

## Representing Evil in *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful*

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*To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of 'ineffability', that is, non-representability, is to mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human.*

- Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*

The cinematic representation of the Shoah or Holocaust is prolific, running to several hundred films and documentaries.<sup>1</sup> Of course, depictions of such horrors raise a number of crucial philosophical and ethical questions. Can the Shoah be represented? In what ways do filmic representations of the Shoah contribute to the writing of history? How is the necessarily privileged position of the camera to be negotiated? Should there be limits to such depictions? Is it right to portray the heroic exploits of certain individuals or remarkable stories of survival when so many millions died as anonymized victims of industrialised genocide?

For some film-makers, the question of representation is best answered by returning to key locations, the authority of survivors and the testimony of victims and perpetrators. Film becomes a vehicle for the transmission of historical witness; the medium is rendered as transparent as possible. The most prominent example of such an approach can be found in Claude Lanzmann's nine-and-a-half hour epic *Shoah* (1985).<sup>2</sup> The impetus towards making films based on survivors' memoirs using painstaking historical detail has been very strong for a number of reasons. First, the number of witnesses is diminishing as the years pass and memories become cold amongst succeeding generations. Our connection to the events of the mid-twentieth century moves from shared memory towards history as an object of study. Film can be a means to preserve the sources. Secondly, the abhorrent spectre of Holocaust denial has ensured that filmmakers pay particular attention to the historical record in its

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive and critical survey of the Holocaust in film, see Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2003).

<sup>2</sup> For an exacting critical appraisal of *Shoah* and *Schindler's List* with further fascinating references to James Ivory's *Remains of the Day* (1993), see Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch.2, especially p.49.

various forms. Deviation from, or even lack of attention to, that record is quickly labelled 'revisionist'. Thirdly, many critics, following the lead of Theodor Adorno who famously claimed that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric',<sup>3</sup> insist that the artistic representation of the Shoah is not possible and only survivors' first-hand testimonies and documentary footage should be preserved and disseminated.

Lanzmann's work is sometimes regarded as the culmination of post-traumatic, historical depictions of the Shoah. In its mammoth assemblage of the accounts of witnesses alongside visits to the sites of Nazi murder and genocide, *Shoah* seemed to constitute the final and authoritative historical rendition of the horror of the concentration camps. Alongside, for example, Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955) and Michel Drach's *Les Violons du Bal* (1974), these films attempt to disrupt the present with the particular and personal memories of tragedy and terror which belong to an inevitably fading past. Nevertheless, many other cinematic approaches have been developed and different perspectives on the Shoah have been explored, including those of perpetrators, victims and children. The adaptation of historical novels is a particularly prominent genre. While based on memoirs and first-hand accounts, placing an historical novel on the screen allows the film-maker greater licence to interpret the events and weave together historical and fictional characters in the creation of compelling narratives which are nevertheless in some sense rooted in an historical source. One of the most successful recent examples of this approach is Roman Polanski's The Pianist (2002) based on the memoirs of the Polish pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman and his survival in Warsaw during the Nazi occupation.

In this essay, I intend to assess theologically two very different examples of film's approach to the Shoah, the first of which is an adaptation of an historical novel. Measured in terms of box office receipts and awards, Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) is not only the most successful film to date about the Shoah, it is also one of the most successful films ever made. It is based on Thomas Keneally's historical novel *Schindler's Ark*, the story of the German business man Oskar Schindler and his rescue of over one thousand mainly Polish Jews during the Second World War. Coupled with his 'Film and Video Archive of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum' (now including 1,005 hours of archival footage relating to the Shoah), Spielberg has had an enormous impact on debates concerning the representation of the Jewish experience in the mid-twentieth century. Despite receiving criticism for

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<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.162.

rendering mass extermination 'consumable' according to the priorities of Hollywood, *Schindler's List* has been the focus of considerable critical acclaim. Its commercial success suggests that it is by far the most influential film about the Shoah ever made.

