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Laughter in Life-Threatening Situations: Reflections on Roberto Benigni’s Film *Life is Beautiful*¹

Śmiech w sytuacji zagrożenia życia – rozważania na przykładzie filmu *Życie jest piękne*

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Słowa kluczowe: śmiech, Holokaust, komedia, film

Abstract

The article focuses on Roberto Benigni’s film, *Life is Beautiful* and analyses the film’s unique combination of comedy and drama which evokes intense emotions and prompts reflection on human existence in the face of incomprehensible suffering. This culturally and historically significant film has gained prominence in world cinema, becoming an important work of cinematic art. The article demonstrates how the director’s approach to depicting the Holocaust through humour and love provokes debate about the role of cinematic art in portraying difficult themes. Despite the controversy, *Life is Beautiful* is an undeniable testament to human endurance and strength of spirit, reminding us that sparks of hope and beauty can be found even in the darkest moments. The humour in the film acts as a soothing element that offsets the weight of the difficult topic, while emphasising that laughter can be a form of resistance to suffering.

I realise that this article delves into a difficult topic that cannot be discussed without mentioning death, pain and cruelty, but in my opinion, Roberto Benigni’s film, *Life is Beautiful*, deserves close attention because this work of cinematic art proves that joy is essential even in life-threatening situations (Frankl 2016, Frank

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2020)². In this article, I will attempt to show how the film surprisingly manages to combine life-threatening circumstances with the need for joy. However, it is not my intention to analyse Benigni's work from a film critic's point of view, but from the viewer's perspective.

In an article entitled "There is no joy without sadness – a comparison of depictions of primary emotions", Aleksandra Jasielska argues that emotions such as joy and sadness have many similarities and states that "joy and sadness are comparable in that these emotions are based on similar biological mechanisms, may be deprived of an object and may contain semantic content derived from culture" (Jasielska 2011: 172). In turn, Przemysław P. Grzybowski, in his book *Laughter of Life and Death*, explains that strong emotions such as joy, combined with fear for one's own life may be suppressed or even eliminated because they may be perceived as inappropriate.

Laughter is present in many wartime stories. When confronted with the memoirs of individuals who participated in the war effort, witnessed the occupation, or were imprisoned in ghettos and concentration camps, contemporary readers, who have never experienced the hell of war and do not have any personal relations with war victims, cannot fathom that laughter could be heard from time to time under such macabre circumstances. Laughter could be expected from the tormentors, for whom service in the army and oppressive institutions was an "ordinary" job, after which many returned to their homes and families (Grzybowski 2019: 12).

Following this line of thought, let me quote Kornel Filipowicz's view on the matter, as presented in Justyna Sobolewska's book *Miron, Ilia, Kornel. Opowieść biograficzna o Kornelu Filipowiczu* (Miron, Ilia, Kornel. A biographical of Kornel Filipowicz):

[Kornel] was searching for means of expression. Initially, pathos seemed to be the only appropriate tonality. But then he realised that death often verged on the grotesque and that macabre elements were often intertwined with humour. "I remember myself back in those days, close to death from exhaustion, but still preoccupied with adjusting my hat in an effort to die with style. I listened to the jokes told by people who were about to die" (Sobolewska 2020: 124).

² Refer to the work of Viktor E. Frankl, Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, who posited that people can find meaning in life even in the most dire circumstances. In his best-known book, *Man's Search For Meaning*, Frankl describes his personal experiences in a concentration camp. He argued that the ability to find meaning in life is a fundamental element of human existence. In turn, Anne Franke wrote *The Dairy of a Young Girl* when she was hiding during the Nazi occupation. Franke wrote that she believed in a better future despite her difficult circumstances.

This observation raises important questions about the attempts to fuse humour with the tragic experiences of concentration camp prisoners. Is laughter acceptable under such dire circumstances? Is film an appropriate means for telling such tragic stories? These critical reflections are controversial and raise questions about the limits of cinematography, its role in conveying difficult content and instilling respect for historical tragedies.

