



La Vita È Bella **Life Is Beautiful**

Wednesday 24th March, 10.00am.
Cinemobile, Pery Square, Limerick.

Study Guide **Tony Tracy**

Study Guides

Introduction to Study Guides

The films brought together for this year's Festival all have 'war' as a central theme. Addressing this theme is perhaps timely, given the ongoing global conflicts which have cultural, economic and religious difference at their core.

For the young person who finds themselves in a place and time of conflict, they must walk a difficult path. Regarded as not yet old enough perhaps, to make decisions for themselves, they are pushed around by the vagaries of the conflict and find themselves adapting to external events, out of their control. This absence from the decision-making process leaves the young person in a precarious position.

The three films being screened in the Festival; *Ivan's Childhood*, *Empire Of The Sun* and *La Vita È Bella /Life is Beautiful* find the young people dealing with the circumstances they are presented with. Their relationship to their families is crucial when we look at the films as a group: Ivan's parents are dead – he has made a new

'family' within the war; in *Empire...* Jim has been separated from his family and is trying to find them; and in *La Vita...*, Giosué is protected by his father as they attempt to deal with the horror that is unfolding before them. In each instance, the boys relationship to his family dictates or has dictated how they will negotiate the conflict.

All too often in conflict situations, we find family's split up. The mass movements of people are a consequence of war and lead to untold misery. One of the interesting aspects of these films is that they show the lack of normality in day-to-day living during a time of conflict. People adapt to their situation, but it seems as if their lives have been put on hold. They dream of days before the conflict came and wait patiently for it to end, in order that they can continue on their journey.

We do hope you enjoy the films being presented. If you haven't had a chance to see them, try to get down to your video/dvd store and rent them out. It'll be worth your while.

Brendan Maher

Features Programmer

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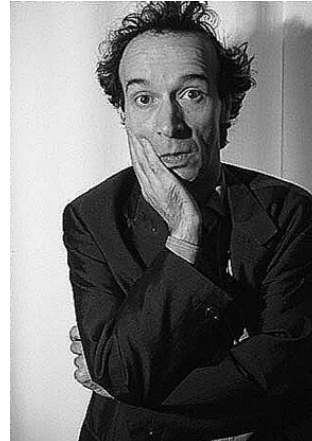
La Vita È Bella/Life Is Beautiful

Italy, 1997

Cast

Roberto Benigni
Nicoletta Braschi
Giustino Durano
Sergio Bini Bustric
Giuliana Lojodice
Amerigo Fontani
Pietro De Silva
Francesco Guzzo
Raffaella Lebboroni
Giorgio Cantarini
Marisa Paredes
Horst Buchholz
Claudio Alfonsi
Gil Baroni
Massimo Bianchi

Guido Orefice
Dora
Eliseo Orefice
Ferruccio Papini
School principal
Rodolfo
Bartolomeo
Vittorino
Elena
Giosué Orefice
Madre di Dora
Dr. Lessing
Amico Rodolfo
Prefect
Man with key



Roberto Benigni

Crew

Roberto Benigni

Director

Vincenzo Cerami,
Roberto Benigni

Screenplay

from their own story

Tonino Delli Colli
Simona Paggi
Danilo Donati
Nicola Piovani

Director of Photography

Editor

Production Designer

Music

116 minutes



Life Is Beautiful is one of the most successful, popular and controversial films of recent years. Its success and notoriety are especially unusual given that it is not an English language or American film but Italian, written, directed by and starring Roberto Benigni. Benigni has been successful and well known in Italy for many years but what brought him to wider attention with this film was his choice and treatment of subject matter – a comedy about the holocaust. As one of the most shameful and distressing events of twentieth century history, the methodical arrest, incarceration and murder of some six million Jews is an unlikely arena for humour. Yet not only did Benigni dare to combine the seemingly opposed genres of tragedy and comedy but his film was widely praised by members and holocaust survivors of the worldwide Jewish community. Among the many plaudits it received was 'Best Jewish Experience' (Jewish International Film Festival, 1998) Best European Film (European Film Academy), and the Academy Awards ('Oscars') for Best Actor Best Foreign Language Film and Best Music (out of seven nominations).

'An unforgettable fable that proves love, family and imagination conquer all.'

