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## “*Life Is Beautiful, Or Is It?*” Asked *Jakob the Liar*

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“Sono addolorata e disgustata—e i membri più anziani della mia famiglia non potevano ridere. Non potevano nemmeno piangere. Non possono credere che ci sia qualcuno che ci ride sopra, e qualcun altro che per questo lo premia.”

[“I am grieved and appalled—the eldest members of my family were not able to laugh. They could not even cry. I cannot believe it that there is someone who laughs about it, and someone else who offers a prize for this.”]

-- Sandra Y. Elazar<sup>1</sup>

In 1999 the 71st Academy Awards ceremony awarded to the film *The Last Days* the prize for Best Documentary Feature. Underwritten by Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, this documentary depicts in a compelling, historically objective fashion what the Nazi regime called the “Endlösung” [“Final Solution”]: the effort to annihilate all of European Jewry.<sup>2</sup> In the film, five Hungarian survivors are interviewed with honesty and compassion. Their answers record history as it unwound. Clearly, the intent of the interviews is to assure that historical facts are not falsified, nor taken for granted. Documentaries of this kind can attempt to transmit the past to future generations without intentional distortions.

During the same Academy Awards ceremony, the Italian film *La vita è bella* [*Life Is Beautiful*] was nominated for seven categories, and it won in four. This was a great success for Roberto Benigni’s film, as it had been thirty years since a foreign film was nominated in the category of best film.<sup>3</sup> *Life Is Beautiful* was the sixth film directed by Benigni, and the film has been awarded countless prizes—to name just a few: nine “Davide di Donatello,” the “Biglietto d’oro,” the “Chiavi d’oro,” five “Nastri d’argento,” four “Globi d’oro,” and the prize “Amidei.” On an international level, besides winning at the Academy Awards, *Life Is Beautiful* was awarded a prize at Toronto’s cinematography festival. Also, the film won the “Fellini” prize, and a prize at the film festival in Jerusalem, in addition to the “Grand Jury” prize at Cannes. As of March 1999, Benigni’s film had already

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amassed 56 international prizes.<sup>4</sup> The ugly pun “There’s no business like Shoah business” quickly resurfaced and was quoted frequently by the media.

Before analyzing the reasons for this film’s success and treating the ambiguous themes hidden within, it is helpful to discuss the use of humor in works that address the Shoah. Humor (which was strictly forbidden in the ghettos by the Nazis) was sometimes used by Jews as a form of relief from the frustration and horrors of everyday life. Their humor was but a tenuous attempt at laughter: a clandestine, whispered smile. Such peculiar “humor” mostly involved a sense of bitter irony, a biting sarcasm. It was black humor, desperate humor, generated by Jews forced to live in unimaginable conditions. Bitter laughter was often the only form of resistance that these slave-prisoners could muster, and for some of those victims, a bitter laugh constituted the only means of defense they had against anti-Semitic measures. It seems unnecessary to underline how no phase of the Jewish persecution was even remotely comic. Witnesses relate that ghetto and camp humor was used by only a minority of Jewish victims. For the majority, the pain and suffering could not be relieved by bitter laughter. The pre-war, traditional Jewish humor, observes Kristol, died when its Eastern European creators and interpreters were killed by the Nazis (431). Steve Lipman reports that during the Jewish genocide in World War II, Jewish humor cast its very own mold: “the Jewish humor from Nazi Europe was intrinsically Jewish. It was *by* Jews. It was *about* Jews, Jewish suffering, Jewish holidays, and Jewish ideals.... It had a distinctive point of view” (140). It was insiders’ humor. Can this tragic form of humor be transposed into film media without betraying it?

Freud theorized that laughter liberates people, for it sets distance between the subject and the pain (Lewis 64). Typically, any joke ultimately targets a weaker figure, the one who is at the end of the verbal stick. Hence, the punch lines to jokes represent a power game played by the narrator against the weaker target, for the punch line often creates a weak victim. Jokes can also represent a temporary refuge from reality: jokes and puns serve to avoid a serious discussion about a situation that victimizes the target.

