
Not So Beautiful Life: A Study on the Treatment of Black humour in *Life is Beautiful*

Rishad V

Guest Lecturer,
PG Department of English
NSS College Manjeri

Abstract

The Holocaust is one of the most tragic events ever happened in the human history. It was a systematic, bureaucratic and state sponsored persecution and murder of around six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Our memory of Holocaust, especially of the people belonging to this generation has been shaped more by popular representations, especially in films. The film *Life is Beautiful* directed by Robert Benigni portrayed the horror of Holocaust connotatively using black humour as its main medium. A short analysis of how Benigni uses black humour and other visual- cinema techniques in bringing out the terror of Holocaust among audience is studied in this article. Though the movie seems to fall under the genre comedy, it discusses connotatively the serious issues related to the life of Jews under Nazi regime without any use of violent images or scenes that reflect the real terrors of Holocaust.

Keywords: Holocaust, Black Humour, Robert Benigni, Jews, Nazi

Introduction

Life is Beautiful (La Vita e Bella) is a 1997 Italian film that represents the Holocaust in an extraordinary way by using humor and sentiments alternately throughout the movie. The film is directed by and starring Robert Benigni and tells the story of an Italian Jew who comes to city in search of a job with his friend during Mussolini's fascist reign and settles with his uncle as a waiter. There he accidentally meets and falls in love with his sweet-heart and the first half of the film is presented as a sentimental comedy which is about the romance between them. Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* is actually a combination of two movies. The second half narrates an entirely different story and is an extremely painful tale in which they and their young son lead their life caught in a concentration camp with the fear of death. This film makes us both weep and laugh

simultaneously. He presents the depth of the horrors and violence of Holocaust diminished in a gently touching manner. With his master mind, Benigni proved that the Holocaust terror can also be presented seriously using humor without the use of any evident Nazi signs and symbols or scenes of mass killing or violence. Instead of choosing to screen the mass devastation and immense pain that the genocide caused, Benigni opted for a man's love for a woman and then for his son. Thereby he made the film tender and light, able to evoke joy and humor. But when it is time to be serious, he allows it to happen and succeeded to bring out the feeling of in-depth terror of genocide among the audience. Thus, through its way of representation, through its humor, *Life is Beautiful* presented a wholly unique vision of one of the world's greatest atrocities.

Analysis

The very first scene of the film itself is a comic treat for the audience in which Benigni cunningly ridicules the fascist leaders of Italy. The car in which Guido and his friend Ferruccio comes to the city loses its brakes and accidentally comes in between the escorting vehicles of the king of Italy who was expected shortly by a nearby crowd. The car which Guido comes carries some bushes and shrubs on it and the crowd awaiting the king misconceives them as the Royal King. He was received grandly with waving hands and band troupes and when the real King and officials arrive, they get shame-faced. Benigni smartly ridicules the fascist king and officials of Italy through this scene.

The romance between Guido and Dora is presented very interestingly. Guido surprises her always having sudden unexpected meetings. Dora meets Guido for the first time when she falls from the hayloft to his hands. In another scene, he falls on her when he was trying to evade from a fascist official on a bicycle. In these scenes, Dora, a member of superior Aryan race, not only does she descend from the hayloft, but by giving herself to Guido, to be his princess, she also descends from a higher social class. She even crawls under a table to kiss him and tells him to take her away on her day of engagement. Dora was ready to take risks to lead a life of her own with the man of her choice. Though her marriage was already fixed by her family with a wealthy well settled fascist officer, she elopes with Guido in presence of her relatives and friends who had come to attend her engagement party.

Benigni constantly ridicules and mocks Nazi racial ideology throughout the film. Some of the ridicule is obvious and hilarious, at other times it is subtle. It is racism that Nazism beholds as a justification to their right to power. They judge that they have rights over other groups and perceive themselves as belonging to a superior race. Perhaps the most humorous scene in the film is when Guido appears as a fascist government officer for inspection at Dora's school before young students. This scene is the first clue for the idea that the film deals with a much higher and serious topic, racism. He actually goes there to impress his beloved as he always has a sudden unplanned visit to her. But he was assigned by the Principal there to talk about the Italian racial superiority and to explain that Aryans are the best ones. But Guido turns to mockery there utilizing the chance that he got to talk about Aryan race. His look is impish. His limbs are rubber. His hair is vanishing and his face is a caricaturist's dream. He ends up in his underwear showing the students that he has the best ear lobes, nose and the belly button and has an 'Aryan exit' through a window. Robert Benigni, in this scene diminishes racist ideology into its own absurdity. It is important to note that it is a Jew who is having an absurd talk on the superiority of Aryans as a guest among some Aryan teachers and students. This is the level of mockery used against Nazis by Benigni.

