

A Fable of Love: *Life is Beautiful*

Life is Beautiful (or *La Vita è Bella* in its native Italian) is a film produced in 1997 by Italian director and actor Roberto Benigni. Worldwide, the film grossed \$229,163,264 in the box office. Until 2011, it was the highest all-time grossing film in Italy. In 1998, the film won the grand prize (known as the grand prix) at the Cannes Film Festival in Paris, France. The same year, it won three Oscars in the 71st Academy Awards including one for best foreign language film.

The film itself is a fable about love. Benigni masterfully separated it into two distinct parts. Each follows the main character Guido Orefice. The first part of the film is set in Tuscany, Italy where Guido incessantly attempts to win the affections of Dora, a wealthy schoolteacher who is supposed to marry the fascist town clerk. The film then skips ahead five years. At this point, Guido has married Dora, and they now have a five-year-old son named Giosue. Whereas the first part is characterized by clownish humor (there is even a scene where Guido is in the school where Dora works, masquerading as an inspector from Rome who is meant to speak on the topic of Italian superiority, a topic Guido approaches by showing off the “perfection of his ear” and his bellybutton which “can’t [be] untie[d] . . . even with your teeth,”) the second is better characterized by a need to survive and protect. Rather than following Guido through city streets as he tries to impress his love-interest, the second part of the film follows Guido through a Nazi concentration camp as he courageously faces gargantuan odds in his attempt to protect his son at all costs.

Criticism is widespread, ranging from text singing the praises of Benigni’s masterpiece to proclaiming, “. . . Benigni’s movie made me want to throw up” (Edelstein). The slapstick comedy that Guido employs in his persistent endeavor to win Dora’s affection is the same tool

that he uses to keep Giosue safe. It is exactly like Roger Ebert says in his own positive review of the film, “[Guido] is a clown, and comedy is his weapon.” Most debate is centered, however, on the use of this weapon in a setting as serious as a Nazi concentration camp. How can Benigni insert comedy into such a setting without trivializing it? Surely there is nothing in the Holocaust that can be joked about, is there? I again call upon Roger Ebert who insightfully brought up the point that *Life is Beautiful* is not about Nazis or fascists. The movie is about the human spirit.

This is my argument: *Life is Beautiful* is a courageous film that portrays a fable of love and one man’s determination and dedication to his family; the film inspires laughter despite its setting rather than at the expense of its setting and ultimately attempts to convey the message that there is always a place for love and hope, even when it seems futile. First, I will show how the film is a fable of love by comparing Guido’s characteristic disposition with the five types of love that Erich Fromm speaks of in his highly-acclaimed book, *The Art of Loving*. Next, I will prove that the subject matter of this film is the human spirit, in particular the strength of Guido’s spirit through Giosue’s eyes. In doing this, I will also bring up the crucial idea that the audience does not see the events of the film as they actually happened but rather as Giosue perceived them to happen. Finally, I will talk about the validity of this film in real life.

To begin, Fromm mentions that there are five different types of love. First, there is brotherly love. This type of love can be thought of as the type that exists between close friends and siblings. It is also the most important type that underlies every other. Next is motherly love, characterized by unconditional care and affection. Third is erotic love. This is the kind of exclusive love that exists between two romantically engaged people (in this case, Guido and Dora). Fourth is self-love while fifth is the love of G-d.

Looking closely, it is easy to see that Guido possesses each of these types of love in abundance. Throughout the entire film, Guido attempts to do what he believes is correct. Guido welcomes all with open arms and treats each person he meets as if said person was Guido's deeply-loved brother. He wants the best outcome for everyone. He does not always get this right (for example, the time he crashes his friend's car while attempting to woo Dora), but not once in the entire movie does he say a negative word about anyone. To be plain, Guido's character is a clown who finds the most pleasure in the simple joy of bringing smiles and laughter to those around him, whether it be by riding a horse through an upscale restaurant to save a damsel in distress or affect a cartoonish march through a concentration camp to keep his son from being scared.