Let me quote Liliana Segre, an Italian writer who, similarly to Filipowicz and Primo Levi, was a prisoner in a concentration camp. In an interview, Segre openly criticised Benigni's work by arguing that although the film has certain aesthetic qualities, it does not reflect the camp reality. "No child could have been hidden in a Nazi concentration camp. Prisoners could not communicate through a megaphone. Children were sent directly to the gas chamber or subjected to horrible experiments. Benigni should make it clear that his film is a fairy tale" (ilfattoquotidiano 2023, online)³. The German philosopher, sociologist, composer and cultural theorist Theodor W. Adorno, who disapproved of the use of humour in his theory of negative dialectics, was equally critical of depicting the atrocities of the Holocaust through a fairy tale narrative (cf. Adorno 1994).

However, Benigni's work also attracted neutral and positive opinions from critics. In an article entitled "Roberto Benigni: giocoliere di parole in *La vita è bella*", Flavia Laviosa argued that "Roberto Benigni, the prankster, the joker, the jester, the clown, and the new monstrosity that dared to defile the sanctity of Italian cinema in 2000, was depicted in the press as a Martian, a bizarre and peculiar character from the Moon who sought beauty in horror" (Laviosa 2007: 509). Joanna Zajac also took a stand in Benigni's defence:

Benigni was often accused on ideological grounds precisely because "he portrays the Holocaust through the lens of fiction" and "he turns tragedy into comedy". However, his critics failed to notice that the film features very few comedic or even grotesque elements, but quite many sentimental shots. Sentimental scenes do not provoke laughter, and if they do, it is mostly "laughter through tears". The most touching and dramatic moment in the film comes when the amused Giosue watches his father trying to play the "camp game" which may cost him his life (Zajac 2007: 144).

Did Roberto Benigni cross the ethical line by introducing elements of comedy to a film about suffering and death? To answer this question, let us examine Bergson's

³ A. Conti, *Liliana Segre: "La vita è bella non è realistico. Schindler's List? Compare in carne, noi eravamo scheletrici"*, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/09/01/liliana-segre-la-vita-e-bella-non-e-realistico-schindler-s-list-compare-in-carne-noi-eravamo-scheletrici/5916584/> [accessed: 05.07.2023]. Unless indicated otherwise, all Italian citations were translated by the author.

claim that comedy begins when people cease to be moved (Bergson 1977: 49). In the discussed context, this statement could imply that some situations and events are so absurd that they exceed the boundaries of tragedy, cease to evoke emotion, and are perceived as comical. This statement can be also interpreted as a commentary on the human ability to find humour in the most difficult circumstances, and the human propensity to regard humour as both a defence mechanism and a sign of hope in the face of adversity. At first, the audience is engaged, and the depicted events elicit laughter and enjoyment. However, as the plot develops, there comes a point at which the narrative becomes more complex or dramatic, and joy is replaced with other emotions, such as surprise or reflection. This is because comedy is a dynamic construct that not only generates laughter, but is also capable of moving the audience.

I believe Segre was right, but only to a certain extent. It should be emphasised that Benigni's intention was not to paint a realistic picture of life in a concentration camp, but to depict human strength, perseverance, love and humanism, even in the face of life's greatest tragedies. Benigni addressed this criticism in an interview: "my film is not a documentary, I never intended to depict the camp reality, but to portray human emotions [...] If, after watching the film, the viewer is able to comprehend the terrible injustice of this historical event, then the film has passed the test" (Benigni 2023, online). In contrast, Anna Tonelli argued that Benigni's film is an outstanding work of art and that its creators, in particular screenwriter Vincenzo Cerami, are authentic history researchers: "Vincenzo Cerami amalgamated various perspectives in his historical narrative, including fascism, the economic boom, and the intrigues plotted by the Italian mafia. But it was in *La vita è bella*, a film that won numerous awards, including three Oscars, that Cerami's take on history stirred the most profound emotional response" (Tonelli 1999: 3).

