

# HUMOR can transcend HORROR

**A review** of the tragicomic film "La Vita è Bella" ("Life is Beautiful") (Miramax/98)  
 Coscripter & protagonist Roberto Benigni ("Guido"; gentle wife "Dora"; their son "Joshua")  
 Begins '39 in Italy; ends as American tank enters the Nazi death camp where G. has just sacrificed himself to save J.'s life. To be with her Jewish husband & child, D. had boarded the death train to the camp; but she survived, & the film ends with her playfully rolling in the grass with her son.

This review combines my prior reflections with insights from last evening's film-discussion group.

1 Double serendipity! (1) I said "Benigni is Italy's Charlie Chaplain." (2) In throwing out old letters this morning, I came upon a Chaplain reference & the idea in this Thinksheet's title: "As a mosaic of Charlie Chaplain and a handful of other comedians, he's\* my living favorite for humorous transcendence of the horde of private and public inhumanities." So, for at least 20 years, the idea has been with me....  
 \*Woody Allen

...."the power of humor to transcend horror." That was my phrase when I suggested to the group that crafting a single phrase to capsule a film is a way to achieve instant vigorous discussion as phrase jostles with phrase, each member of the group offering one phrase.

2 The Pope doesn't see many movies, but he was so delighted with this one that he gave Benigni a private audience....Waving his two Oscars, B. ran around the Hollywood Oscars-night extravaganza. Many other honors for this foreign-language (English titles) film (also released with English dubbing, but it's too bad not to hear the Italian).

3 A delightful profound mix of realism (antiSemitism & the Final Solution) & idealism (the father's surrounding his small son with an invisible wall of **fantasy** ["It's a game!"] & **hope** ["We'll win first prize, & you'll have a *real* tank!"]).

4 **Worlds:** (1) The pre-war partying lifestyle of upperclass Italians; (2) The concentration camp with its *visible* walls; (3) The fantasy ("It's all a game!") world G. created to protect J. from experiencing/anticipating the horror of (as a playmate of J. put it) "we're all going to be made into soap & buttons"; (4) the actual father-son interpersonal world of love, a world including the out-of-reach wife/mother; (5) the world of divine resolution, a world hinted at variously (including G.'s uncle's saying "God serves men, but [keeping the initiative] he is not a servant to men").

5 **GENRE:** Personal narrative, J.'s start/finish speeches enveloping the action. **FIRST WORDS:** "This is a story, an easy one to tell." **LAST WORDS:** "This is the story of the sacrifice my father made for me." The Gospels are the story of the sacrifice God(Father-Son) made for us: G. is a **Christ figure**.

6 The Lord's Prayer daily accultures us to world #5, the now/not-yet kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven." What's now only virtual reality will become visible reality.

7 We do not know whether G. believes deliverance will come, but we do know that he uses **preplaying** to prepare his son for the inevitable (J. never having been on a train, G. prepares him for the death train by saying "People always stand up on trains; there are no seats") & for the desirable (the prize tank he tells J. he's making when J. sees him lugging an anvil toward a smelter).

When the American tank appears, it stops directly in front of J., who shows awe but no fear. The commander takes him up into the tank & playfully puts his goggled helmet on him. The tank proceeds amid a double file of releasees from the death camp till the child cries out "Mama!" The tank stops to let J. enter his mother's eager arms, an eschatological image (to walk into the arms of God).

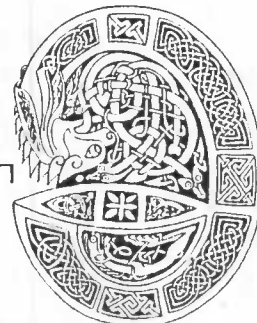
8 The height of this **tragicomedy**: The father, being led away to death, does a clown walk past the place where he's hidden the son--the last acting out of "It's only a game." This is the clip most used in promoting the film.

