

Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*)



*Guido (Roberto Benigni), Dora
(Nicoletta Braschi), and their son,
Giosue (Giorgio Cantarini) before the
hard times*

Rating: ** (1998) Running time: 114 minutes.
Rated PG-13 (due to concentration camp scenes).**

Credits

Director: Roberto Benigni

**Screenplay: Roberto Benigni and
Vincenzo Cerami**

Director of Photography: Tonino Delli Colli

**Producers: Elda Ferri and Gianluigi
Braschi**

Production Design: Danilo Donati

Editing: Simona Paggi

Music: Nicola Piovani

Cast

Guido: Roberto Benigni

Giosue: Giorgio Cantarini

Ferruccio: Sergio Bustric

Dora: Nicoletta Braschi

Uncle Zio: Giustino Durano

Doctor Lessing: Horst Buchholz

by T. Larry Verburg

Like thousands of other viewers, I enjoyed Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* immensely, and even appreciated the antics of its director/star in Hollywood at Oscar time"up to a point. Benigni plays his role to perfection; he is a combination country bumpkin and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936). (Or, perhaps, he is more like the Fool in a Shakespearean play.) And yet, the evening I saw it with my wife, as we sat in the darkness looking up at the bright, lively colors of Benigni's creation, I thought the film was seriously flawed.

It seemed to me then that I was really watching two very different and not very well integrated films. The first film is about a family in Italy during the fascist years. (The father is Jewish, thought the mother isn't, but this fact does not become important until later.) The second film is an entirely different one, a much sadder and darker film that takes place in a German concentration camp. I was certainly not the only one to notice this. Virtually everyone, from Roger Ebert to Scott Renshaw and Janet Maslin commented on this aspect of the film. (The reviews are available at the following addresses—Roger Ebert's at http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1998/10/103003.html, Scott Renshaw's at <http://www.inconnect.com/~renshaw/lifeisbeautiful.html>, and Janet Maslin's [*registration required*] at <http://www.nytimes.com/library/film/102398life-film-review.html>.)

While I thought *Life Is Beautiful* an interesting and admirable film in many ways, it seemed to me to lack cohesion and was, as a result, not so dramatic and poignant as *The Garden of The Finzi-Continis* (1971). Nevertheless, the problem of the two films remained to haunt me, asking questions I could not answer and posing riddles I could not satisfactorily resolve.

Ultimately, I concluded, the first film is not very remarkable. Too much of the film is literally dominated, shadowed, by Guido, who is one of those rare creatures whom nothing can get down. He remains positive in the most difficult and trying situations. It is as if simply by the sheer force of his will, he keeps the earth in orbit, the diurnal rhythms in harmony, and by his very laughter exiles ugliness, brutality, and shame. That Benigni can make us believe in this quasi-ludicrous character is a true sign of his genius as both actor and director.



Guido explains life

Guido's *joi de vivre* is overflowing, bubbling down to the audience from the screen, and it ultimately gives the film a kind of golden glow, the feeling of a momentous spring day reflected upon years later. The first film is softened by this mellifluous mood, and the audience is lulled by the whispering voices of the spring day, unaware that a force of unspeakable darkness is looming on the peaceful blue horizon. Seeing this family so at peace with the world, so contented in themselves and their beautiful life, we begin to wonder when the storm cloud will strike, enchaining mankind in madness, death, and despair.

And so we come to the second film. While it does not provide that visceral assault on the senses, the gut-wrenching horror of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), it does portray the almost unimaginable cruelty and inhumanity that became commonplace during World War II, as thousands were sent to workcamps where they were literally worked or starved to death—those who were lucky enough to avoid the gas chambers. And so, we ask, how can Guido's indomitable spirit stand up to this darkness at the soul of Naziism, this willful cruelty that poisoned a generation?

As atrocity begets atrocity, we see the family in a completely different light. In the second film, Guido, the hero (for hero he has become) struggles to keep alive the spirit and illusions of his little son, Giosue, even during the darkest times in the concentration camp, as the horrors occur around them and promise no resolution, no outcome except an obscene, needless death.

