

# Life is Beautiful

## *La Vita e Bella*

(1997, Benigni, Italy)

**Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives**  
**Component 2: European Film (AS)**

**Core Study Areas**  
**Key Elements of Film Form**  
**Meaning & Response**  
**The Contexts of Film**

### Rationale for study

*Life is Beautiful* is a romantic tragi-comedy that won three Oscars on its release and went from being a low-budget independent Italian film to become a worldwide success. The film has an interesting structure in that the first half is a slapstick Romantic Comedy but this changes significantly in the second half to become a tragic tale about the Holocaust. It is a funny, moving and inspirational film but there was controversy upon its release because of its use of the Holocaust as a setting for comedy and sentimentalism.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

**00:00-0:04:27**

The opening sequence.

**0:47:41-0:50:55**

The introduction of Joshua.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

A long shot introduces us to Guido and Joshua

initially, we see them from a distance as Joshua's voiceover introduces his tragic story about love. This is contrasted in the next few scenes as we see Guido in medium shots which give us more character information but also allow us to see his comic performance.

The use of close ups in the opening sequence allow us to see Guido's comic reactions and his expressive character but also attempt to develop an emotional allegiance between the spectator and Guido which is important to the affect of the film later.

The camera is used to encourage closer spectator allegiance and produce a magical effect in the conservatory scene as Joshua is revealed. A tracking mid-shot is used to take us into the conservatory as we follow Guido in a slow, romantic manner, we are then left at the doorway in suspense before Joshua is unexpectedly revealed and we track out with him. The sense of magical romance and the uplifting revealing of their child reinforces the theme of love but also introduces a note of foreboding as we know that this has happened in the context of Fascism.

#### Mise-en-Scène

The film begins in a foggy, dark setting as we see a man in ragged clothes carrying a child. This foreshadows the bleak and tragic diegesis of the Labour camp that we see later and is in stark contrast to the next scene which is set in the beautiful and luscious Italian countryside. The body language we see exhibited by Guido in this scene is more expressive and comic. The Mise-en-scène of these first few scenes reflects the contrasts between Italy before the war and Italy during the war.

Guido and Dora's clothes when they meet reflect their differences in social class and rural/urban backgrounds. Guido is wearing cheap and rather

ill-fitting clothing, a joke that is developed later is that he is constantly trying to get hold of a better hat. Dora is dressed, inappropriately for someone trying to get rid of a wasp's nest, in an expensive-looking floral dress, large hat and heels. Comic juxtaposition is used with Dora as she also has Beekeeper's large white gloves and a mesh veil on.

The beautifully dressed Conservatory is the perfect setting for the romantic fulfilment of Guido and Dora's courtship. We have moved from a gaudy and bright party setting in which the corruption and elitism of Fascist Italy is mocked and we now see the simple beauty of love and nature, signified by the flowers and plants decorating the conservatory. The lighting helps transform the shot from romantic low-key lighting to the high-key optimism of the completed family unit.

### Editing

The use of a continuous shot, held in a long take introduces a very slow pace at the beginning of the film. It forces us to reflect upon the opening narration which helps it become more meaningful later in the film as we see the same shot again.

As we see Guido driving to eventually meet Dora in the opening sequence a series of more rapid edits give the film a pace and urgency to reflect the quick-fire visual gags and an appropriately slapstick rhythm.

When Joshua is introduced we see his arrival in one continuous shot. As Guido and Dora disappear into the conservatory the shot is held and eventually the whole family emerge. The temporal ellipsis appears to occur magically because of the use of a single shot which adds to the magically-romantic mood of the film.

### Sound

The opening scene introduces the film as a reflective fable. The tone of voice and the content of the narration tells us that the film is about love and tragedy, introducing grand themes that will counterpoint the slapstick aesthetic we will see in the next few scenes.

In the opening sequence we hear the film's theme tune twice. Initially we hear the theme quietly as we see comic driving and body language but when Guido meets Dora the theme is played again at a much higher volume in the soundtrack. The use of the music as a motif is established and signifies Guido's love, we also hear the second important motif in the film, 'Buongiorno

Principessa' for the first time. These motifs become crucial to the film's emotional effects later.