This was the tagline – the 'sound bite' used to market the film – for *Life Is Beautiful*. In it we can detect the way in which the film's distributors, Miramax, wanted the audience to respond to Benigni's unusual film and, given the awards it won, it would appear they succeeded. The tagline wishes to draw our attention away from the historical element of the film and concentrate instead on more abstract associations linked with fable and family. Indeed it is notable that the tagline completely ignores the historical context and setting of a story which takes place during WW II, attending instead to the universal, less controversial, 'warmer' elements of the film. It is precisely this tension – between history and fable – that has been at the centre of so much debate and discussion. Approaching the film we have to be mindful of both of these 'levels' of story in judging its merits and potential weaknesses.

Historical Context

In order to understand the story of Guido and Giosué more completely we need to understand a number of elements related to the historical setting of the story. Crucially we need to be aware of the political movement known as fascism, which ruled Italy at the time and the changing situation for Italian Jews which precipitates the action of the film.

Fascism

Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) began life as a school teacher and later journalist before becoming editor of *Avanti*, a socialist newspaper. With the onset of WW I however he completely changed his political viewpoint and in his subsequent writings became more and more 'right wing'. Gathering support for his opinions he rose to the leadership of a new political movement called "fascism" [after "fasces", the symbol of bound sticks used a totem of power in ancient Rome].

Mussolini came to power after the 'March on Rome' in 1922, and was appointed Prime Minister by King Victor Emmanuel.

The word '**fascism**' has come to mean any system of government resembling Mussolini's, that exalts **nation** and often **race** above the individual, and uses **violence** and modern techniques of **propaganda** and censorship to forcibly suppress political opposition, engages in severe economic and social **regimentation**, and espouses **nationalism** and sometimes **racism**.

Fascism is generally regarded as somehow the "opposite" to socialism or communism. Mussolini himself described it as such in a 1932 paper entitled 'What Is Fascism?':

'...Fascism [is] the complete opposite of... Marxian Socialism, the materialist conception of history of human civilisation can be explained simply through the conflict of interests among the various social groups and by the change and development in the means and instruments of production...

Fascism, now and always, believes in holiness and in heroism; that is to say, in actions influenced by no economic motive, direct or indirect.'

This excerpt is especially interesting in considering Fascism's view of the individual's role in history and in particular, its understanding of the masculine. Mussolini built up a considerable cult around himself that



emphasised manly attributes – sport, soldiering, physical strength and courage – which he frequently associated with the heroics of Ancient Rome.

We will return to these ideas later when considering Guido's masculinity.

Jews in Italy

Life Is Beautiful takes place during a 6 year period; between 1939 (indicated by an on-screen title) and 1945 with the liberation of the concentration camp by the Americans. This period not only is a turbulent and catastrophic one for the people of Europe in general but, in the context of the film, also marks a dramatic and tragic turning point for many thousands of Italian Jews. During this period Italian society changed dramatically in its attitude to its Jewish members who had long lived happily alongside and among the population at large.

Before 1938, the fascist Italian government (led by Benito Mussolini since 1922) had not joined its Axis ally

Germany in its persecution of Jews. Jews made up about 0.1% of the population and were very well assimilated. It was not unheard of for Italian Jews to marry Catholic Italians. The average Italian might have perceived Jews as having different and perhaps strange-seeming worship customs, but in general they were considered normal friends and neighbours. Jews even felt comfortable joining the Fascist Party, out of patriotism for their country. Indeed Mussolini's mistress until 1936, Margherita Sarfatti, was Jewish.¹

1938: The rise of Anti-Semitism

In 1938 the situation of Italian Jews changed radically with the passing of unprecedented anti-Semitic 'race laws' in response to increasing pressure on Mussolini by Hitler, including miscegenation laws and a media campaign against Jews. Jews were forbidden to teach in schools, hold civil service jobs or own property. Foreign Jews living as refugees in Italy were rounded up and confined in internment camps.

1943: Germany takes matters in its own hands

The situation took a dramatic turn for the worse in 1943 when Mussolini was overthrown and imprisoned. General Badoglio assumed the Prime Minister's post and immediately began negotiating a ceasefire with the Allies. Enraged, Hitler used force in an attempt to bring Italy back into the Axis fold. Germany sent troops to occupy northern and central Italy. SS troops, along with the most zealous of Mussolini's supporters, began rounding up Jews in Rome, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Trieste, and other northern cities. Two internment camps were built and occasionally the Germans transferred Jews from these camps to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

At the start of the war there were just under 50,000 Jews living in Italy. In total about 8,000 Jews were deported to the Nazi death camps during the occupation. About 95% of them perished there. The remaining 40,000 Jews in Italy survived because of the refusal of common Italians, as well as lower-level Italian government and military authorities, to cooperate with the Nazis both before and during Germany's brutal occupation. In many instances, Italians actively assisted Jews by obstructing or not cooperating with deportations, or helped them escape to unoccupied southern Italy. Eighty percent of Italian Jews survived the Holocaust, while elsewhere in Europe as many as 80% of Jews were murdered.

