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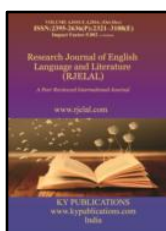
The Pain through Laughter: A Representation of the Holocaust Trauma

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ABSTRACT

The terror and trauma of the Holocaust is an unrepresentable reality. Although many attempts were done to encapture the horrors of the Auschwitz experience, the reality in its intensity slips away from the language. The Italian film maker Roberto Benigni successfully portrays his trauma of the Holocaust in his Academy Award winning film, *Life Is Beautiful*. The comic mode taken by the director hits us with a shock of terror and pain.

Key words : Trauma, laughter, Holocaust, terror.

Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*, is a film that is set in a concentration camp and combines comedy with the seriousness of the extermination of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Benigni's task in making this film was significant, by taking a tremendous risk, making a "comedy about the Holocaust." And the fact that he pulled it off so well, despite the expected controversy it has aroused in some quarters, is downright miraculous. Benigni initially accesses the emotions of his audience through simple comedy. And the film is a comic attack on Fascism.

The film's plot structure can be divided into two parts. The first half of *Life Is Beautiful* is basically a slapstick comedy. This part has been seen by many critics as being inferior to the second, but this is certainly not the case. In the first section we follow the delightful romance that will eventually lead to marriage and the creation of the wonderful Goisué. Unlike so many films nowadays there is nothing crude or coarse here; his is simple innocent humour, which is all the more effective. The way he ties together little strands in the film to create comedy shows a great writing ability, and a mastery of timing when it comes to their execution on screen. Various incidents related to the rise of anti-

Semitism and Fascism in Italy show that there are sinister forces at work. And these come to the fore in the second segment of the film.

The movie opens with the conversation of two friends who move to "the city" (in Italy), and we follow Guido (played by Benigni) and he falls in love with a school teacher (played by Benigni's own wife, Nicoletta Braschi). This takes place in pre-World War II Italy, and the Fascists are in rule. We see from the beginning that Benigni does not hold authority in high regard. He ridicules these people repeatedly in the first half of the film. In the beginning Benigni is mistaken for the king of Italy as his car loses control and accidentally ends up in a parade. He is constantly switching hats (ie, switching roles or identities) with a fascist employer of his. When the priest is to arrive from Rome, Benigni assumes his identity and winds up going to a local school where he puts down the idea of identity by race, as he illustrates to the students the absurdity of the concept of Aryan superiority. Benigni presents the scene with ridiculous comedy. The following dialogue is from the film illustrates this beautifully:

Principal :	Go ahead, Inspector
Guido :	Our race
Students :	Is Superior

Guido : Why did they pick me, children? Must I tell you? Where can you find. ... someone more handsome than me?

Justly so, there is silence. I'm an original 'superior race' Pure Aryan..

Children. Let's start with something that one says: "What's so big about the ear. Look at the perfection of this ear. Left auricle.....

With a pendant little bell at the end. Check it out. Movable cartilage.

Bendable.

Find two ears more beautiful than these and I'll leave!

But you have to show me them.

They dream about these in France!

Races exist, children. You bet they do! (Benigni 41-42)

Thus he jeers at Hitler's claim of Aryan superiority and the theory of Eugenics. When his son asks why a certain pastry shop does not allow Jews or dogs, Benigni tells him that these classifications are completely random, and that there are stores in town that forbid entry to others (Chinese and kangaroos, Spaniards and horses etc.). Guido does, however, have enough respect for the rules in his observation of the rules of being a waiter. He learns them carefully from his uncle, who takes the role of waiter very seriously, and he does his job well, although still with comic moments. Guido succeeds in marrying Dora, a non Jew, by stealing her away at her engagement from her aristocratic but arrogant fiancé.

In the second half of the film Guido and Gisoué are taken to the concentration camp along with their Uncle Eliseo. Dora also manages to join them even though she is not a Jew. It is the mid 1940s, when the war is in full swing. The racism towards Benigni, the Jew, becomes quite apparent. Benigni gets himself into hot water with big bullying authority figures and uses slap stick comedy to get his point across. He is then shipped off to a concentration camp in Germany. There, he invents

an elaborate ploy to hide from his son the truth of what is really going on. He tells him that it is all a big game, and that whoever is first to get 1000 points will win a real tank. Anything that threatens to break in on this fantasy is explained away as just part of the game. The movie is an attempt to keep the reality of the situation from his son; but equally important is the way Benigni builds up the horror of the camp and then breaks the spell with a comic moment.

There are three features Benigni employs that are essential for understanding the motivation behind the film. First, Guido continually responds to the particular situations that present themselves, and this explains why this is not, strictly speaking, a film about the Holocaust. A good example of this continued responsiveness is Guido's incredibly quick "translation" of the German officer's rules to adapt to the story he has invented for his son. Guido does not know German. But, for the sake of the story of the game, he comes forward to translate into Italian the Nazi guard's German instructions.

Guido: The game starts now. Whoever's here is here, whoever's not is not.

The first one to get a thousand points wins. The prize is a tank!

Everyday we'll announce who's in the lead from that loudspeaker.

The one with the least points has to wear a sign saying "jackass" right here on his back.

We play the part of the real mean guys who yell. Whoever's scared loses points.

You'll lose your points for three things.

One, if you cry.

Two, if you want to see your mommy.

Three, if you're hungry and you want a snack.

Forget about it!

It's easy to lose points for being hungry.

Just yesterday I lost points....

Because I absolutely had to have a jam sandwich.

Don't ask for any lollipops. You won't get any.

We eat them all!

I ate of them yesterday!

Sorry if I'm going so fast, but I'm playing hide and seek.

I have to go now or they'll find me (Benigni 109-110).