Non-minority humorists who ply their trade at ethnic humor often rely upon stereotypical commonplaces. One might include here Benigni, a non-Jew, portraying Jewish humor. Moreover, one might ask whether it is ethically legitimate to use the Shoah as the subject of slapstick comedy, and if it is, to which extent.

Probably several reasons exist for the popular acclaim of *Life Is Beautiful*. One is, of course, the financial clout and advertising influence of the powerhouse Miramax Films; and a second is the popular human response to sentimental optimism, so much a part of this film. The centripetal and superficial protagonist Guido represents

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to a certain extent our contemporary society in search of facile sentimental idealism as a theme exploitable by mass media for popular entertainment. Hollywood and Cinecittà (its Italian equivalent) repackage and recast unmentionable human tragedies as plots that can console the casual spectator, thus transforming an unlikely comedic production into a convincing commercial success. It is not by chance that with the possible exceptions of *Schindler's List* (1993) and *The Pianist* (2002), for at least the past thirty years the most successful films treating the Jewish annihilation have done so only indirectly.<sup>5</sup>

While the underlying concept of *Life Is Beautiful* undeniably offers universal human appeal (what parent would not try to protect his/her only child from the horrors of anti-Semitism and from the gas chambers?), it is at the same time arguably absurd to reduce the Shoah to a wacky farce, to a “‘fable’ about a man named Guido making a sort of hide-and-seek game out of camp life” (Schickel). Miramax’s hype billed this film as a fable about “love, family, and the power of imagination,” yet most Jewish victims of the Nazis’ “Final Solution” were loving, concerned, devoted parents. No amount of love, family, and power of imagination helped their children survive the gas chambers. David Sterritt of *The Christian Science Monitor* writes that “his fable ultimately obscures the human and historical events it sets out to illuminate. Its intentions may be sound, but its achievements fall far short of the ambitious mark it sets for itself.” The film denies to its audience the traumatic historical impact of the Jewish genocide, while at the same time sugar-coating the deaths of the victims. Ossola and Orengo conclude that Benigni’s film attempts to transform the memory of evil into a prize game.<sup>6</sup>

Citing Sander Gilman’s research, Paul Elovitz suggests that Benigni’s film might be more easily accepted among Italian Catholics than by Jews:

Gilman pointed out to what extent the film is very much an Italian myth of the Jews being fully integrated into their society and a very Italian Catholic story of the mother and child as the Virgin Mary and the Christ child surviving while Joseph (Guido) sacrifices himself for the good of the family and society. The Holocaust is merely a stage backdrop. (Elovitz 5)

Also, Bernheim perceptively notices that by the end of the film the principle surviving protagonists are the non-Jewish members of the Orefice family: Dora, Guido’s wife, and the couple’s young child, Giosuè (6). *Life Is “Beautiful”* then mainly for the non-Jews, since most of the Jews in the Miramax version of the Shoah are dead by the end of the film.

Speaking in terms of movie ethics, Taylor writes, “The point, I think, is the sheer callous inappropriateness of comedy existing within the physical reality of the camps—even the imagined reality of a movie.”<sup>7</sup> Comic moments in a film treating

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the Shoah seem inconceivable. The destruction of the self in a concentration camp was so final that it is possibly unlike any other kind of humiliation known. Perhaps (and only perhaps) in today's terms, a pale analogy to the violation of the self experienced in the Nazi camps might be in the violent transgressions experienced by victims of incest and of rape. When Benigni's comic twist on the theme of the Shoah is equated to a theoretical attempt to attach humor to incest or rape, it becomes clear that within the ethics of representation, *Life Is Beautiful* demonstrates a blatant lack of respect for Jewish victims and survivors.

By exploiting the popular need to feel good about life and oneself, the film fails to overcome the superficiality and falseness of its premise. For example, Gerush '92 (an Italian Jewish Cultural Association) declared that this film purposefully failed to ever mention that children under three feet high were sent to the gas chambers upon arrival in the camps. Through a combination of marketing opportunism and a facile, naïvely sentimental consumer base, *Life Is Beautiful* subverts a serious political analysis of the historical facts. After noting that Guido's gentleness and innocence stand no chance against Hitler's "Final Solution," film critic Schickel contends that "sentimentality is a kind of fascism, too, robbing us of judgement and moral acuity, and it needs to be resisted."