Life Is Beautiful is a multi-faceted story with two dominant themes: the romantic and humorous love story of a man and a woman set against the backdrop of beautiful Italian landscapes, and a father's love for his son in the dark atmosphere of a death camp.

This topic deserves closer scrutiny. Once again, I will argue that the power of love is the main theme in the Italian director's film. Guido Orfice, the main character, is introduced to the audience in 1939, when he begins to work as a waiter for his uncle. The young man dreams of opening his own bookshop, but must earn some money first. Guido is an exceptional young man. He lacks a realistic approach to life, and appears to be an actor who is performing in a stage play⁴. Guido

⁴ Cf. Banki: According to Hegel, a "true" unification of fate and self-consciousness can be achieved only in comedy, where the actor's "proper self coincides with his proper personality."

is also a comedian who is capable of transforming reality in a humorous way, to soften or even tame the hard facts of life.

Such attempts had been previously made, especially during comedy shows that were staged in the Third Reich to mock the absurdities of German reality. In Nazi Germany, stage comedy was also used as a means to oppose and resist the authorities and to convey social messages through satire and irony. Comedy cabaret performances were not only a distraction, but also a subtle means of expressing opposition to the totalitarian regime. Germans voiced their discontent through parody, satire and humour to avoid direct confrontation with the Nazi regime:

In 1934, during a performance in Berlin's *Catacomb*, stand-up comedian Wilhelm Finck mocked the Nazi salute, while a tailor was busy taking measurements for a new suit. "How would you like your jacket, sir? With chevrons and stripes?" asked the tailor. "You mean a straight jacket?" replied Finck [...] Soon after, the cabaret was closed down at Goebbels' orders, and Finck was detained in a concentration camp (Evans 2017: 750–751)⁵.

The film juxtaposes two realities that appear to be mutually exclusive. The first is the reality of Fascist Italy with its characteristic Roman salute, fascination with racial purity, and educational standards imposed by Mussolini:

In fascist ideology, the goal of general education in schools and universities is to instil pride in the mythic past; fascist education extols academic disciplines that reinforce hierarchical norms and national tradition. For the fascist, schools and universities are there to indoctrinate national or racial pride, conveying for example (where nationalism is racialized) the glorious achievements of the dominant race (Stanley 2021: 78).

However, Benigni introduces a second, imaginary reality, where an unpredictable event is resolved in a magical and humorous way in Orfice's favour.

Let us focus on the scene in which Guido escapes through the school window after delivering a humorous lecture on the superiority of races. The lesson came as a surprise to both the children and the visitors because it ridiculed fascist and

Obviously, this does not mean that the comedic actor ceases to perform, but it implies that the universal forces (gods, fate, substance) lose their representational form because the individualised "self" is a "negative force that causes gods [...] to disappear" (2009: 234). In the comedy, individual self-consciousness is expressed as an absolute force, but it is deprived of a form that is manifested through consciousness (and thus something external to it) and emerges as a subject, a concrete being.

⁵ Cf. Majewski (2019: 73) "During his stay in Paris, he was visibly shaken by a stage performance where Werich and Voskovec, the comedy duo, ridiculed the Führer and the chancellor of the Reich".

Nazi ideology. This scene testifies to Benigni's masterful artistic awareness, because the director was able to portray the Italian educational system during Mussolini's reign in a comical and mocking manner. Nonetheless, the reality depicted in the film differs from the historical reality. An accurate description of Mussolini's regime can be found in Francesca Tacchi's *Fascismo*:

The regime was particularly intrusive in the field of education, and the Gentile reform witnessed several "amendments". As part of the Lateran Treaty, Catholic religious instruction was made compulsory in primary schools. In 1931, university teachers were forced to swear an oath of allegiance to the regime, and in 1932, the teachers' unions were placed under the administrative control of the National Fascist Party. In 1936, Minister De Vecchi reorganised the school administration in a centralised and hierarchical manner and introduced military culture as a compulsory subject in secondary schools. In 1938, the "racial purge" was introduced by Minister of Education Bottai, and schools and universities were the first to implement this concept by discriminating against Jewish teachers and students. Bottai was the author of the School Charter (1939) which advocated for the creation of three-year schools of general education where Latin was still taught (Tacchi 2008: 148).