The second focus of this essay is Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful/ La vita è bella* (1997). This film has also enjoyed considerable world-wide success: Benigni won the Oscar for Best Actor and the film won two other Academy Awards. The film also won the award for the Best Jewish Experience at the Jerusalem International Film Festival and the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. Nevertheless, it has proved very controversial because of the use of Chaplinesque comedy in its approach to an horrific period in European history. Gerald Peary, writing in the Boston Phoenix in November 1998, states, 'Life Is Beautiful isn't just the film title, it's Benigni's reprehensible moral. He dares to assign a transcendent meaning to the Holocaust, which to most Jews resonates with non-meaning, a hollow waste of many millions of lives.'<sup>4</sup> Writing in the same month in Time, Richard Schickel writes, 'Sentimentality is a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgment and moral acuity, and it needs to be resisted. *Life Is Beautiful* is a good place to start.'<sup>5</sup>

I am returning to these familiar, much-discussed and commercially successful films in order to assess them in relation to a particular theological perspective on the nature of theological language and the ontological status of evil. They offer fundamentally different approaches to the questions of representation which continually surround Holocaust film. I will argue that the delicate use of allegory and comedy in *Life is Beautiful* at once resists establishing the Shoah as unrepresentable and therefore definitive of history's meaninglessness while also maintaining the devastating incoherence, and therefore 'unspeakable', nature of genocide. Contrary to Peary's assessment, it is precisely Benigni's refusal to assign any transcendent meaning to the Shoah which renders *Life is Beautiful* an insightful approach to the subject. By contrast, the cinematic spectacle of *Schindler's List*, while doubtless heightening public awareness of the terrors of the Shoah and helping to assuage what Gillian Rose calls 'knowledge-resistance to the Holocaust', nevertheless renders the experience of Jews and Germans in mid-twentieth century Europe too accessible on a pietistic and literal plain, and therefore 'comprehensible'. I begin, however, with the theological background against which I will read these films.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://geraldpeary.com/reviews/jkl/life-is-beautiful.html>, accessed 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,989504,00.html>, accessed 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2011.

### Privative Evil

Both the ancient Jewish and Christian traditions, influenced by the legacy of Platonic philosophy, insisted on the supreme reality, and therefore intelligibility, of the Good. According to Plato's famous allegory of the sun in the *Republic*, just as the light of the sun makes all things visible and therefore knowable, so too the 'light' of the Good preserves all things and renders them intelligible.<sup>6</sup> By an intensifying participation in the Good, visible created things are more fully themselves. I know the desk at which I am sat is a desk and not a chair or a pile of firewood precisely because it is a *good* desk. When we speak of someone as a true friend, we mean also that this person is a good friend. So the good and the true are intimately intertwined in Plato's metaphysics. Knowledge of things (epistemology) cannot be separated from what things *are* (ontology). The Good is that which, in itself, is most supremely intelligible. All other things are intelligible insofar as they participate in the Good. This is to say that, the more fully something is fulfilled or actualised, the more intelligible it becomes.

The Jewish and Christian doctrine of creation diverged from the ancient Greek philosophical tradition in insisting that God creates *ex nihilo*. Nevertheless, the Platonic character of theological approaches to creation was maintained in other crucial respects. For example, just as for Plato the Good is the only source of intelligible light and being, so for later theologians there is only one source of being, namely the divine. Created being is a participation in being-itself and has no self-standing ontological status outside of this participative relationship. The insistence on God as the *ex nihilo* source of all things who at once enfolds the transcendentals of the Good, the True and the Beautiful has consequences for the theological understanding of evil. For the Neoplatonists, Jewish thinkers such as Philo of Alexandria, and the theologians of the early Church, evil is a privation of the good. Contrary to Gnostic and Manichean cosmologies, the tradition of evil as *privatio boni* maintains that evil has no 'foothold in being': it is a privation which is wholly parasitic on the Good.<sup>7</sup> Some contemporary criticisms of the *privatio boni* tradition point out the viewing evil merely as a privation cannot do justice to its horror and force, not least in the experience of the Shoah. However, it should be remembered that the tradition of viewing evil as a privation of the Good is not an empirical thesis about how we experience evil, but a

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 507b-508d.

<sup>7</sup> For a contemporary analysis and defence of the *privatio boni* tradition against the Kantian radical evil school represented by, for example, Jean-François Lyotard, see John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), ch.1.

metaphysical thesis about evil's ontological status in relation to a transcendent reality. It is an aspect of the doctrine of creation.