Roger Ebert reports that *Life Is Beautiful* has been controversial since it was first released, for it received strong opposition from the right when it opened in Milan. At Cannes it "offended some left-wing critics with its use of humor associated with the Holocaust." In order to insert some slapstick comedy situations during the second half of the film, the horror of the concentration camps had to be softened, just to make some clownish situations possible at all. Take, for instance, the completely unrealistic scene of Guido's broadcasting Offenbach over the camp's intercom system with the complacency or the negligence of Nazi guards. Are we spectators of the film really to believe that Nazis in the camp could be manipulated so easily? How can history be so trivialized?

The so-called comic moments of *Life Is Beautiful* (particularly during of the first half) are extravagantly fantastic: a princess falls from the skies, and Guido carries her off on a green horse. And although, as Erika Milvy and Maurizio Viano note, the number on Guido's camp uniform (0737) is in homage to Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, there is an obvious abyss between the intent of the two movies.

Benigni shows no interest in realistically conveying the hunger of the children and of the other inmates in the camp. In *Life Is Beautiful*, little Giosuè's face remains angelic even in the most probing moments of camp life. For those few children who fortuitously managed initially to survive the gas chamber, nice, clean clothes and angelic, innocent questioning faces certainly were not the norm.

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Historical photographs of the children who lived during the Shoah bear witness to how those harsh conditions turned their faces from angelic to emaciated within a matter of just a few days.

It is useful to ask why the focus of this film drifts from historical verisimilitude to entertainment-relief and whether its masking and concealment of pain for the sake of media entertainment represents egregious excess. Other films about the Shoah demonstrate alternatives to this focus on facile optimism. Upon viewing Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* in 1985, Ruth Klüger Angress (a camp survivor who was 12 years old when she was deported by the Nazis) commented,

There is plenty of grass in Lanzmann's long shots of the camp today. I look at its technicolored image and I think of that middle-aged man who was trying to tell me something about the resilience of life in general when I felt only naked 12-year-old terror for my own particular life. (251)

From several points of view, its commercial success notwithstanding, Benigni's film is not remarkable work. The fate of characters other than the protagonists is given little attention: the other interned slave-prisoners merely form an anonymous Jewish mass that weaves in and out of the over-simplified, linear plot. Benigni has been able to reduce the Shoah to a logical moment in history with a clear beginning, a logical sequence of intervening events, and an inadequate historical closure. "A type of narrative," writes Miriam Hansen referring to *Schindler's List* but whose discourse perfectly applies to *Life Is Beautiful*, "in which the resolution of larger-order problems tends to hinge upon the formation of a ... family ... and of familial forms of subjectivity" (298). In the film, Benigni is concerned about one example of survival, an incredible exception to the rule of annihilation, and disregards the historical implications of millions of other deaths.

This assessment is in keeping with Benigni's reputation in Italy for clown-like opportunism. During an interview with Marco Spagnoli, when asked, "How would you define *Life Is Beautiful*?" Benigni answered that it is a bitter fable with no philological ambition about the '40s, that it has nothing to do with the concentration camps, with Jews, with fascist Italy.<sup>8</sup> Audiences for the film might well be stupefied by such a dissociation and left to wonder what this film might be about, if it is not about anti-Semitic discrimination and its consequences. During another interview given to Vanina Pezzetti, referenced in Bullaro and Celli, Benigni declared that the story recounted in *Life Is Beautiful* actually happened in Buchenwald (however, he does not offer any substantiating evidence). As any scholar of the Shoah knows, there were no gas chambers in the forced-labor concentration camp of Buchenwald.