Obviously, Guido delivered the speech by accident because the only reason he visited the school was to meet Dora, the woman he fell in love with at first sight. The attraction between Guido and Dora is palpable from the very beginning. A man's love for a woman is the key to unlocking deeper layers of meaning. This unique feeling requires a precise definition. It was well described by doctor Meyer, the protagonist in Kornel Filipowicz's short story "Misja Doktora Meyera" (Doctor Meyer's mission):

The love of a man for a woman. Love begins with love. The closest of friendships can give rise to tenuous love at best. Love is blind, ardent, hot, sensual, free, innocent, pure, childlike, deep, faithful, unhappy. There is also the love of the brethren, love of excess, sexual love... (Filipowicz 1983: 427)⁶.

⁶ Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life. A Trilogy of Life in the Łódź Ghetto* is an excellent example of literature focusing on war-torn love. The love story of Seweryna Szmaglewska and Witold Wiśniewski also deserves special mention. The two writers described their reunion in Nuremberg in their respective books. In *Niewinni w Norymberdze* (Innocents in Nuremberg), Szmaglewska wrote: "Driven by an inexplicable impulse, I run forward. In a moment, I will be embraced by arms whose power and scent will awaken me from the war, from the German corpses, from the abstraction called the afterlife. I want to be roused from a sleep that reeks of decay; only love, a powerful storm, a shock, a release of the tension, a volcano, prolonged weeping can liberate me from images that are imprinted in my memory, images so real that they become an obsession [...]. A man will wrap his arms around my back; a rough, smoke-scented hand will gently caress my cheek. [...] Without a trace of sensuality, he holds me tightly in his arms, and his hot breath moves my short, barely grown hair". Witold Wiśniewski, Szmaglewska's husband, described the same encounter as follows: "This is Mrs Seweryna. I nodded and jumped forward. At

Several scenes are worth examining to fully understand the director's intentions. As previously noted, Guido's world is unique, special and joyful. Is he completely unable to recognize the evil that surrounds him? Absolutely not: Orfice is clearly aware of the situation in Italy, which becomes evident as the story unfolds. However, he wants to 'disenchant' reality, to make sense of this difficult world. And he does that to protect his son.

The game begins when they arrive in the camp, but Guido makes the first attempts to change their perceptions of reality and downplay the situation already during their journey in a truck. When his son asks him where they are going, Guido begins to build a colourful narrative of a surprise trip. He portrays the train as a miraculous means of transport, where seats were deliberately removed to allow people to stand freely side by side. The father "praises" German punctuality and order, and even justifies the violence by "thanking" an SS officer for pushing him into a cattle car.

Guido, an Italian Jew, abides by only one rule: never show fear to the child. He is adamant in his attempts to portray their dire circumstances as a series of "normal" events. Without batting an eye, Guido criticises the uncomfortable train service and threatens to take the bus on the return journey. Another scene depicts the difficult moment when Guido and his son enter the barracks. Guido is horrified by what he sees, but only for the briefest of moments. He quickly steps back into his role, and tells his son that this is a very special place. Guido's intention is to convince his son that what he is witnessing is completely normal. An SS officer enters the barracks to tell the prisoners (in German) about camp rules. Orfice does not speak German (he asks another prisoner to translate some of the German words), but he volunteers as an interpreter to explain the rules of the game, where the main prize is a real tank, to his son.

Okay, the game begins! If you're here, you're here, if you're not, you're not!

The first one to get a thousand points wins a real tank!

Lucky man!

Scores will be announced every morning on the loudspeakers outside! Whoever is last has to wear a sign that says "jackass" – here on his back!

We play the mean guys, the ones who yell! Whoever's scared loses points!

