

# Laugh Yourself to Death: the new wave of Holocaust comedies!

*Slavoj Žižek*

The success of *Benigni's Life Is Beautiful* seems to mark the beginning of a new sub-genre or at least a new trend: the Holocaust comedies. It was followed by *Jacob the Liar* with Robin Williams, the remake of the old GDR classic about the owner of a small shop in the ghetto who pretends to have a hidden radio-receiver and regularly tells his terrified fellows uplifting news about approaching German defeat that he allegedly learned from the radio. Forthcoming is the American release of the Rumanian *The Train of Hope*, the story of the residents of a small Jewish community who, when the Nazis occupy the country and plan to transport them to the extermination camp, organize a fake train with Nazi guards, board it and, of course, instead of the camp, take the ride to freedom. Significantly, all three films are centered on a lie that allows the threatened Jews to survive their ordeal.

The key to this trend is provided by the obvious failure of its opposite, the Holocaust tragedy. There is a scene which condenses all that is false in Spielberg, although many a critic praised it as the strongest scene in *Schindler's List*, containing the "Oscar winning" performance by Ralph Fiennes: the scene, of course, in which the commander of the concentration camp confronts a beautiful Jewish girl, his prisoner. We listen to his long quasi-theatrical monologue, while the terrified girl just silently stares in front of her, totally immobilized by mortal fear: while she attracts him sexually, he finds her unacceptable as his love object due to her Jewish origins. In this battle between the human erotic attraction and the racist hatred, racism wins the day and he casts off the girl.

The tension of this scene consists in the radical incommensurability between the two subjective perspectives: what is for him the light-hearted flirt with the idea of a brief sexual affair is for her the question of life and death. We see the girl as an utterly terrified human being, while the man is not even directly addressing her, but rather treating her as an object, a pretext for his loud monologue... So what is so thoroughly false here? The fact that the scene presents a (psychologically) impossible position of enunciation of its subject: it renders his split attitude towards the terrified Jewish girl as his direct psychological self-experience. The only way correctly to render this split would have been to stage the scene in a Brechtian way, with the actor playing the Nazi villain directly addressing the public: "I, the commander of the concentration camp, find this girl sexually very attractive; I can do with my prisoners whatever I want, so I can rape her with impunity. However, I am also impregnated by the racist ideology which tells me that Jews are filthy and unworthy of my attention. So I do not know how to decide..."

The falsity of *Schindler's List* is thus the same as the falsity of those who seek the clue to the horrors of Nazism in the "psychological profiles" of Hitler and other Nazi figures. Here, Hannah Arendt was right in her otherwise problematic thesis on the "banality of Evil": if we take Adolf Eichmann as a psychological entity, a person, we discover nothing monstrous about him - he was just an average bureaucrat, his "psychological profile" gives us no clue to the horrors he executed. Along the same lines, it is totally misleading to investigate the psychic traumas and oscillations of the camp commander in the way Spielberg does. The way out of the predicament seems to be to turn to comedy which, at least, accepts in advance its failure to render the horror of the Holocaust. Paradoxical as it may sound, the rise of the Holocaust comedies is thus strictly correlative to the elevation of the Holocaust into the metaphysical diabolical Evil - the ultimate traumatic point at which the objectifying historical knowledge breaks down and has to acknowledge its worthlessness in front of a single witness, and, simultaneously, the point at which witnesses themselves had to concede that words fail them, that what they can share is ultimately only their silence. Holocaust in advance disqualifies all (explanatory) answers - it cannot be explained, visualized, represented, transmitted, since it marks the black hole, the implosion of the (narrative) universe. Accordingly, any attempt to locate it in its context, to politicize it, equals the anti-Semitic negation of its uniqueness.

However, this very depoliticization of the Holocaust, its elevation into the properly sublime Evil, can also be a political act of utter cynical manipulation, a political intervention aiming at legitimizing a certain kind of hierarchical political relations. First, it is part of the postmodern strategy of depoliticization and/or victimization: is Holocaust not the supreme proof that to be human today means to be a victim, not an active political agent? Second, it disqualifies forms of the Third World violations of human rights for which Western states are (co)responsible as

minor in comparison with the Absolute Evil of the holocaust. Third, it serves to cast a shadow on every radical political project, i.e. to reinforce the Denkverbot (prohibition to think) against the radical political imagination: "Are you aware that what you propose ultimately leads to the holocaust?" In short: notwithstanding the unquestionable sincerity of some of its proponents, the "objective" ideologico-political content of the depoliticization of the holocaust, of its elevation into the abyssal absolute Evil, is the political pact of the aggressive Zionists and the Western Rightist anti-Semites at the expense of TODAY's radical political potentials.