For Jewish and Christian theologians, the transcendence of God, the source of all being and life, presents a particular problem concerning representation and language. Of course, the second of the ten commandments, given in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, forms the basis of the care which must be taken in referring to God because the spectre of idolatry is always apparent. Nevertheless, our speech about God is always regarded as the address of a creature to the transcendent source of all things who exists in unapproachable light. How can words refer adequately to God? The response of Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) was that words cannot refer to God, and that we are therefore only capable of saying what God is not. To say that 'God is good' is not to have any handle on God's goodness; it is merely to say, falteringly, that God is not evil. This became known as the *via negativa*, or 'negative way'. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274), writing in response to Maimonides, insisted that, although we name God from creatures, we do so neither univocally nor equivocally, but analogically. He resisted Maimonides's purely negative approach to theological language and argued that, when we make statements such as 'God is good', we do not merely state that 'God is not evil'. Rather, we name God as good in himself without thereby claiming that we have a grasp on what it is for God to be good. Why? Because what it is for God to be good is not what it is for a human being to be good (just as what it is for a dog to be faithful is not what it is for a husband to be faithful), although a human being is good by virtue of his or her participation in divine goodness. To comprehend divine goodness we would need to know what kind of thing God is, and both Aquinas and Maimonides would insist that we do not know God in himself; we only know God through his creation and, for Aquinas, we name him by analogy.<sup>8</sup>

Against this background, Aquinas, along with much of the Christian and Jewish Neoplatonic tradition, maintained that God is most supremely intelligible *in himself* because God is fully actual.<sup>9</sup> There is, as it were, no ambiguity in God. As being-itself, God is the source of all created being. However, *to us* God is wholly other and transcendent. Our intellects are suited to the knowledge of creatures. We know God by means of his creation and revelation in accordance with the capacities of the human intellect and the constantly

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<sup>8</sup> For a much fuller explanation of the analogical naming of God in Aquinas, see my introduction to Simon Oliver and John Milbank (eds), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009). See also Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: the Divine Science of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), ch.4.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.12.7.

arriving gifts of divine grace. On Aquinas's view, contrary to much modern philosophy, the human intellect is not the measure of intelligibility. The fact that we can grasp aspects of the created world but not God does not, for Aquinas, mean that the created world is more intelligible *in itself*. It may be more intelligible for us; in itself, however, the created world, in being contingent and subject to change, has its measure of intelligibility by virtue of its participation in the eternal and unchanging Good which is God.

For a particular tradition, both Jewish and Christian, which finds its deep roots in Platonic metaphysics, the linguistic and artistic representation of the divine always faces the spectre of idolatry. Nevertheless, those representations are understood as consummated and yet fully exceeded in the worship of a wholly transcendent divinity.<sup>10</sup> Liturgical mediations of the divine are made possible by *theosis*. However, in the context of this same tradition's view that evil is a privation of that supremely intelligible Good, does not the problem of linguistic representation and intelligibility of evil present itself for precisely the opposite reason? If the Good is, in itself, supremely intelligible, and all creaturely references to the transcendent participate by *theosis* in that surfeit of intelligibility and meaning, what are we to say about representations of evil which is *precisely* a privation of that intelligibility and meaning? Does evil become unrepresentable? Can any intelligible discourse be maintained?

One answer to this question is, no, evil is unintelligible and not representable. However, this is not quite the response of the tradition which maintains that evil is *privatio boni*. It is crucial to remember that evil's absence of meaning is only revealed with reference to the always prior intelligibility of the Good. It is not evil which reveals its own unintelligibility, for this would grant to evil the autonomy of self-determination. Rather, it is the Good which reveals evil's unintelligibility. At all times, evil is parasitic on the Good. We do not know evil as unintelligible simply in itself. We only know evil as an unintelligible absence of meaning with reference to the infinite abundance of intelligibility and meaning that we find in the Good. Moreover, the tradition of *privatio boni* continually insists that an *absolute* evil is not possible, for it would dissolve into nothingness.<sup>11</sup> So even an evil as 'radical' as the Shoah is in some sense parasitic on a prior good, although in itself it remains blind to its privative nature. For example, Hannah Arendt's report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 and 1962 comments that even the Nazi commanders were parasitic on a notion of the