You can lose all your points for any one of three things. One: If you cry. Two: If you ask to see your mother. Three: If you're hungry and ask for a snack!

one point, she noticed and recognised me. There we were, standing in front of each other. I held her hands in mine and couldn't utter a word. Not that words were necessary. [...] She closed her eyes and lowered her gaze. I was paralysed with fear that something had happened in the past year, something that would prevent her from giving me the answer I had longed for" (Wiśniewski 1977: 256).

Forget it!

It's easy to be disqualified for hunger. Just yesterday, I lost forty points because I absolutely had to have a jelly sandwich. Apricot jelly! He wanted strawberry!

Never ask for lollipops! You can't have any, they're for us only! I ate twenty yesterday! What a bellyache! But they were so good! Sorry, gotta run. I'm playing hide-and-seek, gotta go before they find me⁷.

The world of the grotesque and comic is juxtaposed with real life in the concentration camp. Guido works in a factory, where each day, he has to carry heavy metal parts that are melted in large furnaces. This job places significant physical strain upon the thin and frail man. Guido is terrified, and he can barely cope with such exhausting labour. However, he musters his willpower for the sake of his son who is waiting for him hidden in the barracks.

After all, Guido has to pretend and tell untruths, which is particularly evident when he describes the purpose of his tattoo⁸. He tells his son that he writes down the competitor's number on his arm in order not to forget it. To magnify the comic effect, Benigni introduces a scene that could initially shock the audience. In that scene, Guido and his son talk about turning humans into soap and buttons, and Giose is clearly surprised and disturbed by what he hears⁹. Buttons also perplex Róża, the eight-year-old daughter of Stramer's eldest son, the protagonist of Mi-kołaj Łoziński's novel. Róża's reflections are filled with childlike wonder: "What use is this button for the Germans? Nobody talks about it. Do they make clothes like mum? Maybe we should just give it back" (Łoziński 2019: 250). But Guido knows the truth – he knows that the Germans commit gruesome crimes, kill people in gas chambers and burn them in crematorium ovens. However, he is aware of the gravity of the situation, and he decides to play it down in a conversation with his son. Benigni's film features several scenes in which Guido uses humour and irony to caricature life in camp: "Tomorrow, I will wash my hands with Bartholomew and button up with Francesco" or "Does this look like a human being?". It is important to note that the boy trusts his father completely and is convinced that his father always tells the truth. After all, nobody is ever "forced" to do

⁷ English translation of the original Italian screenplay: https://thescriptsavant.com/movies/Life_Is_Beautiful.pdf

⁸ Cf. Wolski (2013: 74) "this is not only a matter of literary identity [...], but also of non-literary identity"; Kossak-Szczucka (2004: 23): "Indelible, dark-grey digits remained on the deeply punctured skin. As of that moment, the number replaced your given name, family name, maiden name, husband's name, nickname, pedigree, pet name, birth certificate, or identity card"; Ostalowska (2011: 20): "Even though she had her tattoo surgically removed after the war, Dina played the lottery with her camp number, 61016".

⁹ Cf. T. Bonek, *Ludzie na mydło. Mit, w który uwierzyliśmy*, Znak Horyzont, Kraków 2023.

anything in the fascinating, magical world created by the caring guardian. When Giose feels homesick and wants to leave the camp, Guido resorts to subtle “manipulation”¹⁰ and tells his son that they can leave any time they wish, but if they do, they will lose the game. As a result, Giose changes his mind and remains hidden in the barracks.