No wonder, then, that no one, not even the most severe keepers of the flame of the Absolute Evil, was offended by *Life Is Beautiful*, the story of an Italian Jewish father who, in Auschwitz, he adopts a desperate strategy of shielding his young son from the trauma by presenting him what goes on as a staged competition in which you must stick to the rules (eat as little as possible, etc.) - those who win the most points will at the end see an American tank arriving. The miracle of the film is that the father succeeds in maintaining the appearance to the end: even when, just before the liberation of the camp by the Allies, he is led away by a German soldier to be shot, he winks at his son (hidden in a nearby closet) and starts to march a goose-step in a comically-exaggerated way, as if playing a game with the soldier..

Perhaps the key scene of the film occurs when the child gets tired of the game which involves so many deprivations of the camp life (lack of food, the necessity to hide for hours) and announces to the father that he wants to leave for home. Unperturbed, the father agrees, but then, with a feigned indifference, mentions to the son how glad their competitors will be if they leave now, when they are in the lead with so many points over the others... In short, he deftly manipulates the dimension of the other's desire, so that, when, finally, close to the doors, father says to the son "OK, let's go, I cannot wait for you all day!", the son changes his mind and asks him to stay. Of course, the tension of the situation is created by the fact that we, the spectators, are well aware that the father's offer to go home is a false choice, a pure bluff: if they were effectively to step out, the son (who is hiding in the barracks) would be immediately killed in the gas chamber. Perhaps, therein resides the fundamental function of the protective father: under the guise of offering a (false) choice, to make the subject-son freely to choose the inevitable through the competitive evocation of the other's desire.

*Life Is Beautiful* makes it clear how the so-called human dignity relies on the urgent need to maintain a minimum of protective appearance - are not all fathers doing something similar, although in less dramatic circumstances? Benigni's protective father ultimately accomplishes the work of "symbolic castration": he effectively separates the son from his mother, introduces him to the dialectical identification with the Other's (his peer's) desire, and thus accustoms him to the cruel reality of the life outside the family. The fantasmatic protective shield is the benevolent fiction allowing the son to come to terms with harsh reality - father does NOT protect the son from harsh reality of the camp, he just provides the symbolic fiction that renders this reality bearable. And is this not father's main function? Is it not that, if "becoming mature" means that we no longer need such a protective appearance, we in a sense NEVER become effectively "mature": we just displace the shield of the protective appearance onto a different level? In today's times, obsessed with "unmasking the false appearances" (from the traditional Leftist critique of the ideological hypocrisy of morality or power, to the American TV on which individuals in talk shows disclose publicly their innermost secrets and fantasies), it is touching to see such a pageant to the benevolent power of appearance.

What remains problematic in Benigni's film is the allegoric relationship between the film's narrative and the way the film addresses its spectator: is it not that, in the same way the father within the film constructs a protective fictional shield to render the traumatic reality of the concentration camp bearable, Benigni himself treats the spectators as children to be protected from the horror of the holocaust by a "crazy" sentimental and funny fiction of a father saving his son, the fiction that renders the historical reality of the holocaust somehow bearable?

As such, Benigni's film should be opposed to another recent film, Thomas Vinterberg's *Celebration* in which the father, far from protecting the children from trauma, is the very cause of the trauma. In one case, we have a father assuming an almost maternal protective role, knitting a protective web of fictions for his son, a kind of ersatz-placebo. On the other hand, we have the father at whose core we arrive through the dismantling of all protective fictions: at this point, we see him as what he is, as the brutal jouisseur, rapist of his own children... *Celebration*

tells a lot about how today, with the False Memory Syndrome (of being molested by one's parents), the spectral figure of the Freudian Urvater, sexually possessing everyone around him, is resuscitated - it tells a lot precisely on account of its artificial and fake character. A closer look at Celebration tells us that there is something wrong and faked about all this pseudo-Freudian stuff of "demystifying the bourgeois paternal authority": today, such a "demystification" sounds and is false, it more and more functions as a postmodern pastiche, even as a nostalgic depiction of the good old times in which it was still possible really to experience such "traumas". Why?