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Benigni does not seem to hold consistent political beliefs. He told Sabina Guzzanti during yet another interview—billed as “the first (and only) serious interview with Roberto Benigni”—that comics have always been free [politically], that a true political thought no longer exists and, hence, one can never go wrong, that anything goes, that it’s almost too easy, and that the comic has always played the role of a [political] reactionary.<sup>9</sup>

There is a basic fallacy to the entire premise of the film, i.e., that this film is a “fable” seen through the eyes of a child. The literary parameters of “fable” are misused in this context.<sup>10</sup> By strict definition, a fable is structured as an allegory that presents animals or plants speaking in human tongues, a structure that bears no resemblance to *Life Is Beautiful*. Fables work because animal characters who speak are so nonsensical that this type of fiction constructs a built-in distance for the reader, a buffer from reality. However, any child in a concentration camp would have very soon figured out the truth about the stench of the burning human bodies in the crematoria, and the languishing of the other prisoners. Nazis “sure didn’t stack the evidence up in a corner where little kids couldn’t find it” (Tatara). The movie does not fulfill the ambitious demands of its premise: any parent knows how hard it is to fool a child, and consequently how impossible it would be to invent a make-believe game convincing enough to fool a boy living in those conditions. As Mick LaSalle writes,

the audience soon realizes that Benigni is at cross-purposes. He wants us to be frightened that the Nazis will find Guido’s son.... At the same time, he consistently undercuts the realness of the Nazi presence with bits of whimsy that play like warmed-over magical realism. (C1)

Benigni’s characters are not realistic, nor historically possible.

This film then must be trying to protect the audience from the tragic reality of the Nazis’ “Final Solution.” The question is why? Why compromise historical horror? In Benigni’s camp, no one seems really sick. No one seems to be dying. No human waste is detected on the soil of the barracks. No filth is noticeable, and, with the exception of one quick scene (conveniently shrouded in fog), there are no rotting corpses. Food rations are small, and labor conditions are harsh, but “the prisoners don’t seem to see much of their jailers, who, when they do turn up, act as if they’ve drifted into this film from a *Hogan’s Heroes* rerun—barking incomprehensible orders to cover their comic ineptitude” (Schickel). Paul Tatara points out that the kind of concentration camp that Benigni creates is such a “back-lot version” that he cheats his audience “before even dealing with the horror.” Benigni’s harlequinesque adventures conveniently encourage historical oblivion. At times his slapstick could be interpreted as anti-Semitic. It should

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not be forgotten that a few years ago, during a nationally televised and very popular show titled *A tutto Benigni*, one of his so-called jokes went like this: “Dio è anche tirchio, infatti ha scelto gli ebrei come suo popolo eletto!” [“God is a big cheapskate, why else would he pick the Jews as his chosen people?”].<sup>11</sup>

The inappropriateness and insensitivity that can be cataloged in *Life Is Beautiful* can be extended also to the treatment of parenthood. It is *we* (the passive audience) who are transformed into the children of this film by accepting the comic rhetoric of the movie. Just as the protagonist Guido hides the truth from his son Giosuè, likewise the film hides it from the audience. Benigni’s story-telling and the excuse of a “fable” serve only one purpose: to distract from realism by creating a false image of the camps.

Even the anti-Semitic laws promulgated in Italy in 1938 are underplayed in this film, so that from the beginning, the audience loses any sense of the actual tragedy of the final Italian outcome. The infamous discriminatory sign “No Dogs or Jews Allowed” is reworked into a politically meaningless “No Spiders or Visigoths.” Hitler and Mussolini, responsible for unspeakable crimes, are reduced to the characters of the two young dunce-like children (Adolfo and Benito) tormenting each other on a sofa.

Guido’s death occurs conveniently and deliberately off-screen. Just as the father protected his son from the reality of the camp, so too does the film protect the audience from the truth of Guido’s demise. Clearly the success of the movie depends on Benigni’s keeping the truth from his audience. In this context, it is helpful to mention another ill-conceived shot in the film (and one which has often drawn laughter from audiences): the well-known scene in which a stiff German officer comes inside the barracks and barks orders, which Guido nonsensically mocks and translates into Italian as though they were rules of a make-believe game. Misunderstanding orders barked in German could literally result in the whole barracks meeting its death in the gas chambers. This fact is ignored in the film as is the true tragedy about the linguistic Babel created by interned Jews and other displaced ethnic groups. This Babel was evidence of the massive uprooting of thousands of different ethnic Jewish cultures throughout Europe—a fact ignored by Benigni, who instead transposes the linguistic tragedy into a skit. Benigni is a comedian appreciated by many for his slapstick humor. Nonetheless, Baltake writes, “the fanciful way the death camp is presented struck me as a queasy insult to people who died in such places and those who miraculously managed to survive” (TK 15). Whether one likes it or not, today the media have increasingly become the repository of history, either in documentary format or in reconstructive productions. In the case of the Shoah, one must appreciate the

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value of any of these reconstructions, since the Nazis purposefully destroyed most primary historical documentation. As eventually first-hand eyewitnesses will no longer be alive, our collective memory will rely more and more heavily on visual, commercial reflections of the facts.