Guido’s efforts to manipulate his son’s reality are evident in yet another scene which can be described as the “silent game”. Italian children have to remain silent during the “game”, namely their stay in the camp. “They talk so weird, you can’t understand a thing” – Guido tells his son. In this scene, Guido Orfice works as a waiter serving SS officers. He decides to take his son out of hiding and show him that other children are also playing the “game”. Guido’s intention was to convince Guido that he is not alone. However, as capricious fate would have it, the boy accidentally ends up at a German party, and he has to keep quiet to hide his identity. The party is in full swing, with the soldiers relaxing in one room and their children eating in another. At one point, Giose inadvertently utters the word “grazie”. Tension begins to mount, and the viewers are fully aware that the boy’s life would be in serious danger if his identity were to be revealed. Fortunately, the intrepid father comes to the rescue and pretends to be teaching Italian to German children. Once again, he manages to bring the situation under control. A similar event takes place just as the camp is being prepared for closure. Guido puts on a disguise and attempts to reach the women’s camp to pass important information to his wife Dora. This scene could be potentially funny in a typical comedy, but not in *Life Is Beautiful*. Guido manages to escape by climbing the wall, hoping that he would not be caught by the searchlight moving slowly along the wall of the building¹¹. The searchlight misses the fugitive, and for the briefest of moments, the viewers can breathe a sigh of relief. They are made to believe that the protagonist is no longer in danger, but then the light suddenly reappears and reveals Guido because “in comedy, the universal participates in the subversion of the ‘general’; the flow of comedy, the transposition of the general to the individual represents the flow of the universal, which becomes the subject matter of that movement” (Banki, 2009: 235).

At that moment, the film turns into a work of cinematic drama,

both narrative and documentary, which is structured around the main conflict and the relations between the main characters and the events. The skilful progression of dramatic events evokes strong emotions in viewers. Similarly to a comedy, a dramatic

¹⁰ Manipulation is also addressed by Harwas-Napierała (2005: 248).

¹¹ Cf. *The Pianist*, directed by R. Polański 2002.

film combines a wide variety of genres that evolve with the plot and, in some cases, unfold independently (Hendrykowski 1994: 64).

Guido Orfice is caught and realises two things. Firstly, he is being watched by his son; therefore, the “game” must continue. Secondly, he will soon die, which means that the game will end.

Guido does not give up the act. He keeps up the pretence, actively participates in the “game”, and assumes the role of a clown. He faithfully imitates a soldier’s gestures and movements as he is led to the wall, where he is executed. In the background, the viewers can hear Giosue’s laughter and excitement that he is only 40 points away from winning a tank.

Guido lived to see his tragic finale, dying under gunfire in the ruined camp. Even though the bullets that cut through his exhausted body, the blood and the corpse are not shown, the scene creates a powerful impression that is difficult to banish from memory. All that remains is silence¹².

Giosue not only survived, but also won the main prize. An American tank triumphantly enters the camp and picks up the boy who was able to escape the horrors of life in prison through the power of love.

On a final note, let me focus on the last scene in which Giosue finds his mother. The woman lifts her son up in her arms, and the boy shouts: “Abbiamo vinto! We won!”.

In the last scene, we can hear adult Giosue’s voice speaking off-camera: “This is my story. This is the sacrifice my father made. This was his gift to me” and “A thousand points! Couldn’t you just die laughing?”.

Benigni combines comedy with drama, elicits profound emotions, and forces the viewer to reflect on the human condition in the face of unimaginable suffering. Due to its cultural and historical significance, the film has become an important work of cinematic art. By depicting the Holocaust through humour and love, the director obviously initiates a debate on the boundaries of cinematography and its role in conveying difficult topics, but despite these controversies, *Life Is Beautiful* is a true testament to human resilience and the power of the human spirit, and it reminds us that we can find sparks of home and beauty even in the darkest of

¹² Cf. Danilo Donati’s commentary: “I never laugh when watching Benigni’s films. You might think it’s strange, but I’m nearly always on the verge of tears. This paradoxical feeling was probably experienced by Italian theatre-goers before Goldoni. Back then, it seemed that everything he said came straight out of his throat or even deeper, deep from his bowels. You just show the ‘truth of the moment’, and you don’t care if this form of expression appears artificial, grotesque, or comical” (Zajac 2007: 144).

times, that humour can soften our burden and can be a form of resistance in the face of suffering (Camus 2004:146).

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Film

Life Is Beautiful, directed by Roberto Benigni, 1997.

The Pianist, directed by Roman Polański 2002.