Fascism

Find out more about Benito Mussolini.

Were there other fascist systems in place in Europe besides Italy?

What are the roots of fascism? Does it exist today?

What are the key elements of fascism?

Why is fascism often considered the opposite of communism?

See if you can find out more about the anti-Semitic laws of 1938

Judaism

What is anti-Semitism? Can you give any examples?

What are the sources of anti-Semitism?

Why did the status of Jews in Italy change so suddenly in 1938? What were the effects of the new laws?



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Primo Levi

Primo Levi is perhaps the most famous Italian Jew associated with the Holocaust. The well-known author, who was also a chemist, was sent to Auschwitz and survived only because he contracted scarlet fever shortly before the Germans abandoned the camp in the face of advancing Allied troops. Levi was left for dead by the fleeing Nazis but survived and went on to write several remarkable books, all of which were informed by his extraordinary experiences in the most notorious of Nazi death camps. "If This Is Man" (aka "Survival in Auschwitz") is the book that most directly describes his experiences.

Key Scene 1 Opening

Look at the section of the film from where we first see Guido and his friend traveling through the countryside in their car until they stop at the farmhouse.

How would you describe the tone of this sequence – what kind of film does it prepare us for?

What is the source of the humour?

Why do the crowds salute Guido?

What kind of people are Guido and his friend – how are their personalities conveyed to us?



Why does the director indicate the year? Does your reading of the above affect how you now view the action?

Although it is never made clear, why might Guido be moving to the city?

Key Scene 2 Meeting Uncle Eliseo

This scene is important insofar as it introduces Guido's Jewishness (which has not been mentioned until this point).

Describe the kind of person Uncle Eliseo is and the values he holds.

What do the objects in his house tell us about him?

What clues are we given about the changes in Italian society's attitude to Jewish people?

Does the name of Eliseo's horse have symbolic value?

Key Scene 3 Speech on Racial Superiority

Although this scene is a humorous romantic incident, like much of the first section of the film, it has darker political undercurrents.

Why does Guido impersonate the inspector?

What is amusing about his speech – what theories is he lampooning?

Why can we say that the scene has a tragi-comic quality?

Narrative Structure and Technique

Life is Beautiful is a film of two halves – a story of one man's love for his family interrupted by history - the arrival of the Nazi's.

As we have seen above we can trace this structure to real historical circumstances: the passing of the 1938 anti-Semitic laws govern the first part of the film, while the fall of Mussolini facilitates the invasion of the Germans in 1942, and the deportation of the Jews – described in the second.

Compare and contrast the tone of each section. Can you identify a particular moment in the film when it moves from the first section to the second?

In your opinion does the comic first half make the tragic second half more or less serious?



Although real historical circumstances are the source of the film's structure the director adds another narrative point-of-view to the story in the voice-over at the very beginning. What we are about to see is not history, he tells us, but 'a fable.'

*Who speaks this voice-over? From what vantage point?
What is a fable? Can you name any others?
What is its purpose?
What elements in the first part of the film render it more like a fairytale than history?
How realistic is the film?*

The use of the voice-over to introduce the film suggests that the speaker is above the action, looking back on it. It could be argued that what we see is not therefore what actually happened but a story: both a recollection (a memory) and a fable.

*What do you think about this argument? Does it change the way you approach or understand the film?
Does it affect the way in which we are meant to interpret the story?*

Having considered these questions, consider the issue of whether history can ever be accurately communicated in a film.

*What is the relationship between history and memory?
Are they the same thing? Is a distinction between the two useful in approaching this film?*

*Think of another film that deals with a historical subject.
How does it tell its story? From whose point of view?
Do you consider it accurate? Why?*

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Key Scene Engagement Party

This scene brings together the fairy-tale love story between Guido and his 'Principessa', and the political and social realities of fascist Italy in the late 1930s.

What does this scene reveal to us about Dora?