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<sup>10</sup> See Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.48.4.

good in the sense that, in however deranged, depraved and murderous a fashion, they thought they were doing the right thing.<sup>12</sup>

While maintaining that evil is not utterly unintelligible and unrepresentable – in other words, that it can still, in some sense, be spoken – the tradition of *privatio boni* suggests that evil is only interpretable in relation to a primeval Good, as the lack of that Good. In this sense, we cannot account for evil with reference to a purpose for it is that which, by its very nature, lacks purpose. As Aquinas would put it, evil has no formal or final cause.<sup>13</sup> While we might be able to outline the intellectual and historical background to the Shoah (long-simmering European anti-Semitism, the legacy of nineteenth and early twentieth century German philosophy, the humiliation of Germany after the First World War, and so on), we cannot, as the enterprise of theodicy so often attempts to do, provide a *justification* for the Shoah. An example of this kind of justification can be found in the theodicy of the British philosopher Richard Swinburne for whom certain ‘higher-order goods’ such as extreme bravery or generosity (of the kind shown by Oskar Schindler) depend on certain kinds of suffering for their execution and manifestation.<sup>14</sup> However, Swinburne’s theodicy is the precise inverse of the *privatio boni* tradition for it renders the practice of good acts parasitic upon the prior occurrence of certain kinds of evil and suffering. Instead, for the tradition which understands evil as a privation, such evil can have no intelligible justification; if we were able to give a *reason* (in the sense of purpose) for the murder of millions of Jews, or cancer in a single child, we would live in a Satanic world. This is not to say that such suffering is irredeemable or utterly unspeakable. It is to say that suffering calls not for a justification which attempts to render suffering intelligible, but for a response borne of the absolute priority of the Good.

We have seen that God, as the transcendent source of created being, is spoken of analogically using words which, from our point of view, also name creatures. It is perfection terms – good, true, wise – which, for Aquinas, are predicated primarily of God and secondarily of creatures. So in a sense our speech about God will also be speech about other things in their created relation to God. That speech ‘borrows’ its intelligibility from the

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.49.1.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), ch.11. The most effective articulation of the view that evil is a privation of the good with reference to a recent horrific disaster can be found in David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005).

divine, for God is the ultimate focus of reference.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as we speak of the good of creation, we speak intelligibly of its orientation to the Good. Speech about evil will be compromised by the dissolution of meaning and intelligibility. Nevertheless, for the *privatio boni* tradition that unintelligibility will not be revealed unless such speech is placed by the priority of the Good and its surfeit of meaning. If evil is understood as authenticating its own unintelligibility and non-representability, it is rendered in some sense absolute and ineffable, becoming in Manichean fashion the mirror image of the Good. It is only the transcendent Good, which Jewish and Christian thought name as 'God', that is ineffable. Evil is the dissolution of meaning, that dissolution being named by the Good.

It is against this background of the ontological and hermeneutical priority of the Good that I wish to read the approach to the evil of the Shoah in *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful*.

### *Reading Schindler's List and Life is Beautiful*

In approaching the subject of the Shoah, Spielberg is responding to the widespread concern that awareness and knowledge of Nazi atrocities perpetrated against Jews and other groups in the mid-twentieth century is waning, particularly in his native north America. Nevertheless, he resisted making an 'American' film. The actors are European and the locations authentic. The attention to historical detail and fidelity to the visual archives (for example in Ralph Fiennes's depiction of the camp commander Amon Goeth) has been apparent to many commentators and critics. Of course, one important strategy for rendering *Schindler's List* an authentic mediation of events in the 1940s is the decision to film almost exclusively in black and white. Coupled with the extensive use of hand-held cameras, this enables the film to allude simultaneously to a number of different filmic genres: war-time newsreel, 1930s and 40s cinema, *cinéma vérité* and contemporary documentary. The use of light, smoke and close-up portrait shots is particularly reminiscent of mid-twentieth century cinema, particularly *film noir*. More specifically, the frequent use of chiaroscuro lighting (a common technique before colour could mediate relationships and meaning) heightens the ambiguity in Schindler's character, and the symbiotic relationship between Schindler (Liam Neeson) and Goeth. These factors, which feature heavy layers of

