Illusions of Gardens, Conformity and Beauty: Performing Normality in Three Italian
Holocaust Films

.....

by

Jeremy Maron, BA (Adv), BA (Hons)

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film Studies

Carleton University

OTTAWA, Ontario

1 Aug 2006

© 2006, Jeremy Maron

Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-23307-8

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-23307-8

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Abstract

This thesis examines three Italian films, focusing on how the films represent Italian life at the time of the Holocaust, and how these representations reflect shifts in understanding regarding the experience of the Holocaust in Italy. Chapter One explores how the political environment for the Jewish characters in Vittorio De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* disposes them to perform their daily lives as normally as possible while anti-Semitic legislation deteriorates their rights as Italian citizens. Chapter Two examines Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* in terms of a split between the surface illusion of normality, manifest in the film's polished aesthetics and the calm veneer of its protagonist, and the volatile reality lurking beneath. Chapter Three examines how Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* makes explicit what had been left implicit in the previous two films: i.e., that official accounts of the Italian experience of the Holocaust have promoted as fact what is best seen as a fable.

Acknowledgments

This thesis has been both a challenge and a pleasure to write, and I could not have kept my sanity without the love and encouragement of many. First and foremost, I thank my God, the Holy Trinity, for His strength and guidance throughout this project. A huge thank you to Charles O'Brien, my patient and understanding thesis supervisor/editor extraordinaire, who even supported me when I decided, for one day, to change my thesis topic to Winnipeg's conversion to sound theatres; to the rest of the Film Studies faculty at Carleton, especially André Loiselle for countless hours spent listening to my anxieties; to Lionel Steiman and Stephen Snyder from the University of Manitoba; and to the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba for providing a grant to participate in the 2005 March of the Living. Personally, I owe a large debt (both emotional and financial) to my parents, Melvin and Jocelyn Maron, for continual support, even if my goals of film scholarship seemed mildly perplexing at first; to Paul Little, Jason Sneath, Mike Enns and Dustin Wiebe for providing years of frequent and much needed laughter; to my extended family, particularly Ben Weissmann, Steven Hyman, Sandy Hyman and Jerry Katz. Thank you also to all my fellow graduate students who continually reminded me that my torture was not solitary, especially Matt Croombs, Steve Rifkin, Angie Chiang, Sonya Poweska, and Tim Rayne. And, of course, to the love of my life, Cheryl Martens – I was already in the midst of this project when I finally found you, and your encouragement through to its conclusion will never be forgotten. I love you. There are many more to whom I owe thanks, and although this space is limited, my gratitude is infinite. Thank you all and God bless. I lovingly dedicate this thesis to the memory of my *Baba* and *Zaida*, Rose and Hymie Katz.

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Holocaust...in Italy?	pp. 1-18
Chapter 1: Safe in the Garden?: The Logical Catastrophe of Deliberate Ignorance in <i>The Garden of the Finzi-Continis</i>	pp. 19-45
Chapter 2: <i>The Conformist</i>: Shadows of Conformity	pp. 46-70
Chapter 3: “This was [my father’s] gift to me”: The Reality of the Fable in <i>Life is Beautiful</i>	pp.71-100
Epilogue: The Historical Holocaust	pp. 101-105
Bibliography	pp. 106-111

Introduction: The Holocaust....in Italy?

What did they expect from us, the Della Setas, engineer Levi, and that boy who loved to play Chopin? Didn't they understand that the conceivable became real because it concerned, fatally, only *them*? They were guilty without guilt. They should have known that the Vatican's diplomatic maneuvers to persuade the Germans to give up some of their human booty favored those who had owned up to the decide, those who had washed away their guilt by bending their heads under the waters of baptism. The Jews who stubbornly refused to convert would sooner or later become victims of their pride and perseverance in error. A painful and ineluctable destiny separated them from *us*.¹