Yes, here is the second film, so poignant, where the greatness of the flawed film shows itself. For who, except possibly a Viktor Frankl (author of one of the greatest books to owe its genesis to life in a concentration camp, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1946, English version 1959), can experience the horror they do and survive? And, while I celebrate the film's immense popularity, I confess I feel, somewhat smugly, that this very popularity, this unprecedented success surely proves the film is not as good as many of its most enthusiastic supporters claim.

No, I assure myself, the change is too abrupt. There is virtually no foreshadowing, no hint in the first part of the evil that manifests itself in the second, the more sombre, realistic, and dramatic part.

But I believe this without really thinking, without proper reflection, and without analyzing why I feel so satisfied with the film, in spite of its flawed structure. Only much later, when the poignancy and energy of the film have not diminished for me, do I question my

first assumptions and begin to reflect on the film, its many defects, and its elements of genius.



Guido and Giosue at the concentration camp

My original objection to the film, that it really is composed of two separate and very different films weakly spliced together, begins to fade. For I begin to see that the film is intended as a unity. What we have is the same family, but in two very different but equally feasible circumstances—before and during the War. We see, in other words, the same coin, but viewed from two different angles. We see different images, the head and tail, but the coin is one solid piece; neither view is the only real or correct one. The life of such a family in such a time doubtless is many-faceted and contains an infinity of possibilities, of outcomes, some more or less probable than others, but all potentialities.

For us to truly understand the second part of the film, and to understand Benigni's artistry, we must have the first part. In the first part we come to know the family, Dora, the loving wife and mother, the self-sufficient family, their trials and tribulations, come to know them as they face life and interact with friends, family, and others in the community that makes up their world, their cosmos. And this world is, in effect, a mirror image of the larger world, that world whose inhabitants deny the evil tide surging ever more strongly around them, who view life in more primitive, more simplistic terms.

Guido and Giosue, in their rapport, remind me of Antonio and Bruno, the father and son in Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). And yet this film is most certainly not a neo-realistic one. The first part is mostly a phantasy, dream-like and evocative, yet alive with vibrant, realistic colors.

No loud voices of protest are heard in this part of the film. Though there are hints of abuse and brutality, nothing comes close to the reality or even implies or faintly suggests a recognition of Hitler's true evil by the the rest of the world. Though that recognition came almost too late, it inspired the Allied response with an awesome duty and fueled and spurred its bitter, determined drive to Berlin.

But then the coin is flipped. What we see is the same family confronting a chaos and a social force of utter and profound devastation. The family knows, we, the audience know, that this fragile world of the first part is gone forever. Nothing can remain the same after its journey to the abyss and back. Nor should it remain the same. The second part of the film, in its bold, spiritual triumph, would be ludicrous if we didn't have the evidence before us of Guido and his positive and romantic view of life, his utter enjoyment of life, his passion and zest for his beloved wife and son. In his special way, Guido is very like the koan about the Zen Buddhist monk who savors life even while he is being chased by a tiger. Guido doesn't simply realize the munificence of his bounty when he is close to losing everything.



Guido and Giosue discuss life

The power, the ultimate success of the film flows forward from the fact that Guido has acknowledged all along the perfection of that life—the pure dignity and lucid harmony that exist even in the simplest and most seemingly hum-drum lives. All we need, Benigni says, is to be aware of our lives and to nurture a measure of self-awareness to be able to discern this deep truth for ourselves. And these small and seemingly insignificant moments in Guido's life are truly precious to him. They form the stepping stones upon which he will cross to his ultimate doom and the salvation of those dearest to him.

We can believe in the second part of the film only because we are introduced to the people who inhabit the first part and have become real and vibrant individuals to us. And so I now begin to see that the film is a melody, a song; that is has a definite, distinct, and flowing tonal form. Its pattern is inexorable, its voice unique. It is more a symphony than a canvas, more a celebration than a dirge.

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Please send any comments or suggestions to: lverburg@mindspring.com