The discrimination that the Jews had to face in their daily life was pictured in a scene in which Guido and Ferruccio comes to his Uncle for the first time. The moment they step into their Uncle's house, what they see is their Uncle being attacked by some youth belonging to the Aryan race. But his uncle does not react to them occasionally as it is like a usual thing happening around. What he actually denotes is Jews had to lead a life tolerating all the discriminations they had to face from Aryans. When Guido enquires why his Uncle kept silent, Uncle Eliseo says that silence is the most powerful cry.

Another visible symbol of racism and ethnic conflicts is pictured in the party scene in which the engagement date of Dora with the fascist officer is declared. In that scene, Uncle Eliseo's horse 'Robinhood' was painted green by some Aryan crazy men. They have marked the sign of danger on it and have written "Achtung, Jewish horse". This time Uncle Eliseo took this matter as serious as atrocities against them were randomly increasing day by day and he warns Guido that he too will have to get used to it as they will start with him too eventually. But Guido

gives no importance to the incident and took this as a fun saying he did not even know the horse was Jewish. He continues: “The worse they can do is undress me, paint me yellow and write Achthung; Jewish waiter”. (00:37:46-00:37:50) Guido sees this as one of many pranks done by usual Aryan fools and barbarians and gives no consideration to the anti-Semitic statements written on it. Also in this party scene, when the party sits gathered around the dinner table, the school Principal from earlier in the film says how shocked she was by a problem given to the third grade students which employs figuring out how much the state would save if the cripples, lunatics and epileptics were eliminated. She was shocked as she says because the problem requires math far beyond a third grade level. Amico, the fascist officer whom Dora is to get married makes hatred comment there saying it will be easy to solve this problem if the government kills all these crippled and lunatic people. This makes everyone there around laugh but Dora reacted to this by saying ‘unbelievable’. This shows the level of inhumanity deep inside the Aryans though they claim they are the most amazing race indeed.

When the time period set in the film approaches to the war time, the disputes over the Jews by the Aryans increases gradually. It is evident through the process of labeling the shops as that of Jews. Public places and Aryan shops are hoarded with boards saying “No Jews or Dogs allowed.” These deeds were done to make Jews remain suppressed and estranged. Aryans considered and treated both Jews and dogs alike. Both are like their pets and they do not have sympathy on them. That is why they keep them away from their daily social and economic activities. Robert Benigni mocks this spirit of Aryans through his film. Guido further mocks this Aryan deed saying that they will not let spiders and Visigoths to their bookshop as Joshua and Guido do not like them. Visigoths are a group of nomadic tribe settled earlier in Germany. Also, in a scene from the bookstore, Guido was taken away by some officers to Prefects leaving little Joshua alone in the store. The Jews were forced to get to the government officers whenever they were asked to do so. Jews had to obey them amidst their personal interests. Guido, neglecting the seriousness of the situation imitates like a Nazi soldier marching to make his son happy and not worried.

The use of ideas and philosophies of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer has also prime importance in the film. In his most famous work, *The World as Will and Idea*, he

expresses the idea that the will is a universal and omnipresent force and is more important than the rational mind. He says that with will power, we can do anything we want. Robert Benigni employs this theory into this film having some manipulation. The concept was introduced when Guido and his friend Ferruccio lie in bed at night. Guido was making plans for the next day and suddenly realizes that Ferruccio is asleep. Astonished, he enquired Ferruccio how could he sleep so fast. Ferruccio replies that Schopenhauer helped him to do so. Guido immediately turns this into his advantage and starts moving his hands to let the magic work, a habit that he continued throughout the film. In another scene, at the theatre, Guido makes Dora look at him using this magic spell. Later, at the end of the film, just before Guido was shot, he hid his son in an iron metal box. Guido used Schopenhauer's method to save Joshua from a sniffer dog that was about to discover Joshua's hiding place.