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<sup>15</sup> Aquinas adopts Aristotle's *pros hen* (towards a single focus) view of analogy as attribution rather than proportion. We call a diet and a medical treatment 'healthy' by virtue of their common focus in the health of the human body. The body is healthy in itself; health is attributed to the diet and the medicine by virtue of their relationship to the body. Likewise, God is good in himself. A human being has goodness attributed to him or her by virtue of a relationship with the divine source of goodness.



cinematic nostalgia, combine to create the impression of reality and authenticity: we are really 'seeing' the Shoah's principal characters, from the victims to the heroes and the psychotic perpetrators.

Given the aim of presenting the Shoah to a wide audience, it is not surprising that Spielberg has been thought to adopt what is often called a classical narrative approach.<sup>16</sup> This approach to cinema, which dominated Hollywood at least until the 1960s, relies on well delineated character plots in which motivations are clear and the narrative develops in a linear fashion. Audiences are encouraged to associate particularly with a single, central character (the 'star' of the movie) whose goals define the seamless development of a unique narrative. In the case of *Schindler's List*, the goals of the central character, Oskar Schindler, are initially those of profit-making from his enamelware factory and only later become the rescue of Jews who are to be deported to concentration camps. The need to provide a reason why Schindler would risk his profit and life to act heroically in this way is a particular challenge for the film; to maintain the classical narrative style, the viewer must understand the central character's key psychological motivations which govern the plot. The key point concerning the classical approach to cinema is that the viewer is enabled to 'lose herself' in the visual experience. The film becomes almost transparent as the work of interpretation is undertaken effortlessly by a complex set of filming techniques in which ambiguities are made plain and then resolved quickly and neatly. For example, the character of Schindler is, initially, mysterious. During the opening sequences of the film, as he dresses to attend a party, we see only his hands. The lighting of Schindler's face again stresses both light and dark. As the story unfolds and Schindler develops from profiteer to saviour, these ambiguities are neatly resolved to reveal the hero. The worrying aspect of this narrative is that, faced with a choice between the hero Schindler and the psychotic Goeth, audiences departed from cinemas reassured that, if they had been present in Poland or Germany in the 1940s, they, of course, would have acted as Schindler.

As Miriam Bratu Hansen observes, this classical approach eradicates the complexities of the real world because 'it relies on neoclassicist principles of compositional unity, motivation, linearity, equilibrium, and closure – principles singularly inadequate in the face of an event

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<sup>16</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Schindler's List is Not Shoah: Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory' in Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp.81ff.

that by its very nature defies our narrative urge to make sense of, to impose order on the discontinuity and otherness of historical experience.’<sup>17</sup> While Goeth’s motivations are interpreted in terms of murderous psychosis and depictions of the brutal murder of Jews scattered through the film add to a sense of the sheer senseless nihilism of these events, nevertheless this narrative as a whole is rendered intelligible and therefore comprehensible through the classical genre. Causal motivations – even those of Goeth and other soldiers – are rendered clear because, we are told, they see Jews as animals, not humans. The narrative of the Shoah is represented within a genre which governs much of classical film-making in the mid-twentieth century and allows audiences to believe that they have ‘seen’ or ‘experienced’ the Holocaust in all its authenticity.

A number of commentators have argued that, in other respects, *Schindler’s List* subsumes within itself other depictions of the Shoah and thereby develops its credentials as the definitive and intelligible representation. Allusions to previous Holocaust films, notable *Night and Fog* and *Shoah*, abound. For example, the huge piles of suitcases, glasses, shoes and other possessions once belonging to deported Jews was famously depicted in *Night and Fog* and is repeated in *Schindler’s List*. Nevertheless, as Joshua Hirsch points out, the role that such images play in Spielberg’s film is quite different.<sup>18</sup> For Renais in *Night and Fog*, the piles of possessions indicate the unimaginable and unrepresentable extent of the loss which constituted the Shoah. Such evil is unintelligible in its depth, extent and deprivation. Similarly, the throat-cutting gesture made by a bystander as a train-load of Jews makes its way to Auschwitz is used by Lanzmann in *Shoah* to depict the moral complicity of the bystander. Spielberg uses both in *Schindler’s List*, but not to indicate the unintelligible and the privative; rather, these are events of history which are, as Hirsch states, quite representable.