It is also obvious the deep, unconditional love Guido holds for Giosue. Throughout the whole film, while being under the constant threat of death, he never once loses his patience with the child who at times gets unruly. One of the film's largest critiques is the fact that Guido tells his son that the entire camp is a game. Giosue has a fascination with military tanks, and Guido tells him that the entire concentration is a game, the winner of which is given a tank as the prize. Guido is forced to work to the brink of death, just like many others in the camp, yet somehow he still finds the strength to continue his façade. He manages to override any despair he feels in order to protect his son by distancing all of the evils they are forced to face. Guido never once thinks about himself; there is no greater example of unconditional love than that.

Moving now to erotic love, Fromm defines the eroticism as exclusive but the love as inclusive. By this, he means that just because a person is in a sexual relationship with one other person (and that person alone), it does not mean that they love only that person. Fromm summarized this with the sentence: in you, I love all of mankind (51). Now, look at how Guido

acts around Dora. While trying to win her affection, did he profess his love for only her? No, rather he did what any performer does: he impressed everyone around him. When he masqueraded as an inspector from Rome, he did not attempt to impress Dora with his knowledge of Italian superiority. He did, however, make the entire room of schoolchildren laugh. When riding his uncle's horse into the restaurant to steal Dora away, he may have only come for her, but as he left everyone present (save for her fiancé) was wildly applauding and smiling. Within Guido's love for Dora, he finds a desire to impress everyone and make everyone's day just a little brighter.

Self-love is a topic that would make many critics of Guido's character laugh. They would argue that he loves himself too much: always eager to impress, talking constantly, throughout the entire film virtually unmet with any type of constructive criticism, and only dealing with characters that are meant to act as either foils or "barometers" to show just how good a person Guido is (Tatara). This is not so, however, because self-love should be thought of more in terms of self-respect. Think of the saying, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." In this, one does not love her/his own self more than other people's but rather as much. Yes, Guido talks a lot, but he is a performer. He does not talk so much so that he is the only one speaking; he seems to talk so much because the other characters are laughing. Guido recognizes this laughter as the other characters' speech. Having received positive comments in this laughter, Guido continues to talk. It just so happens that Guido is the only one using distinguishable words.

Lastly, there is the love of G-d. This is type has a much more involved definition the full explanation of which is beyond the scope of this essay. Put simply, the highest form of the love of G-d is manifest in the embodiment of such ideals as love, truth, justice, and tolerance. Guido's capacity to love has already been shown, he never once tells a lie unless it is in the best

interest of those he loves, and he always does everything in his power to deal fairly with others, even if they are not always fair with him. In this way, Guido shows an embodiment of the love of G-d, even if it is never called to attention.

My next point calls to attention the subject matter which the film is truly commenting on: the human spirit. Some critics believe that Benigni attempted to portray the Holocaust as a comedy in *Life is Beautiful*. They argue that Benigni tried to portray that danger and horror could be willed away if you act like everything is a joke. What this interpretation fails to take into account is exactly why Guido acts the way he does. Recall Guido's motivation: he and his five-year-old son have just been shipped to a concentration camp. Recall who Guido is as a character and as a father: he is an entertainer with a deep love for life and unconditional love for his son. So, what is Guido going to do? He is going to protect his son at all costs to the best of his ability. Recall that the weapon at his disposal is comedy. Nothing about the Holocaust is laughable, but Guido does not laugh at the Holocaust. He is a desperate father who manages to find the superhuman strength to smile and to tell his son that it is going to be okay, and yes, he even somehow finds the strength to make jokes and laugh. This is all done in the midst of the Holocaust, but the humor is not present to trivialize it. The humor is present because it is the one thing Guido believes he can do that has any chance of keeping his son safe. Janet Maslin, a reviewer from the New York Times, summed this up well by saying, "Guido . . . jokes his way through this nightmare for the sake of his loved ones." In this light, it can be seen that Guido does not joke his way through this nightmare because he believes the nightmare is a joke. Guido understands the implications of his situation, and that is why he jokes.