Although the scene has the traditional image of a Prince coming on his white horse to rescue his Princess, Benigni re-imagines this cliché in an amusing but pointed way.

Describe how he does this.

The scene contrasts Guido with Dora's fiancée; a 'real' fascist man. Compare the two versions of masculinity presented in this scene and elsewhere.

Try to find out the relevance of the great Abyssinian cake that is carried into the party

Relationships

The film foregrounds a number of relationships – all of which centre on Guido.

Which relationships can you identify?

Three in particular stand out: Guido and Dora; Guido and Dr. Lessing; Guido and Giosué. Of these, it is the last which receives the greatest attention, dominating our memory of the film and placing it among a long list of films, plays and books dealing with fathers and sons.

Can you name any other father-son stories?

Why, do you think, are there so many of these, in contrast to say, mother-daughter narratives?

Are there any qualities common to Guido's relationships with others?

In the first part of the film, while Guido attempts to woo Dora, the narrative has a fairy-tale quality. It achieves a slightly more realistic quality with the arrival of Giosué, but its light and humorous tone still dominates.

Describe Guido's relationship with his son

Does it change over the course of the film?

Having married Dora – and proved himself the equal, or superior of 'fascist man' – Guido is thrown into the role of

sole parent after deportation by the Nazis. Although Dora volunteers her own deportation, the viewer's sympathy remains with Guido and his imaginative methods to keep his son safe and untroubled.

What is Guido's motivation for making the experience of deportation and confinement into a game for Giosué?

Do you think he is right to do this?

Key Scene Translating Nazi Soldier



This is one of the funniest scenes in the film. What makes it so amusing?

One of the sources for the scene's humour is the way in which it plays with earlier cinematic stereotypes of Nazi soldiers. Benigni manages to achieve almost contradictory impulses simultaneously. On the one hand it is comic in the way in which it pits the small man against the strong, fierce soldier and triumph, despite, or because of his ignorance and weakness. The soldier's power and authority is completely undermined by the silly translation because we are only allowed to understand Guido. (When the film was released in Germany the Nazi was dubbed in

Italian while Guido was dubbed in German!). But while the scene is funny it is also touching. Despite the humour we are aware that Giosué is in mortal danger – that Guido's efforts are not simply for the fun of it but as an act of survival. He is putting himself in great danger in order to protect Giosué. The other prisoners provide an audience for the comic, while the link between father and son cuts across this in an emotional and touching way.

Although this scene is set in a dormitory, it all but ignores the other prisoners. Some commentators found the way in which Benigni reduces the other men to 'extras' objectionable. What do you think of this criticism?

The scenes in the prison concentrate on Guido's paternal role – his actions as a father towards his son. Central to this role is the notion of masculinity – how a man behaves.

*What sort of man would you describe Guido as?
How does he compare with other men in the film:
Dr. Lessing; Dora's fiancée; the other men in the camp;
the soldiers.
Identify key scenes or moments in the concentration camp which reveal Guido's masculinity.
How does this representation of masculinity compare with a fascist understanding of 'maleness' as discussed above?*

Is Life Beautiful?

'Life is Beautiful. Can you imagine anyone who actually survived the death camps saying that?'

Gerald Peary²

'Movies are naturally affirmative, genocide is not.'

J Hoberman

Peary's comments on the brightness of Benigni's vision in the film echo many critics who felt it inappropriate and even grotesque to find humour in the Holocaust. Yet others have defended this attitude, saying that it shows the resilience of the human spirit; an indomitable condition of optimism in face of even the most extreme hardship.

The difficulty in answering this question – and there is probably no right answer – lies in the extremity of the situation.

In 2000 an Israeli researcher conducted interviews with Holocaust survivors on around this topic. Here is an excerpt from her research

'...Look, without humour we would all have committed suicide. We made fun of everything. What I'm actually saying is that that helped us remain human, even under hard conditions.'

'...But don't think that it is possible for people in such situations not to have any humour and satire. This is impossible, it is a kind of defence mechanism.'

'...At the Ghetto we were looking under ground for things to laugh at, even when there weren't any.'

'...When I was interviewed for Spielberg and they asked me, what I thought was the reason I survived, they probably expected me to answer good fortune or other things I said that I thought it was laughter and humour, not to take things the way we were living but to dress them up as something different. That was what helped me I wasn't thinking about miracles and wasn't thinking anything, I only thought how not to take things seriously, as if I thought that this was the proportion that I was giving, and I guess it (this attitude) helped me. Because it was absurd all that time, it was unconceivable, that they could do those things to people.'³

Can the Holocaust, or any extreme experience be made amusing? And perhaps more importantly, should it? Does making people laugh mean making light, trivialising? Do you think Life is Beautiful trivialises the experiences and deaths of so many in the Nazi concentration camps?