While *Schindler’s List* is unambiguously a ‘Holocaust film’ with a single, linear narrative, the same cannot be said for *Life is Beautiful*. Beginning in Italy in 1939, the film begins by stating very clearly that it is a fable. Crucially, we are told that the story is difficult to tell. There is no pretence to speak literally or historically, and one might say that the film is only tangentially about the Shoah. The Shoah is placed, rather than places, other more fundamental narratives. The film is saturated in comedy, allegory, layered narratives and

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<sup>17</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, op.cit., p.81.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Hirsch, *After Image: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), p.147.

magic. Divided into two parts, the first half of *Life is Beautiful* focuses on the growing and magical romance between Guido Orefice (Robert Benigni) and Dora (Nicoletta Braschi). As their romance unfolds, so the spectre of fascist anti-Semitism gradually emerges as an aspect of the film. However, at no point is that anti-Semitism allowed to stand alone as if it might interpret itself; it is interpreted as ludicrous by the admittedly daring use of comedy. For example, when a government inspector comes to visit Dora's school, Guido takes his place and, via slapstick and farce, provides a devastating critique of Italy's anti-Semitic laws of the late 1930s in a fashion that renders those policies quite literally laughable.<sup>19</sup>

The magical narratives which Guido weaves into everyday events as he seeks the love of Dora point to the multiple meanings of life beyond its purely material significance; there is always more to be seen.<sup>20</sup> These hidden meanings are explored with particular poignancy in Guido's relationship with Lessing, a German doctor staying at the hotel where Guido works as a waiter. Other than Guido, Dora and their son Giosuè, Lessing is the only character to appear in both halves of the film.<sup>21</sup> Strangely, he is fixated on riddles which he cannot solve. In one scene in the first half of the film, Guido solves a riddle which had been perplexing Lessing for eight days: 'The bigger is it, the less you see it.' The answer: obscurity. In the second half of the film, when Guido and Giosuè are together in the labour camp (while Dora, a Gentile who has voluntarily followed her husband and son, is in the women's section), Guido once again encounters his friend Lessing who is now working as a doctor in the camp. While Guido is waiting on the tables of the Germans in the camp mess, Lessing states that he must talk with Guido urgently. Needless to say, Guido is full of expectation; he believes that his friend, the doctor, will aid his family's escape. The expectation is allowed to mount through a number of vaguely comic but tense scenes. Finally, the meeting takes place in a corner of the dining room. Lessing has a ludicrous riddle he cannot solve: 'Fat, fat, ugly, ugly, all yellow in reality. If you ask me what I am I answer "Cheep, cheep, cheep." Walking along I go, "Poopoo."' Throughout the scene, Guido is silent. As Benigni portrays Guido's reaction, his comic persona appears wholly crushed. His face conveys utter incomprehension

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that this scene, one of the funniest in the film, critiques an Italian government policy rather than brutal murder. At no point in the film is murder and genocide – to which only allusion is made – the subject of specifically comic derision.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent and more detailed reading of these narratives, see Maurizio Viano, 'Life is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter,' *Jewish Social Studies* 5.3 (1999): 47-66. A detailed analysis of *Life is Beautiful* is also available in Carlo Celli, *The Divine Comic: The Cinema of Roberto Benigni* (London: Scarcrow Press, 2001), ch.11.

<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the significance of the names of certain characters in *Life is Beautiful*, but the importance of references to the German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) should be noted.

and the total unintelligibility of his circumstances. Guido departs the shot leaving Lessing banging his fist on the sideboard in deranged frustration. This exchange, one of the very few which mirrors the first half of the film, becomes a metaphor for the unintelligible and nihilistic nature of the Shoah. Unlike the representation of *Schindler's List* and its voyeuristic approach to brutal murder, this reference is wholly tangential and 'unreal', yet it nevertheless does not leave Nazi psychosis uninterpreted; Guido, the master of narrative and the discloser of secret meanings, is crushed. Still, he returns to his son who, despite the hidden murder of his father later in the film, will eventually emerge alive from the labour camp to tell a more primitive story.