It is not inconceivable that Benigni was well aware of the impact his film could have on collective memory of the Shoah when he opted to distract his audience from the horrors of the concentration camps. David Denby astutely observes that *Life Is Beautiful* is “one of the most unconvincing and self-congratulatory movies ever made” (96), and he concludes that the movie is “a benign form of Holocaust denial” (99).

Other film footage extant about the Shoah is etched in our minds, including that taken at the Nuremberg trials, when the accused officers all proclaimed resolutely, “I am not guilty; I am not responsible.” Protestations of non-involvement beg the important questions of who is responsible for preserving collective memory and for presenting an accurate historical background.

Consider these questions also in tandem with an analysis of the film *Jakob the Liar* (newly released in a 1999 USA version), based on the homonymous book by Polish-born Jurek Becker, who spent most of his youth in the Lodz ghetto before being deported to the concentration camps. *Jakob the Liar* (in the American version starring Robin Williams as both main protagonist and executive producer) is a remake of the 1975 East German film *Jakob, der Lügner* which won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.<sup>12</sup> Bruce Kirkland points out that Williams’ remake was partly filmed in the Polish village of Piotrkow (one and one-half hours southwest of Warsaw), where no Jews survived the war.<sup>13</sup> After two weeks of filming, the cast then moved to Budapest.

While the opening credits are still rolling and before the actual film begins, a voice-over by Robin Williams tells a joke which is reported by many witnesses to have circulated in the ghettos: Hitler goes to a fortune-teller to learn about the future circumstances of his own death. The fortune-teller informs him that he will die on a Jewish holiday. How does the fortune-teller know? “Any day Hitler dies is a Jewish holiday,” is the punch line. While the audience of the film is visually catching its first glimpses of ghetto scenes, the voice-over continues as a rhetorical question is asked: how can one tell jokes in these conditions (i.e., conditions of grave deprivation as experienced in a Nazi-occupied Polish ghetto)? “We survived with this” is the rhetorical answer by the same voice-over. And thus, the philosophical and theoretical frame for *Jakob the Liar* is set before the actual story even opens. The film successfully proposes a definition of humor and illustrates the specific kind of gallows-humor that circulated in the ghettos as a

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means of counterbalancing the daily despair of the Jews. Briefly, the plot focuses on the reluctant hero, non-religious Jakob Heym (played by Robin Williams), a Jew in an unnamed Polish ghetto during the harsh winter of 1944. One evening, he overhears a radio broadcast indicating the advancement of the Russian front. Through a series of misunderstandings, innuendos, and lies, much of the ghetto is convinced that Jakob is defying Nazi rules by hiding a radio in the ghetto. Since news of the advancing Russian troops sends a wave of hope throughout the ghetto, Jakob continues to circulate false war news while at the same time denying possession of the radio, a capital crime. The whole film, then, pivots around intriguingly ambiguous definitions of “truth” and “falsity,” here understood within the parameters of wartime living, under conditions of extreme duress. We are immediately reminded of the remarkable chapter titled “The Gray Zone” in Primo Levi’s book *The Drowned and the Saved*. In this essay, Levi courageously illustrates how moral and ethical parameters may sometimes shift when survival is at stake.<sup>14</sup>