Paul Tatara, a reviewer for the Cable News Network, wrote that if the point of the film is to deal with the strength of the human spirit, then it should not have been set in a location where

such a spirit was so easily destroyed by a single bullet. Is that not the very point, though? In the concentration camp, no one is safe. With every breath of life there comes the more-likely-than-not chance of death, too. That is why the second part of the film is set in the concentration camp. The human spirit is so easily victimized, and yet it still exists and radiates and protects.

Moreover, I would like to bring up a point that I have not yet heard in any review or criticism. *Life is Beautiful* does not depict the events within the film as they actually happened. Rather, it is discovered at the very end that the entire story was narrated by Giosue, who now is an adult himself. He says, "This is my story. This is the sacrifice my father made. This was his gift to me." This means that the events depicted are not necessarily reflective of reality. The audience is viewing Giosue's memories of his father's actions.

Yet another common criticism of this film is that the concentration camp was not fully realized. This is true, and can be seen when looking at two photos, one from the film when Guido and Giosue first enter the barracks and one actually taken in one of the barracks at Auschwitz during its liberation. In the film, the prisoners are all shown decently with proper clothing, and though they seem gaunt, they do not appear as if on the brink of death. The actual photograph from Auschwitz, however, shows a different story. Standing up is one man, naked save for a pair of pants that he is holding in front of him, while lying down there are men of all different ages. Some have full uniforms on while others are missing various articles of clothing. The major difference, though, is in the bodies depicted. Whereas in the film the prisoners looked unhappy but not necessarily unhealthy, in the actual barracks there were people who could not be distinguished as either alive or dead. Most people were horrifically thin, begging the question of how they were alive at all.

In response, I once more bring up the point that Guido did everything in his power so that Giosue did not fully see the horror that they were surrounded by. Is it not reasonable to think, then, that in the retelling of these events the horror is not fully realized? As a grown man, Giosue understands that the horror was worse, but he is not narrating the Holocaust, nor his own part in it. He is narrating what his father did. In this way, the story is set within the Holocaust, but none of the humor is pointed at it, nor is it trivialized. How can it be when it is not even the focus of the story? The focus is Guido through the eyes of his son, the effects and depth of a man's love for his family and his determination to protect it at all costs, even when the odds seem insurmountable and the world too bleak for any humor to exist.

This fable is valid in real life too. When asked about the film, Roberto Benigni himself said, "It's a real love story in an extreme situation." Indeed, he wanted to find the *most* extreme situation in which this could occur. He did not, however, create a situation without merit. Much of *Life is Beautiful* is actually inspired by Rubino Romeo Salmoni's experiences at the hands of the Nazis. Salmoni was himself an Italian Jew along with his two brothers. All three were prisoners in World War II, but only Rubino Salmoni survived (Hall). Furthermore, while creating the film, he actually met with different Jewish groups in Italy so as to keep from offending "the memory of survivors . . ." (Benigni).

To conclude, *Life is Beautiful* has garnered a large volume of critical attention, most of which gravitates towards the extreme sides of either revering the film or despising it. Most negative criticism centers on the idea that the film is either attempting to make a joke of the material that it presents or that the material presented is too far removed from reality. It has been shown through an analysis of Guido's character that the film is a fable centered on the idea of love, and by deducing the reasons why Guido acts the way he does, it can be seen that none of

the humor is aimed at any part of the Holocaust and the subject matter is indeed the human spirit. This is all while keeping in mind that much of the action onscreen is actually represented as part of Giosue's memories and therefore is not meant to be completely historically accurate. Last but not least, it has been shown that, though this film is a fable, there is a place for it in this world, especially when more and more often it seems that this world is lacking in so many ways the deep love that is the basis of Guido's character and this film.

[] – mine

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