

## **La Vita è Bella (1997): Suffering Produces Perseverance; Perseverance, Character; and Character, Hope.**

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Opinion of film: Recommended

After six months working to develop the technicalities of this site, two months ago I sat down to do what I thought God had asked me to create this site for in the first place; to write and publish essays on the movies. However, it is only now, two months later, that I come to sit down to write *this* essay that I realise I'm really doing what God asked me to do. Which above all is not to write essays on just any movies, but primarily to write essays on those movies that He has given to us; those movies that we can say with confidence were inspired by the Holy Spirit. "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things" (Phil 4:8). And if ever there was a film that fell into this category it is Roberto Benigni's *La Vita è Bella (Life is Beautiful)*. However, to appraise *La Vita è Bella* with due justice would not be possible without referring to the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Victor E Frankl's classic book *Man's Search for Meaning*. For if ever there was a book that encapsulated in detail the day to day life experiences of Jewish prisoners in the Second World War, Frankl's book is the one. For this reason I will reference Benigni's film back to Frankl's accounts frequently.

The most conspicuous aspect of the film to want to address first, the aspect that caused some controversy upon the film's release, is the use of humour to depict the experiences of those imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. At first in writing that last sentence, I wrote 'to depict the horrors of those imprisoned...' yet I soon saw that that was wrong. For the thing that makes this film work, and ensures that for most people it does not cross a dark boundary into causing offence, is that the humour in the film is not used to depict the horrors of the camp. Instead the humour, in the second half of the film at least, focuses upon day to day camp life for those that managed to avoid the vicinity of the gas chambers. In *Man's Search for Meaning* there are a surprising number of references to the existence of humour in the camps that Frankl was imprisoned in. In fact such is Frankl's belief in the importance of having a sense of humour that he makes a point of stating that "humour was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation". And in echoes of the scene where Guido 'translates' the German officer's commands, Frankl recalls how he once joked with one of his fellow prisoners that he would be unable to lose the habits of camp life when he returned to his former work as a hospital surgeon. On the camp building site the foreman encouraged the prisoners to work faster by shouting: "Action! Action!" and Frankl told his friend, "One day you will be back in the operating room, performing a big abdominal operation and suddenly an orderly will rush in announcing the arrival of the senior surgeon by shouting, 'Action! Action!'". Benigni and Frankl will both have understood Jesus's words when he told us in the beatitudes "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21).

*La Vita è Bella's* ability to switch seamlessly between moments of humour and moments of deep human tragedy represents screenwriting at its best. None more so is the reality of the horror of the concentration camp brought home to the audience than when Guido is carrying Giosué asleep on his shoulder. Guido wonders if they have taken a wrong turn in the fog and questions "maybe it's only a dream... we're dreaming. Tomorrow Giosué, tomorrow mommy come and wake us up...". And then reality confronts him; reality in the form of a mountain of bones and corpses. Guido turns and walks back in deafening silence. The scene is yet another reminder of a true story in Frankl's accounts of his life in the

concentration camps. Frankl recalls how one night a fellow prisoner was tossing and turning in bed, clearly in the depths of a distressing nightmare. Frankl's first reaction was to reach out his hand to wake his fellow prisoner and reassure him. But then he felt his hand pull back as he realised that whatever nightmare his friend was having, it couldn't possibly be any worse than the reality of the concentration camp they were enslaved in.

Yet just as the concentration camps provide testament to the potential depths that humans can sink to, they also provide evidence that not all guards sank to these depths. In *La Vita è Bella* Guido's friend Doctor Lessing, shows some degree of sympathy to Guido by getting him a job as a waiter. Later on we see that the conflict the Doctor is torn between is driving him to the point of madness. It's a well-judged and acted scene, with Guido's emotions tipping marginally to the side of a lack of sympathy - reflecting the acknowledgement that his friend the doctor still does have a choice of whether to stay in the situation he is in or not; even if the latter may mean death. Frankl also states that he knew that the commander of the camp from which he was liberated, had paid no small sum of money from his own pocket in order to purchase medicines for his prisoners from the near-by market town. Frankl goes on to say "that the mere knowledge that a man was either a camp guard or a prisoner tells us almost nothing. Human kindness can be found in all groups, even those which as a whole it would be easy to condemn. The boundaries between groups overlapped and we must not try to simplify matters by saying that these men were angels and those were devils".

Above all, *La Vita è Bella* pays reverence to the fact that there is meaning in suffering and that even in the most extreme and restrictive of conditions man still does have some degree of choice; primarily that of his attitude and the hope he retains. In his letter to the Romans Saint Paul tells us that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (Roms 5:3-4). And hope is central to the message of both Frankl's real-life experiences, and Vincenzo Cerami's and Roberto Benigni's screenplay. Frankl recalls how once in the camp, when tempers had reached their lowest and many of his comrades had died in the past few days, the senior warden in his camp, a wise man, gave a talk in which he spoke of these deaths. This warden spoke of how many of the deaths came through sickness or suicide, but he also mentioned what might have been the real cause of their deaths: giving up hope. Frankl speaks at length throughout his accounts of two primary reasons to retain hope: that of his wife, and that of his future works that he has been entrusted with; works that only he could complete. This latter basis for his hope is what he builds his therapeutic methods upon – finding the meaning in one's life; the unique task that each person has been entrusted with. Guido was all too aware of the basis of his hope; the people he had been entrusted with safeguarding the future of; his wife Dora, and his son Giosué. In the knowledge of this hope he did everything possible to maintain an attitude that would take him as far as possible through his horrendous ordeal.

In the closing stages of his accounts Frankl recalls of how he told his comrades that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death. In the closing scene of *La Vita è Bella* a now mature Giosué concludes "This is my story, this is the sacrifice my father made. This was his gift to me". In both of these accounts, and in countless others beyond, this gift of suffering, even of death, became the ultimate gift there is – the gift of life itself.

Mark Banks is the Editor of Soul Food Cinema. He has ten years experience watching character study and faith films (the latter since returning to the faith two years ago). Bible quotes from the New International Version (© 1984). *Man's Search for Meaning* (Victor E Frankl) is published by Rider Books (2004), ISBN 9781844132393. Essay written: June 14<sup>th</sup> 2008.