Second, Benigni in the film displays an incredible amount of faith. He uses this to keep up his commitment, and this explains his never despairing at the sight of so much suffering around him. Guido displays this faith throughout the second half of the film, and the hope that his son has the possibility of surviving on the last night allows him to march to his own death without losing his identity and therefore without falling into despair. Guido does not cry because he believes, because he has faith, that he will succeed in helping his son live even though he has no real reason to believe either of them will survive. His faith is not in some future salvation but in the present moment.

Third, and most important, Benigni's commitment allows him to do whatever is possible for the higher cause of easing his son's suffering. He is not bound by the ethical principle of always telling the truth. You could say Benigni is a liar, he makes up a story just to hide the truth from his son; or you could say he shows insensitivity to those around him, being insensitive to those who suffered and died in the Holocaust. He certainly seems to depict the Holocaust in an unrealistic picture of the atrocities committed by the Germans in World War II.

The film in the second half is about Benigni's private undertaking. Benigni need not, and indeed cannot, explain his characters' actions to anyone who does not understand them. Instead, he shows us a world where individual love prevails in the worst possible surroundings, a world where faith saves one from despair. The film works because we can see that Benigni himself made this film with love and a certain faith that it would be understood. At the end of the film, Benigni's character is shot and killed, but the war has ended with the arrival of the Americans, and the son and mother survive. The tragedy gets intensified when the camp is freed the very night of Guido's attempt to escape and his death.

Representation of highly traumatic events like the Holocaust is hazardous. But imagination has

a moral authority and art has the power to uncover the truths that are latent in documentary material. The film depicts how the Jewish people were affected by the Holocaust. We can read books, or look in museums, but seeing the people struggling through the acts forced upon them brings into being new meanings to what took place during that time. Having heard first hand accounts of the horror people went through, Benigni's mission of not letting his son actually know what was happening was a great gift to his son. And Benigni uses a strategic ploy to save the viewers, too, from the harsh realities of the camp. But the veil of comedy in turn works as the intensifier of trauma. Trauma, the mediated emotion through memory, gets represented in the film mediated through comedy.

No wonder that no one, not even the most severe keepers of the flame of absolute evil that is the Holocaust, was offended by *Life Is Beautiful*, the story of an Italian Jewish father who, in Auschwitz, adopts a desperate strategy of shielding his young son from trauma by presenting to him what goes on as a staged competition in which one must stick to the rules (eat as little as possible, etc.) in order that the one who wins the most points will at the end see an American tank arriving as his prize. The miracle of the film is that the father succeeds in maintaining the appearance to the end: even when, just before the liberation of the camp by the Allies, he is led away by a German soldier to be shot, he winks at his son (hidden in a nearby closet) and starts to march a goose-step in a comically-exaggerated way, as if playing a game with the soldier.

Perhaps the key scene of the film occurs when the child gets tired of the game which involves so many deprivations of camp life (lack of food, the necessity to hide for hours) and announces to the father that he wants to leave for home. Unperturbed, the father agrees, but then, with a feigned indifference, mentions to the son how glad the other competitors will be if they leave now, when they are in the lead with so many points over the others. In short, he deftly manipulates the dimension of the son's desire, so that, when, finally, close to the doors, the father says to the son, "Ok, let's go, I cannot wait for you all day!" the son changes his mind and asks him to stay. Of course,

the tension of the situation is created by the fact that we, the spectators, are well aware that the father's offer to go home is a fake promise, a pure bluff: if they were effectively to step out, the son (who is hiding in the barracks) would be immediately killed in the gas chamber. Perhaps, therein resides the fundamental function of the protective father: under the guise of offering a (false) choice, to make the subject-son freely choose the inevitable through the competitive evocation of the other's desire.

The whole story is developed on a bluff of feigned choice. Benigni offers the viewers moments for laughter. But the choice offered to laugh is a false choice and the viewers are well aware of the reality behind the bluff. The shadow of death accompanies every comic scene in the film. So the smile which flowers on the lips of the spectators is accompanied by daggers on their heart. Benigni here acts the role of "a protective father" to the audience. Žižek comments about the film in a lecture delivered at Lunds University:

What remains problematic in Benigni's film is the allegorical relationship between the film's narrative and the way the film addresses its spectator: is it not that, in the same way the father within the film constructs a protective fictional shield to render the traumatic reality of the concentration camp bearable, Benigni himself treats the spectators as children to be protected from the horror of the Holocaust by a 'crazy' sentimental and funny fiction of a father saving his son, the fiction that renders the historical reality of the Holocaust somehow bearable? ("Laugh Yourself to Death" 4).

Life is Beautiful makes it clear how the so called human dignity relies on the urgent need to maintain a minimum of protective appearance. Žižek argues that Benigni's protective father ultimately accomplishes the work of "symbolic castration": he effectively separates the son from his mother, introduces him to the dialectical identification with the other's (his peer's) desire, and thus accustoms him to the cruel reality of the life outside the family. The fantasmatic protective shield is the benevolent fiction allowing the son to come to terms with harsh

reality – the father does not protect the son from the harsh reality of the camp, he just provides the symbolic fiction that renders this reality bearable.

As the allegorical story of the game protects the child from the harsh realities of the camp, Benigni's comic veil protects the viewers from the horror of the Holocaust. But this comedy is only a protective shield. The shield dissolves when the viewers become mature in realization. Once the protective shield disappears, the trauma of the Holocaust survivors manifests itself in the minds of the spectators as a "speechless fright". In the film, at a certain point, the comedy is "sublated" and we are delivered a "serious" pathetic message. In a Holocaust comedy when the laughter stops we get either pathetic dignity or nausea. This nausea marks the self-cancellation of the comedy. Thus the laughter dies or we laugh ourselves to death.

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