The recent impasse with Benjamin Wilkomirski's Fragments points in the same direction: what everyone assumed to be authentic blurred memories of the author who, as a 3-4 years old child, was imprisoned in Majdanek, turned out to be a literary fiction invented by the author. Apart from the standard question of literary manipulation, are we aware to what extent is this "fake" revealing of the fantasmatic investment and jouissance operative in even the most painful and extreme conditions? Usually, we generate fantasies as a kind of shield to protect us from the unbearable trauma; here, however, the very ultimate traumatic experience, that of the holocaust, is fantasized as a shield - from what?

Along the same lines, the rapist enjoying father of the False Memory Syndrome, far from being the Real beneath the respectful appearance, is rather himself a fantasy formation, a protective shield - against what? Such a father-jouisseur is the ultimate guarantee that there is somewhere full, unconstrained enjoyment. So what if the true horror is the lack of enjoyment itself? The true horror is not the rapist Urvater against which the benevolent maternal father protects us with his fantasy shield, but the benign maternal father himself - the truly suffocating and psychosis-generating experience for the child would have been to have a father like Benigni, who, with his protective care, erases all traces of the excessive surplus-enjoyment. It is as a desperate defense measure against THIS father that one fantasizes about the rapist father.

A further limitation of Benigni becomes palpable when we confront his film with with the other, earlier, types of the holocaust comedy, Chaplin's The Great Dictator from before the World War II, Lubitch's To Be Or Not To Be from 1942, and Seven Beauties - Pasqualino Settebelezze, Lina Wertmueller's attempt at the holocaust comedy in 1975. The first thing to take note is AT WHAT does one laugh here: there are obviously limits respected in all these films. Say, one could, in principle, well imagine the so-called "Muslims" (the living dead of the camps, those prisoners who lost their will to life and just slowly dragged themselves around, passively reacting to their surroundings) as the object of laughter generated by their automatic mindless movements; however, it is immediately clear that such a laughter would have been ethically totally unacceptable. Furthermore, neither of these films is a 100% comedy: at a certain point, laughter or satire is suspended and we are confronted with the "serious" message or level. So the question is: WHICH is this point? In Chaplin's The Great Dictator, it is obviously the pathetic final speech of the poor Jewish barber who finds himself occupying the place of Hynkel (Hitler); in Life Is Beautiful, it is the very last scene of the film, when we see the child after the war, happily embracing his mother on a green meadow, while his off-voice is thanking his father for his sacrifice. ed himself for the son's survived himself for the son's survival.

In all these films, at a certain point, the comedy is "sublated" and we are delivered a "serious" pathetic message. This pathetic moment of redemption is precisely what is missing in Seven Beauties: if Wertmueller were to shoot Life Is Beautiful, the film would probably end with a soldier in the American tank mistaking the child for the lone Nazi sniper and shooting him dead... Pasqualino, the hero of Seven Beauties, a caricaturized dynamic Italian obsessed with pathetic family honor (Giancarlo Giannini), comes to the conclusion that, if he is to survive the concentration camp, he must seduce the plump and ruthless woman Commandant, and we are witnessing his attempts to offer his body, with erection a prerequisite for the success of his endeavour. After the successful seduction, he is elevated into a Kapo, and, in order to save the men under his command, he must kill six of them, including his own best friend Francesco... Comedy thus passes over into the undignified horror of the cruel survival logic of the concentration camp life: laughter is exaggerated beyond "good taste," it is confronted with and slips into the scenes of burning corpses, of people committing suicide by jumping into a pool of human excrement. We are no longer dealing with the pathetic figure of a small good man maintaining his heroic dignity in horrible conditions, but with a victim-turned-oppressor who definitely loses his moral innocence.