A key aspect of the second part of *Life is Beautiful*, in which Guido is interred in a labour camp with Giosuè, is 'the game'. In one of the most comic scenes in the film, Guido pretends to translate the yelled instructions of the German guard concerning life in the camp from German into Italian. Guido, to the astonishment of his fellow inmates and Giosuè, tells of a game in which prisoners compete to win a tank. By means of this game, Guido attempts to lift the spirits of his son and preserve his innocence. While commentators have observed that Giosuè is more aware of his circumstances than Guido allows, there remain competing narratives at work in this part of the film. Which will win? As sober and realistic observers, we know that Guido's account of 'the game' is pure fantasy and that tragedy is near. Indeed, for Guido, this is what comes to pass; he is shot dead, unseen, as Giosuè hides from the fleeing German soldiers. Yet as Giosuè emerges from his hiding place into a new day amidst the abandoned camp, an American tank with liberating soldiers enters through the gates. Giosuè climbs aboard and enjoys his 'victor's ride'. We are left with the question, which narrative was more fundamental for Giosuè? It is this final scene of apparently joyful and wholly sentimental survival with former prisoners running into sunlit countryside which has incurred the scorn of many critics of *Life is Beautiful*. Yet it is in no sense *realistic*. This is a commentarial metaphor. The competing narratives of the film unfold in a fashion totally unlike the single linear narrative of *Schindler's List*. For *Life is Beautiful*, despite the devastating incoherence and unintelligibility of the camp (again, a *metaphor* for the Shoah) a narrator in the form of Giosuè lives to tell a more fundamental story which nevertheless *places* the Shoah and marks its privative unintelligibility. Can the Shoah be represented? Yes, but only as the privation of a more ontologically fundamental Good. In this sense, it is not 'ineffable'. As the film closes, we finally learn that the narrator at the beginning of the film, who announced the fable as 'a simple story, but not an easy one to tell', is Giosuè with whom the film closes.

The allegorical significance of *Life is Beautiful* was ignored by many critics who derided its historical inaccuracies and revisionist tendencies. This is to misunderstand Benigni's purpose which is to convey both the Shoah's privative unintelligibility and its place within a more fundamental narrative that refers to a transcendent Good. He does this by means of metaphor and allegory. Can we nevertheless regard the fantastic stories of *Life is Beautiful*, such as 'the game' in the labour camp, as childish and sentimental escape from the brutal reality of the Shoah which simply repeats the violence of the camps? Not if a proper understanding of allegory is maintained. Allegory does not displace other readings of texts; it supplements them and points to unforeseen realities and symbolism. The allegories of *Life in Beautiful* do not displace the material reality of everyday life, whether of mundane events or the horrors of a concentration camp. Rather, they point to other possibilities, wider frames of reference and more primitive meanings. This is not to suggest that the Shoah has a hidden meaning; quite the contrary, for Benigni is careful to highlight the unintelligibility of the camp – if you like, its 'untranslatable' nature. Rather, it places the Shoah within the wider context of *other* and wider narratives which are more primitive, and thus resists the tendency to make *absolute* and *ineffable* the tragic, horrific and unimaginable story of mid-twentieth century European Jewry.

I began this essay with reference to the tangential nature of language about divinity. To speak of God is to speak analogically with reference to creatures. In being created, those creatures are symbols of the creator. It is as created that they gain their meaning. For the tradition which understands evil to be the privation of the Good which is God, evil dissolves meaning and intelligibility. Yet that dissolution is only made apparent by reference to the more fundamental and 'real' story of transcendent goodness. Because of *Schindler's List's* self-enclosed and all-encompassing realism, it does little to reveal the incoherence and nihilism of the Shoah beyond the literal portrayal of brutal murder which it renders visible in unproblematic fashion. The problem with such depictions of brutality is that, in their simple literality, audiences become over-familiar with such scenes. At some point, it becomes apparent that one must leave the theatre; one is watching a film. For *Life is Beautiful*, the narrative extends beyond the movie theatre's doors. If spirituality is the faithful search for as yet undisclosed or unrealised meanings, *Life is Beautiful* is of greater theological import than its realist counterpart *Schindler's List*.