

MAGIC, SHOWERS AND SCHOPENHAUER

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Life Is Beautiful

Roberto Benigni (1997)

A Jewish Italian man lives a beautiful optimistic life but finds himself being sent to a concentration camp with his wife and his son, he now relies on his humorous view of life to maintain his and his family's hope.

Pattern Scenes:

At the beginning of the film, Guido (the protagonist) works as a waiter at a fancy restaurant where he comes across a special client, this client is a German doctor named Lessing, he loves riddles. Both the waiter and the doctor exchange riddles throughout the film as a method of entertainment through intellectual stimulation and one thing is certain, Guido is very skilled at answering those riddles.



At the end of the movie Guido finds himself serving Nazi officials as a waiter inside of the concentration camp thanks to the same German doctor which happens to be one of the officials. The doctor approaches Guido and informs him that they must talk and it's about something important, our protagonist assumes that he might be referring to a way to leave the concentration camp but when they get to talk



he is revealed that the important matter is an other riddle that couldn't be solved. At that moment Guido loses a lot of his hopes to go back home and loses interest in solving the challenge.

At both cases we have our two characters exchanging riddles at a restaurant, Guido as the servant and the Doctor as the customer but because of the circumstances of the protagonist the meaning of the scene is shifted completely from a comedy intended to a visual metaphor for the end of Guido's hope.



An other pattern scene happens during the end of the first act. Joshua (Guido's son) is at his house and his grandmother is about to visit him and his family, Guido is preparing the house for her arrival when Joshua's mother approaches her son and asks him to take a shower. He immediately refuses to do so, she

then orders him to take a shower and he furiously steps his feet on the ground three times repeating "I don't want to, I don't want to, I don't want to!" He then hides in the cabinet with hopes that his mother won't notice him. The scene is played very playfully again, it being common nature of children to dislike taking showers.



By the middle of the second act Guido is lamenting his misery to his friend while working on the concentration camp, as he carries a weight up a steel staircase he sees Joshua running on the ground. He immediately panics by seeing his son in the open where he could be seen by Nazis and asks him what is he doing there, Joshua then says that he heard all the other children were going to the shower and that he didn't want to, Guido orders him to do so but the kid refuses stepping his feet on the ground three times and repeating his previous dialog, Guido gives

up on trying to convince his children to take a shower afraid that his attitude might cause him some trouble and tells him his mother is going to be very mad and tells him to hide.

The reason why this scene is so intense is because between those two scenes Dora (Guido's wife) is told by an other convict that all the elderly and children are called to shower but actually ends up being killed at a gas chamber, giving a completely different meaning to the second scene, we know what is going to happen in case Joshua goes to the shower and also we know that Guido doesn't.

Life is beautiful has a very strong theme based on the idea that with "will-to-life" it's possible to transform an undesirable reality into a beautiful fantasy, this is geniously demonstrated with the Schopenhauer motif.



During the set-up of the film Guido is sharing a bed with Ferruccio (Guido's friend) at his uncle's house, they are both having a conversation when suddenly Ferruccio falls a sleep, Guido, amazed with the friend's ability to sleep so easily wakes him up and asks how is it possible that he can do so, Ferruccio then explains that it's due to Arthur Schopenhauer's idea that "With will, everything is possible", Guido then gestures his hands at Ferruccio as a magician would do and says "wake-up, wake-up, wake-up" causing him to wake up. This entire scene is done very playfully with a certain disbelief on Guido's part on his friends believes.

Later on, our protagonist finds himself watching an opera at an opera house sitting distant to Dora, his love interest, which seems to be unaware of his presence, Guido then starts to repeat the magic hands motif saying



“Look at me, look at me, look at me” gesturing at her and successfully causing at her looking at him. This time the effect seems to have a grater impact on Guido showing the process of him adapting to this ideology of the power of will.



The last time this motif is used is at the end of the film, Guido is at the concentration camp looking at a metal container where his son is hiding, outside of it there are three soldiers looking from Jews and a dog which seems to be curious with the metal container and starts barfing. Guido, incapable of helping his son starts to gesture his hands to the dog repeating “go away, go away, go away” and at this time the results are so good that it seems like magic and the choice of Guido to do it at this moment shows how he is already completely sold to the optimistic idea.

This motif really becomes fascinating when you come to know Schopenhauer’s work because it beautifully ties down to the narrative of the story. Schopenhauer believed that the main force that motivated humanity is the “will to live” which is the pursuit to the two impulses all living creatures carries, reproduction and survival. Both human instincts that define very strongly the two acts of the film, his pursuit for Dora and their survival story at the concentration camp.

An other aspect of Schopenhauer’s work that is reflected in the movie is the part of intellectual stimulation. Schopenhauer wrote that humans often confuse intellectual stimulation as one of their instincts as if it were to be the characteristic that differentiated us from other animals, according to him intellectual stimulation is only a manifestation of the attempt to survive and reproduce and that this confusion can drive society to dangerous paths prioritizing human knowledge over needs. That aspect of his work is very well illustrated with Doctor Lessing’s character that had a physiological need to solve riddles and become an intellectual but was a sporter of the Nazi regime.