A simple strings and piano arrangement of the theme is used to introduce the romantic elopement of Guido and Dora. As they escape the party and arrive back at his uncle's house the theme begins quietly in the soundtrack's mix to grow in tempo and volume until it dominates the soundtrack. When Joshua is revealed the theme continues and more instrumentation is added to complement the increased tempo and build a Romantic crescendo moment that then fades as Fascist troops are introduced.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

The film's representation of the Holocaust caused a mixed reception upon its release. To some, its sentimental and apolitical approach to its setting, diminishes the suffering of the Holocaust's victims and was offensive. To others, the film is a daring and original approach to the subject that brings a fresh emotional response.

The representation of Guido as a man and a father is interesting to explore, particularly as he transforms from a romantic clown to a tragic hero who sacrifice's himself for love and his child.

The representation of women in the film is problematic. Dora, the mother, is simplistically objectified into a two-dimensional figure of romantic desire and suffering motherhood. There are interesting parallels with the Princess and Madonna archetypes that can be explored in this film as well as her lack of agency and power.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)

The use of sound motifs gives the film a memorable aesthetic style. The repetition of the phrase 'Buongiorno Principessa!' is used in the first half of the film to trigger romantic and comic meanings, it is the catchphrase that Guido uses to woo Dora. This is accompanied by Pavani's theme music which has a powerfully romantic tone to it. In the second half of the film Guido's catchphrase and the theme music take on different meanings and affects, as the narrative becomes tragic.

The influence of Keaton and Slapstick Comic

traditions are clearly evident in the performances and visual style of the first half of the film. We see archetypal characters from the history of slapstick in the shape of Guido (the Romantic Clown), Dora (the Princess) and her fiancé (the arrogant Buffoon). Figure expression and movement in clearly expressionistic and can be directly compared with the 'prat falls', 'silly walks' and exaggerated reactions of characters played by Chaplin, Laurel and, particularly, Keaton.

The aesthetic style undergoes a dramatic transformation in the second half of the film as the *Mise-en-Scène* and incidental music brings a grimmer and less expressive visual style into play. We still see hints of the slapstick routines in the use of performance motifs, particularly in Guido's winks to Joshua and his silly walks, that become poignant and take on a different meaning in the changed narrative setting.

### **CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts (Two from Social, Historical, Political, Technological, Institutional)**

#### **Social**

We see in *Life is Beautiful* familiar representations of the political corruption and class inequalities that have bedevilled Italy at various points in its history. The backdrop of Fascist Italy that forms the film's setting shows huge disparities in social class and the corruption of political elites, particularly in the first half of the film. The differences between rural Italy and the urban Italy are also seen in the film, Guido's family and Dora's family reflect the differences in regional and class identity.

#### **Historical**

The film was inspired by the story of Auschwitz survivor Rubino Salmoni and by the experiences of Benigni's own father who was imprisoned in a Labour Camp and told humorous stories about his experiences in order to not scare his children. Benigni has said that his aim wasn't to create historical realism but a 'poetic and beautiful truth (about humanity)'.

#### **Political**

The political contexts of the Holocaust and Italian fascism are important influences upon this film and the source of controversies in the film's reception. Benigni deliberately included historical inaccuracies into the film in order to avoid direct comparisons with the Holocaust and Italy's connections with it.

#### **Technological**

Whilst the cinematography and editing have been criticized for a lack of technical creativity and craftsmanship the score and production design have been celebrated. Pivani, who also scored several Fellini films, was rightly celebrated for the memorable music incorporated into the soundtrack.

#### **Institutional**

The film was released by Cecchi Gori Distribuzione and was screened in Cannes in 1998, winning the Grand Prix. In the U.S. it was released by Miramax and won three Oscars for Best Actor, Best Foreign Language Film and Best Original Score. It grossed \$229million worldwide.