Robert Benigni connotatively ridicules the policies and ideologies of fascist Nazi leaders like Hitler and Mussolini throughout the movie. In the first part of the film, while talking to Oreste, Ferruccio's employer, Guido asks him what his political views are. At this time Oreste's naughty twin sons who are having pillow fight disturbs the conversation, upon which Oreste indirectly answers Guido's question as "Benito! Adolph! Be good!" (08:50) Here the twin sons named Benito and Adolf actually stands for Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini and Nazi fascist Germany leader Adolf Hitler. Robert Benigni tells us connotatively that Hitler and Mussolini are like twins. They are actually two sides of a single coin. The pillow fight signifies their attitude of war and violence. Oreste's voice telling them to settle down and be good is the voice of every human lover. Later, in another scene, just before Guido takes on Dora from the party and from her fiancé, he enters the hall riding his uncle's green horse. He is greeted by the guests with applause among which an officer welcomes him with the Nazi salute, and remains so long in the same position that it becomes a scene for mass humor. These scenes ridicule Nazis harshly.

Stepping into the second half of *Life is Beautiful*, the tone of the humor presented in the film changes. The setting of the film changes from the city centers of Italy into the concentration camps in Germany. Guido, Joshua and Uncle Eliseo were forcibly taken into the camp on Joshua's birthday. When Dora brings her mother for the first time to their home, what all they

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sea is shattered rooms all around. All the articles in the room were thrown out on the floor. Seeing this Dora immediately perceives that they have been taken by Nazi armies as they are Jews. So she decides to join them to the camp as she does not want to live any second without her family. She was ready to accept any kind of risks for the sake of her family. Thus she was one among the many Jew inmates of the holocaust camp whose life was risked to death.

Robert Benigni has represented these terrific nail-biting events using humor itself. But still he exhibits the political nature of Germans mimetically by reflecting and recreating reality. Not much after their arrival at the concentration camp, Guido and the other inmates have to work in wretched circumstances. Suffering from the intense heat up to three thousand degrees, they had to take heavy risky jobs. Once when Joshua caught sight of his father carrying heavy weight of anvil barely able to walk, Guido tells him that they are just making a tank to make him veiled about the real atrocities of the camps.

The act of transporting Jews to the camps was told as a trip planned by Guido for Joshua's birthday. Joshua was made to believe that they are going to be a part of a game. Benigni portrays the life at the holocaust as a game for Guido and family to make Joshua's life beautiful. According to the game, those who score thousand points first will win the game. The prize is told as his favorite one, a real tank. This made Joshua thrilled to stay there at the camp as he was ready to withhold his thirst and all to get thousand points. He was never informed about the reality in the camp by anyone. Thus his life was so beautiful that he was a part of a real life adventurous game.

Parallel to picturing the real dangers and atrocities in the holocaust, Robert Benigni keeps on mocking the system and attitude of Nazis throughout the second part of the film also. In the most humorous scene of the second half, Benigni sternly ridicules the Nazi officers who are pride of their own German language and who does not know Italian language. In that scene, the Nazi army officials come to the camp to explain the rules of the camp to the inmates and call a person to translate their German into Italian. Neglecting the extreme seriousness of that fearful situation, Guido with a strong willpower to handle any situation comes forward and creates a wonderful situation of humor there. While the officers deliver the camp rules in Italian language, Guido, who does not know Italian, mimics the officer's gestures and expressions to explain the

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rules of the game they are in to Joshua. The other inmates get wondered to witness the absurd things happening around them. What Guido did in this scene is actually done throughout the entire film. He adapted and translated all the circumstances and reality that he is going through to a world which is more easy and bearable to live. It is this attitude of him that made him seem joyful all the time.

Conclusion

The humor Robert Benigni presented in *Life is Beautiful* was not just to provoke laughter and pleasure among audience but it was a multi-faceted one which contained severe criticisms against Nazi ideologies and scope for further thinking and analysis. The ideas and systems followed by Nazis were severely criticized by Benigni using black humor. This article studies in depth many instances in the film that exposes the severe atrocities and violent inhuman manners of the superior Aryan race and Nazi followers which are actually presented indirectly using black humor.

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