9 "Parable," a United Church of Christ mime (no words) film, presents Jesus

as a clown, a mime. We (I was on the national UCC staff at the time) had trouble "selling" it to the churches: too shocking was the complaint; & a sacrilege to mix horror & humor. On the Net I found numerous complaints against "Life is Beautiful" on the ground that "there's nothing funny about the Holocaust." But Beligni's art makes the Holocaust not less but more horrible in the spotlight of comedy. And by using brinkmanship (taking us time & again to the brink, then yanking us away from death) he gives us repeatedly the experience of little horrors to illumine the Great Horror of Shoah.

- 10 "Life is Beautiful": is *beautiful* here ironic or affirmative? 10% the former, 90% the latter. Soul-nourishing moments of beauty; e.g., Offenbach's "Tales" played first in an operahouse & then (G. pointing a record-player at the women's wing so D. could hear & remember their being together in the operahouse) readable on Dora's face as she pauses from her slave-labor. Beautiful also is every representation of human love (against, e.g., the ostentation of a forced marriage from which G. saved D.). Beautiful G.'s courageous & persistent play-acting for the delight & protection of his child. Beautiful the tank commander, & mother & child rolling ecstatically together in the grass by the side of the road. Beautiful the ingenious comicality. Beautiful G.'s love for & joy in life, & his "will power" (with several comical mentions of Schopenhauer!). And beautiful the power of faith & hope over death, and the power of laughter and imagination to bolster the human spirit.
- 11 The German guards are mere stick-figures with the exception of an officer who saves G. from death in order to get help in solving a puzzle, but more than that. Secretly, & obviously in anguish, he whispers to G. "I need your help!" G. says nothing, but his face says "Are you kidding? I a prisoner help you a free man?" We are invited to muse on the mysteries of good/evil & slave/free.
- 12 "Racist" is used only once. Lecturing to schoolchildren, G. shows them his navel & says "No racist Italian scientist can untie that!" When J. sees a storewindow with "No dogs or Jews allowed," G. softens the shock by saying to Jewish J. "Different stores have different exclusions. On my store I'd want 'No spiders or Visigoths'."
- 13 One in our group said the film left her feeling "profoundly sad," as though gasping for oxygen; another said he found it "very depressing, the incredible waste of the human potential." All the rest of us admitted to those feelings, but no others were left with either of those as the dominant after-taste.
- 14 G.'s stealing of hats but always getting his own back? Fantasizing other roles but always returning to himself, said our son Mark.

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Leslie, <sup>Zeigler</sup> I thank you for your apt critique of #3046, which would have been better had you been in our film-group. A few comments:

- 1 A great movie--& I think this one--offers fruit from every pair of shoes. Here, you may stand in the father's (Guido), the mother's (Dora), the son's (Joshua), or those of several minor characters. My Thinksheet is mainly standing in Guido's shoes; your letter, Joshua's.
- 2 You ask "What is the hope involved? Is it anything other than the hope of sparing the boy from the experience of reality," not "helping him deal with reality?" You worry that the boy will turn cynical when he discovers his father deceived him. While I agree on that possibility, the playwright has excluded it at film's end: Joshua (itself a hopeful name, Joshua-Jesus) says "This is the story of the sacrifice my father made for me." (When two Nazi guards approached the trash-shed in which the father had hid the son, the father [who was in the process of making his escape] deliberately distracted them by calling their attention to himself. (The Thinksheet said "Guido is a Christ figure.") Self-sacrifice is always a sign of hope. Too, there's hope in the father's promise ("Some day you'll have a *real* tank!") & in his conniving will that his son survive. There's hope in the father's success at keeping his son thinking positively & not falling into despairing fear, which could have doomed him. And there's hope in the father's "not sparing the boy from the experience of reality." What reality? The father's steady cruciform love, a reality greater than the death camp. (When I studied with death-camps survivor Viktor Frankl, his greatest emphasis was on the prisoner's ineluctable freedom-&-thus-responsibility to choose among present realities & possible life-attitudes.)
- 3 You ask whether childhood fantasies imperil/impede his/her later facing of adult realities. Can; need not, can even help. Game theory comes in here, & it illumines the film & Christ's atonement. But you are so right that such a film presses the envelop, hits a hermeneutic wall it cannot penetrate, a "limit (boundary)" (I add) all the arts face. Analogia inventionis is subservient to analogia fidei, which is subservient to analogia entis.
- 4 Fantasy here is only a vehicle. Of her "Harry Potter," Rowling says "I'm a Christian. I believe in God, not magic." The author of "Life Is Beautiful" could say "I'm a Christian. I believe in God, not fantasy." Salvation is "not th result of our own effort" but of the savior's (Guido's, as the Christ figure). But I agree with you that artistic creativity can be perilous to good theology! And I may be too eager to see good theology. As you say, fantasy can be used as escape, to "overcome reality."