There is considerable poignancy in *Jakob the Liar*, especially in the personalities of the ghetto’s people and their resilience to the constant atrocities they witness. The film is full of subtle (and unsubtle) symbols that serve to reinforce the sense of hopelessness and isolation of each of the movie’s characters. For instance, in the already-mentioned initial scene, a sheet of newspaper flies into the ghetto’s walls, blown by the wind, never to be caught.<sup>15</sup> The free-floating sheet of paper represents a stark contrast to the lack of freedom of the Jews to move about, outside the ghetto walls, whereas an object, a mere sheet of paper, can fly over the wall effortlessly. The Jews’ desperate need to receive reliable news about the war was a direct result of programmed Nazi isolationism. Throughout the film, notwithstanding the use of ghetto humor, the terrible conditions of the ghetto and of the anti-Semitic deportations are never underplayed. They are never relegated to the background. Themes such as suicide and hopelessness are openly discussed. The encumbering tragedy is never forgotten. Within this frame, *Jakob the Liar* cannot really be considered a comedy, rather a drama whose moments of humorous relief are never far from the shadow of the mass deportations. Throughout the film, the script is respectful of historical truths.

The ending of the film *Jakob the Liar* mirrors the end of the book from which it is adapted. Author Jurek Becker devotes many pages to postulating several different endings for his reader, some of which are more gruesome, others less pessimistic. The last of Becker’s scenarios is the one upon which the (only) ending of the 1975 East German film *Jakob, der Lügner* is based. In the last five minutes of Robin Williams’ 1999 remake of the film, two endings are incorporated—one

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immediately following the other, neither taken literally from the book. One shows the cattle-car train inexorably moving its cargo of ghetto protagonists towards the concentration camps; the other (arguably a revisionist reading), involving a Soviet army contingency attacking the cattle-car convoy, Western-movie style, and freeing the Jewish prisoners on board the train. They are then entertained by a brief musical interlude with what seems to be an American “Big Band” playing for a female vocalist trio much resembling the Andrews Sisters.<sup>16</sup> The book’s anonymous first-person narrator discusses his use of multiple endings for the text:

an ending ... incomparably better than the real ending ... it’s really a crying shame that such a beautiful story should come so wretchedly to nothing. Invent an ending for it that can be halfway satisfying.... A proper ending will atone for some of its shortcomings. (242)

And, “now here I am with my two endings and don’t know which one to tell: mine, or the horrible one” (243). And lastly, “So, I am offering them [the endings] as a selection. Let each person select the one he considers the most valid according to his own experiences” (253). Author Becker clearly identifies the reasons for offering alternative endings to the bleak prospect of the transports. The audience of the film (and of the book) is given a clear choice: historical truth vs. a fantasy ending that is more convenient and happier. Contrary to the order in which the films were released in the United States, Jewish Hungarian-born director Peter Kassovitz’s *Jakob the Liar* was actually completed before Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful*. Comparisons between the two films are inevitable and instructive.

It is in their endings that these two films truly intersect, and the endings help explain why *Jakob the Liar* flopped at American box offices while *Life Is Beautiful* became an international success. For both films the central issue is truth vs. falsehood, and both posit pervasive questions as to who is lying and who is telling the truth. Jakob, in Robin Williams’ remake of the film, dies a liar: i.e., he does not reveal the truth about the radio before being hanged by the Nazis in very public circumstances. Paradoxically, it is this same Jakob, nicknamed “the Liar,” who ultimately does give film audiences some true information about life in the ghetto, anti-Semitism, despair, resilience, and the cattle cars. However, at the same time, the film also offers a more convenient (revisionist) dual ending for its audience. Such antithetical duplicity forces a conscious choice on the viewer’s part, a choice between historical reality and a more comforting and reassuring falsified ending. *Life Is Beautiful*, on the other hand, ends its bittersweet story line on one false, sugar-coated survival note. Benigni’s audience is never given a chance to decide for itself.

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The significance of this disparity between the two films and their relationships to the audience is mitigated also by the disparity in the numbers of viewers each has attracted. The film seeking the closest adherence to truth and historical accuracy never made it past the first few weeks of showing in most movie theaters nationwide, while Benigni's untruthful "fable" proved to be very successful among movie goers.

