

Commentary: Life is Beautiful

by
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Life Is Beautiful is described in its official website as a fable about "the power of laughter to move the human heart and the power of the imagination to bolster the human spirit." According to David Denby in a movie review for *The New Yorker*, the worldwide success of *Life Is Beautiful* suggests that audiences are sick to death of the holocaust's ability to disturb, and that Roberto Benigni (director and star) has created a benign form of holocaust denial. Has the holocaust been trivialized by combining its horrors with an unrealistic attempt to shelter one's son from reality and death? Is it a travesty to attempt to make a comedy about the holocaust? Is *Life Is Beautiful* really a comedy?

The first half of the movie is indeed a Jerry Lewis comedy (more fanciful than funny), primarily concerning Guido's (Benigni's) wooing of the lovely, wealthy Dora through his gushing perseverance and a series of ingenious coincidences (every little detail becomes significant later). He succeeds and we fast forward to a scene from the garden house, where they first made love, to view their son Giosue (age 4 or so) running out

and looking for his toy tank (this also is significant later).

So far, the scenes are light and pretty. The restaurant where Guido worked while wooing Dora looks like a wedding cake. The lighting is bright, the colors are vivid. There are a few ominous tones: Guido's uncle's horse, Robin Hood, is painted with Nazi symbols by local hoodlums, but the paint is a cheerful green, flowers are added, and the fairy-tale Robin Hood is used to carry Dora away from her fiance, the Fascist bureaucrat. Jews aren't allowed in a shop passed by Guido and Giosue: this is only because some people don't like other people. Guido protects Giosue from this ugliness by telling him that some people won't allow Chinese people or kangaroos in their shops, and that he himself would never allow Visigoths into his newly established bookstore.

The pretty part of the movie ends abruptly when Guido, Giosue, and the uncle are taken away on a train. Dora, who is not Jewish, insists on boarding also. Since it is Giosue's birthday, this is framed by Guido as a surprise trip. It's silly of Giosue to ask why there are no seats on the train. Doesn't he know anything about trains? This is the first scene in which an ugly pallor, in the form of black smoke from the train, enters the picture. Everyone looks grim and even Giosue is puzzled. A little girl is holding a kitten and one wonders what

horrors will befall them both. This is not a comedy anymore.

The characters emerge in a concentration camp. The lighting darkens and the train continues to emit smoke. Guido convinces Giosue that this is all a game. Whoever wins the most points will win a tank, a real tank. He articulates the rules of the game by pretending to translate for the brutal Nazi who is explaining the rules of the camp to the new inmates. You win points for hiding successfully, points for not asking for food, points for carrying anvils all day, points for winning at hopscotch.

Because of his desire to win the tank, Giosue is willing to hide in the barracks all day while Guido carries anvils (to make the tank). After his first day at work, Guido can barely walk, but perks up when he returns to the barracks to Giosue. He maintains this charade with a frenzy until he is bitterly disappointed after discovering that a possible savior, a Nazi doctor he had befriended in the restaurant, turns out to be crazy. This is the first time that Guido appears to fantasize for his own sake, as well as for Giosue's. As he carries the sleeping Giosue through the camp, he suggests that this is all a dream, that they'll both wake up to Dora bringing them cakes and tea, that he'll make love to her six times (if he still can). This reverie ends as they come across a pile of bodies in the mist. The bodies are arranged with the in-

tricity of a gothic stained glass window, but without the colors. The only color in this scene is gray.

I found this sufficiently horrifying. I knew that the other children had been killed. I knew why the uncle had been forced to take a shower. I knew why the little girl's kitten was found hiding in a stack of clothing. I assumed that the whole family would perish. But I hoped for a different ending, including the possibility that Giosue would win the tank.

Denby the critic came out of the theater feeling "ash-gray," as if his "soul had been mugged." He accuses the audience of feeling "relieved and happy" and of rewarding Benigni for "allowing it, at last, to escape." He criticizes the audience for seeming to fall for the unrealistic aspects of the movie: that all children weren't killed immediately, that one child could survive by hiding, that a few inmates would have the strength to walk out of the camp as the Americans arrive. He seems to equate *Life Is Beautiful* with movies about dancing, singing slaves and dancing, singing Native Americans who triumph over evil through the "power of love." He accuses Benigni of knowing nothing about the real holocaust. "Surely an artist cannot transcend what he never encounters."

Denby the critic falls short of accusing Benigni or the audience (or me) of deliberately mocking the holocaust. Yet, he clearly accuses Benigni and the audience (and me) of a lack of sensitivity in the form of "be-

nign denial." The horrors of the holocaust cannot be transcended; a father's love cannot save anyone from extreme evil. One cannot find meaning in the holocaust through "the power of laughter to move the human heart and the power of the imagination to bolster the human spirit." To be taken in by the sentimentality of *Life Is Beautiful* is offensive at least and dangerous at worst. These points deserve our consideration.

Should Benigni be criticized for failing to find authentic meaning in the holocaust? Has any philosopher, poet, pundit, or politician ever succeeded



in doing so? Victor Frankl wrote about the transcendent power of suffering. Hannah Arendt wrote about the use of rational means to achieve irrational ends, and of the danger of focusing on the efficiency of one's means while ignoring the insanity of one's ends. Perhaps these authors found their own meaning through such abstractions. Perhaps others, including Guido, found their own meaning in the fight for the survival of their loved ones, their racial/ethnic group, their traditions, their heritage.

Was Benigni even trying to find meaning in the holocaust? Does the movie even at-

tempt to do this? If not, should anyone be offended by its failure to do so? Perhaps it's okay to come away with a sense of joy because Giosue has won a tank (i.e., survived). This is not to deny that the holocaust happened. I believe that most of us have the sense to view *Schindler's List* as an attempt to depict reality and *Life Is Beautiful* as an attempt to depict something else. Perhaps it honors Benigni's memory of his own father, a farmer who was imprisoned in Bergen-Belson from 1943 through 1945. Perhaps it is only what the official movie blurb says: a fable of love.

If this is denial, Denby shouldn't take it away. First, a little denial can be healthy, as in the case of clients who aren't ready to deal with their trauma and may never be. Second, although a lot of denial may preclude us from exerting vigilance against further horrors, I don't think I'm falling down a slippery slope. Maybe I can't come close to envisioning the holocaust, but I'm not heading toward a complete denial that it happened, as Denby seems to fear. I've seen *Schindler's List!*

Mr. Denby, you sound like the church group who called for a boycott of Disney World after it established a gay-friendly benefits policy. Is Disney World the worst enemy they could find? Is Benigni the worst enemy you could find? If my comments are offensive, please accept my apology and know that those of us who were moved by *Life Is Beautiful*, rather than offended by its lack of realism, are not your worst enemy. □

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