Grace and peace,

*Willis*

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Nov. 18, 2001 *f. (Cruel) director*  
*att. to me, & as a person who knows*  
*to Ch. children - & the mother*

Dear Dr. Elliott:

A supplement to my letter of Nov. 14 -- with reference to your  
Thinksheet n. 3046.

I saw this film -- "Life is Beautiful" -- some time ago, and had very mixed feelings regarding it. Your Thinksheet aroused those mixed feelings again, and also aroused some reflection (and concern) with respect to why my reaction to the film seems to be quite different than yours, or that of the Pope. It would be interesting to be able to talk to you about it, but as that is not readily possible, decided to write.

The film was, indeed, an impressive one, but . . .? It would take considerable space to do justice to my reaction -- to adequately describe and/or support it. So will attempt only a few brief comments -- primarily questions. The film is certainly a mix of fantasy and realism, but does it really involve a mix of "realism" and "idealism," or "fantasy" and "hope," as you have expressed it? The game being played is certainly, it seems to me, an expression of fantasy, but what is the hope involved? Is it anything other than the hope of sparing the boy from the experience of reality -- not the hope of helping him to deal with reality, but the hope of sparing him the experience of reality?

It could be argued, of course, that the reality is beyond childish understanding, but does the use of such fantasy ("childish things") provide an adequate introduction to reality for that childish understanding? Does the use of this game mean, for example, that Christianity should be presented to a child of this age as a fantasy? As something other than reality (a fairy tale)? If so, when the child becomes a man, why would he not put away this fantasy along with all other fairy tales (childish things)? By what means is this to be prevented?

Further -- is the sacrifice of Christ for us analogous to that made by the father for his son, i. e., is it analogous to a game? If so, what is the game in which we are participants?

In what sense can the "arms of the mother" be understood as representing an eschatological image -- "the arms of God"? Is not the joy of the mother and son the reality of joy of a reunion, one which could not be realistically expected to occur, but a reunion in this very realistic pre-eschatological existence. The boy now has to learn, and his mother is faced with the task of helping him to do so, that the game his father played with him was just that, i. e., actually, although it was done for his sake, his father was tricking (deceiving) him.

Also, I find the phrase suggested in your Thinksheet as a simple one to encapsulate the film -- "the power of humor to transcend horror" -- an intriguing one. But does it serve to encapsulate the film? It seems to me a more accurate one might be "the power of fantasy to overcome reality." And is not fantasy frequently employed in the attempt to overcome reality? If one approaches this film as an analogy to Christianity, is it not an

an expression of an attempt to do exactly that?

Does it not express the view that belief in a fantasy (all our own work, of course) provides the analogy to faith -- a response in trust and obedience to a Reality other than ourselves? In other words, does the film not present "salvation" as the result of our own effort? And finally, is it not possible that that is the limit (the boundary) which a medium such as film, regardless of how well it may be done, in attempting to express Christianity, cannot overcome?

Will cease and desist, and would greatly appreciate any comments you may be moved to make.

Again, a very enjoyable Thanksgiving.

*Lester Zeigler*

*JP Ralston  
R. J. Ralston  
J. J. Ralston  
J. J. Ralston*