An analysis such as this ultimately sheds more light on our own current popular culture than on either of the films discussed here.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sandra Y. Elazar's comment on *Life Is Beautiful* was posted in 1999 on an Italian public web forum which no longer exists. I wish to thank my colleague Cinzia Donatelli-Noble (Brigham Young University) who has patiently listened to me talk to no end about *Life Is Beautiful*. I am indebted to Wiley Feinstein (Loyola University in Chicago), who has kindly provided me with the text of the *communiqué* by the "Cobase Group" (Rome). Also, I thank Ilaria Poli, who brought to my attention several web-based reviews of both films, and Arno Dienhart for his invaluable feedback on a previous draft. For etymological reasons, throughout most of this study the word "Shoah" is used, rather than the term "Holocaust."

<sup>2</sup> In 1993, Steven Spielberg founded the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation whose goal was to videotape at least 50,000 interviews with Shoah survivors from all over the world. In 2005, the Foundation became a division of the University of Southern California's College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. To date, the Foundation has documented nearly 52,000 video testimonies.

<sup>3</sup> In *Life Is Beautiful*, Benigni is the director, star, and script co-author (with Vincenzo Cerami). His real-life wife Nicoletta Braschi plays the character of Dora. Braschi has co-starred in other films by Benigni, more recently in *Pinocchio* (2002), as the *Fata Turchina*.

<sup>4</sup> This was the first time in Academy Awards history that the Best Actor Award went to a foreign actor. The Best Actress Award was presented to the Italian Sophia Loren for her role in *Two Women* (1961). Moreover, Benigni was the first person in fifty years to both direct and star in an Academy Award-winning film. (The only other man was Olivier in *Hamlet*.) Together with Orson Welles, Warren Beatty, and Woody Allen, Roberto Benigni was the fourth person to receive nominations in the following categories for the same film: best actor, best director, and best script. Eighteen months after its release, *Life Is Beautiful* still held the box-office record for a foreign film in the United States.

<sup>5</sup> To name a few, *Lacombe, Lucien* (Louise Malle), *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini* (Vittorio de Sica), *Enemies, A Love Story* (Paul Mazursky), *Music Box* (Costa-Gavras), and *Europa, Europa* (Agnieszka Holland).

<sup>6</sup> "la memoria del Male ... in una favola a premi" (qtd. in Simonelli 140).

<sup>7</sup> For a bit of background: Benigni's father Luigi was sent to a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1943 and came back to tell his children about it. POW camps, of course, presented a much different situation from Nazi annihilation/concentration camps.

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<sup>8</sup> “È una favola amara. Non ha alcuna pretesa filologica sugli anni Quaranta. Non ha niente a che vedere con i campi di concentramento, con gli Ebrei, con l’italietta [sic] fascista” (Spagnoli). This source is no longer available online.

<sup>9</sup> “i comici in effetti, dal buffone a quello che ti pare, sono sempre stati liberi.... Non c’è più un pensiero politico vero e allora non si sbaglia mai, qualsiasi cosa va bene, è una pacchia, quasi troppo, non c’è nessun rischio.... Ma il comico, nella storia, per usare una brutta parola è sempre stato un reazionario” (Guzzanti and Minganti). The source of this quote is no longer available online at the moment of this writing.

<sup>10</sup> “Questa è una storia semplice ... non facile da raccontare ... nelle favole c’è dolore” is heard in voice-over at the beginning of *Life Is Beautiful*. “Like a fable. There is sorrow, but it is also full of joy and wonder ... a simple story but not easy to tell.”

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the Associazione Culturale Ebraica Gherush ’92’s press release of March 1999.

<sup>12</sup> For his portrayal of Jakob, Vlastimil Brodsky won the Prize for Best Actor at the 25th International Film Festival in West Berlin, 1975. The film was directed by Frank Beyer and was nominated as Best Foreign Film during the Academy Awards of 1977.

<sup>13</sup> The reference is no longer available online.

<sup>14</sup> For a closer analysis of Levi’s concept of “Grey Zone,” see “Primo Levi: The Drowned, the Saved, and the ‘Grey Zone.’”

<sup>15</sup> As Ebert points out, one is reminded of the initial “feather scene” in *Forrest Gump* (1994), the film that won six Academy Awards including Best Picture, Director, Actor, and Adapted Screenplay.

<sup>16</sup> The novel, in its last pages, offers a spectrum of possible endings and implies that the last reading (Jews packed in cattle cars, going to their death in a concentration camp) is the true one.

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