nothing they had known before had prepared them to believe.*<sup>3</sup>

There was much about the death camps that would have seemed unreal to the people who were imprisoned there. 'Poor nutrition, appalling sanitary conditions, iron discipline, the humiliation of prisoners and the imposition of brutal corporal and other punishment for the slightest transgression' could only have the overt purpose of dehumanising the prisoners. Guido's game may sound absurd given what we know about the camps, but the reality of the situation was no more rational. Furthermore, the Nazis perpetrated their own type of illusion in the camps. The most significant of these deceits were the showers. People were lead away to be exterminated in the gas chambers on the pretence that they were to be deloused. Guido's innocent fantasies highlight the far-reaching mendacity of the Nazi regime: that they hid their intentions from their captives and some may say from themselves.

While the film can be accused of simplifying historical events into a fight between good and evil, it nevertheless reaffirms the protective sanctuary of imagination as it was necessitated and tested by the holocaust. It is ultimately a parable about the capacity for human creativity to transcend life's banalities and our entrapment in historical circumstance. However, it is not fantastic monsters that give this premise credence but the force of a real historical setting. *Life is Beautiful* may not expand our historical understanding of the holocaust<sup>4</sup>, but it does remind us of the human factor in this atrocity, while it shores up hope by showing that laughter, love and even poetry can survive and even triumph over evil.

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?* Penguin Books, Hammondsworth, 1964, pp. 29-30.
- <sup>2</sup> Inga Clendennin, *Reading the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 76.
- <sup>3</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1989, p. 85.
- <sup>4</sup> Leni Yahli, *The Holocaust: The Fate of the European Jewry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 134.