This is not a simple issue. Many have found the humour of Benigni's film life-affirmative. Others have suggested, in agreement with the last quotation above, that the absurdity and meaninglessness of the whole deportation project, means that all discussion of it must finally confront this level of illogic; that the horror of the camps is so overwhelming that we can only approach it 'side-ways'.

Still others have proposed that with the passage of time new ways of exploring the meaning of the Holocaust become possible and even necessary. This view would admit

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that mixing humour and tragedy can only happen with the passage of time; when memories are less immediate.

Do the quotations above shock or surprise you?

*Do they support the vision of *Life is Beautiful*?*

How can laughter work as a 'defence mechanism'?

Can you think of any examples?

For Further Study

There is an enormous amount of personal testimonies associated with the camps as well as fiction and non-fiction treatments of the subject in film, theatre and literature. Here is a small selection of reference points for *Life is Beautiful*.

Films

The Great Dictator (1939)

Many critics have suggested that *Benigni* has been greatly influenced by the silent film director/actor Charlie Chaplin and this film in particular which parodies a Hitler-like character.

Schindler's List (1993)

Stephen Spielberg's Oscar-winning film was much more 'traditional' in its approach to the Holocaust but it still caused a good deal of controversy, with some seeing it as being overly sentimental in its depiction of Jewish survivors. Most audiences found it moving and informative.

Jacob the Liar (1975, Germany and 1999, USA)

Another comic approach to the subject of the Jewish experience during WWII, made twice – once in German in 1975 and an American remake starring Robin Williams. Shares with *Life Is Beautiful* a belief that the power of the imagination that can sustain the human spirit through difficult experiences.

Apt Pupil (1998)

Released at the same time as *Life Is Beautiful* this adaptation of a Stephen King story deals with a former Nazi soldier and a boy's fascination with the era.

Night and Fog (1955)

Alain Resnais' short, poetic and very moving documentary has no narrative but mediates instead on the idea of the concentration camps using historical and contemporary footage. Resnais contrasts the impulses of beauty and extermination in attempting to make sense of the Holocaust.

Conspiracy (2001)

A dramatic recreation of the Wannsee Conference where the Nazi Final Solution phase of the Holocaust was devised

Books

The Diary of Anne Frank

One girl's diary of her time in hiding during the Nazi occupation of Holland.

If this is a Man

Primo Levi's compelling account of life in Auschwitz.

Maus: A Survivor's Tale

Art Spiegelman's powerful and unusual comic-book treatment of one man's experience of the Holocaust through the memories of his father

Websites

www.remember.org

enormous website which describes itself as a 'forum for Holocaust survivors and their descendants, to promote remembrance.'

www.holocaust-history.org

'Essays, and reproductions of documents, which expose and debunk the claims of Holocaust deniers.'

<http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust>

'A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust offers an overview of the people and events of the Holocaust.'

Notes

¹ 'During the 1920s a number of Jews held important positions in the Fascist government. Aldo Finzi was under secretary in Dept of Interior, Dante Almandi served as vice-chief of Police... Maurizio Rava was a vice-governor of Libya'. Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, 1987)

² Boston Phoenix, November 2, 1998

³ Excerpted from an abstract of Chaya Ostrower's PhD Thesis, Tel-Aviv University, 2000: 'Humor as a defense mechanism in the Holocaust.'

<http://web.macam98.ac.il/~ochayo/abstract.html>

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Festival Co-ordinator:	Cairde Tobin
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Features Programmer:	Brendan Maher
Study Guide Authors:	Tony Tracy, Alicia McGivern and Sean Molony
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Website Designer:	John Crowley
Technical Support:	Simon Maguire and David Burke at Planet TV, Dave Guy
Festival Volunteers:	Brid Finn and Pdraig Baggott
Printing:	Kilkenny People Printing

You can contact us at:

Fresh Film Festival

c/o The Belltable Arts Centre,
69 O'Connell Street,
Limerick, Ireland.

Tel:	061 319555
Fax:	061 319555
Email:	info@freshfilmfestival.net
Web:	www.freshfilmfestival.net

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Thank You:

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