When, in a holocaust comedy, the laughter stops, when the comic rendering of the resourceful persistence of life reaches its end, we thus get either pathetic dignity or nausea. This nausea marks the self-cancellation of the comedy: it emerges when the hero persists to the end in his survivalist stance. That is to say, both comedy and tragedy involve a kind of immortality, albeit the opposite ones. In the tragic predicament, the hero forfeits his terrestrial life for the Thing, so that his very defeat is his triumph, conferring onto him the sublime dignity, while the comedy is the triumph of the indestructible life - not of the sublime immortality of the tragic hero, but of the very vulgar, opportunistic, terrestrial life. Which is why the ultimate comic scene is that of a false death: say, the proverbial scene of the solemn funeral with all the relatives gathered, crying and praising the deceased, when, all of a sudden, the allegedly dead awakens (he did not really die, after all) and asks what the hell is going on, what's all the fuss about...

Towards the end of John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, an old man is dying and, at his deathbed, priests are already saying the last prayers for him. All of a sudden, the dignified calm of the situation is disturbed by the sound of the violent brawl: outside the house, the fistfight between the two film's heroes the whole village was waiting for is finally taking place; the dying man opens his eyes attentively pricks up his ears, forgets that he is involved in his own dying, gets up, runs out of the house in his white nightgown and joins the enthusiastic observers of the fight... This is how one should read Lacan's equation of the comic dimension with the phallic signifier: "The phallus is nothing other than a signifier, the signifier of this flight... Life goes by, triumphs all the same, whatever happens. When the comic hero trips up and falls in the soup, the little fellow still survives." (Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*)

Imagine an Antigone who, after delivering her solemn response to Creon, asks to withdraw and, once outside Creon's quarters, she squats and urinates... Is this comic aspect of survivalism not precisely what films like *Life Is Beautiful* or *Seven Beauties* rely on? No matter what the difficulty, the hero finds a way out. However, if the comic dimension stands for the triumph of life in its most evasive and opportunistically resourceful, the point to be emphasized is that the "life" which survives all predicaments in comedy is precisely NOT the simple biological life, but a fantasmatic ethereal life unencumbered by the constraints of biological reality. In short, this phallic universe of eternal survival is the universe of perversion.

Reduced to its elementary skeleton, perversion can be seen as a defense against the threat of mortality as well as the contingent imposition of sexual difference: in the perverse universe, a human being can survive any catastrophe, adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game, one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. Recall the standard scene from a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon: Jerry is run over by a heavy truck, dynamite explodes in his mouth, he is cut to slices, yet the story goes on, in the next scene he is back again with no traces of the previous catastrophe... The stuff of comedy is precisely this repetitive resourceful popping-up of life - whatever the catastrophe, no matter how dark the predicament, we can be sure in advance that the small fellow will find a way out...

However, in the concentration-camp universe at its most horrifying, it is no longer possible to sustain this gap between reality in its material inertia and the aethereal domain of infinite Life. The Muslim is so destitute that his stance can no longer be considered "tragic": he no longer retains the minimum of dignity against the background of which his miserable position would have appeared as tragic - he is simply reduced to the shell of a person, emptied of the spark of spirit. If we try to present him as tragic, the effect will be precisely comic, as when one tries to read tragic dignity into a meaningless idiotic persistence. On the other hand, although the Muslim is in a way "comic," although he acts in the way that is usually the stuff of comedy and laughter (his automatic, mindless repetitive gestures, his impassive pursuit of food), the utter misery of his condition thwarts any attempt to present him as a "comic character." Again, if we try to present him as comic, the effect will be precisely tragic, like when the sad sight of someone cruelly mocking a helpless victim (like putting the obstacles in the way of a blind person, to see if he will stumble), instead of producing laughter in the observers, generates sympathy for the victim's tragic predicament. Did not something along these lines happen with the rituals of humiliation in the camps, from the notorious inscription above the entrance to the Auschwitz gate *Arbeit macht frei!* to the music band that accompanied prisoners to work or to gas chambers? It is only through such cruel humor that the tragic sentiment can be generated in the concentration camp universe.

The Muslim is thus the zero-point at which the very opposition between tragedy and comedy, between the sublime and the ridiculous, between dignity and derision, is suspended, the point at which one pole directly passes into its opposite. If we try to present his predicament as tragic, the result is comic, a mocking parody of the tragic dignity, and if we treat him as a comic character, tragedy emerges. We enter here the domain that is somehow outside or, rather, beneath the very elementary opposition of the dignified hierarchical structure of authority and its carnivalesque reversal, of the original and its parody, its mocking repetition. Can one imagine a film rendering THIS domain?