- Rosetta Loy

This thesis examines three Italian films, focusing, (1) on how the films allude to or depict the Holocaust in Italy via their protagonists' performances of normality, and (2) how the films' differences in this regard reflect shifts in understanding regarding the Italian experience of the Holocaust. The main films of my study, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, Vittorio De Sica, 1970), *The Conformist* (*Il conformista*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970), and *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*, Roberto Benigni, 1997) feature characters attempting to act normally in wartime Italy – a time and place whose demands are anything but normal. In constructing their protagonists as exemplars for specific modes of coping, these three films invoke an idealized understanding of the *Shoah*² familiar to Italian popular culture. At the same time however, all three films, implicitly or explicitly, reveal the danger that these performances of normality can serve to *hide* in the true reality of wartime Italy. As I argue in what follows, these films can be seen to enact limitations in Holocaust historiography of particular relevance to Italy, and they do so in ways that offer insight into film's potential for rendering the past for the present.

¹ Rosetta Loy. *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*. Trans. Gregory Conti (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000): 156. Original emphasis.

² *Shoah*, meaning annihilation, is a Hebrew term often used as a synonym for the Holocaust, and is the title of Claude Lanzmann's seminal nine-and-a-half hour documentary film on the Holocaust (1985).

Why a study of allusions to and depictions of the Holocaust in *Italian* films in particular? Simply put, in spite of the official alliance that existed between Mussolini's Fascist³ regime and Hitler's Nazi regime between 1940 and 1943, Italy's role in and experience of the *Shoah* has frequently been treated as a secondary topic within Holocaust scholarship.⁴ Historian Alexander Stille notes that at conferences devoted to Holocaust study in the mid-1980s, when the specificity of the Italian Jewish experience during the Holocaust began to attract more widespread scholarly attention, one would often hear remarks that echoed a character in Primo Levi's *If Not Now, When* who, thinking all Italians are Catholics, asks, "Italian Jews? How can that be?" Furthermore, Stille suggests that since these and similar remarks continued to inspire laughs at these conferences, they indicated "the paucity of general knowledge as well as historical work done on the subject."⁵ A similar situation is evident in the field of film scholarship, where representations of and allusions to the Holocaust in postwar Italian films, however frequent, are rarely analyzed in terms of the history of the Holocaust as it occurred in Italy. Even though the experiences of Italian Jews during the Holocaust and the specifics of its occurrence in Italy have attracted increased scholarly attention since the mid-1980s, which I will explore in greater detail below, many of the responses I have heard upon telling people that I am writing an MA thesis on "Italian Holocaust films" reflect the paucity that Stille refers to – "Italian Holocaust films? Are there many of those?"

³ For the sake of consistency throughout the thesis, I will capitalize "Fascism" when referring specifically to Mussolini's Italian Fascism, with the exception, of course, of direct quotations in which the author chooses not to capitalize it. I will not capitalize "fascism" when I am referring to it as a transnational ideology. The words "Holocaust" and "Nazi" are frequently capitalized and not capitalized by various authors. While neither strategy is incorrect, for this thesis I have chosen to capitalize both.

⁴ Joshua D. Zimmerman. "Introduction." *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 1.

⁵ Alexander Stille. "The Double Bind of Italian Jews: Acceptance and Assimilation." *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945*. Ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 19.

Occasionally this might be followed by, “Oh, I guess *Life is Beautiful* would be an example.” And of course, prior to beginning my own research on the Holocaust in Italy, I would have responded in a similar fashion, despite considering myself at least somewhat well-versed in Holocaust historiography and Holocaust film scholarship. In short, the study of Italian life during the Holocaust appears still to be a relatively unexplored research field. My own position is that the study of postwar Italian films can reveal significant aspects of how life in Italy during the Holocaust has been understood by subsequent generations.

In Chapter One I explore how the macrocosmic political environment surrounding the Jewish characters in Vittorio De Sica’s *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* disposes them to perform their daily lives as normally as possible, even as anti-Semitic legislation deteriorates their rights as Italian citizens. Because the larger Italian society in which they were once assimilated is now excluding them, the only way for these characters to keep up the façade of normality is by withdrawing into various microcosms that afford the illusion of security. An example can be found in the idyllic garden space of the Finzi-Contini estate that distorts the violent political reality existing beyond the aristocratic family’s borders. By allowing themselves to remain blind to political threats from the larger political macrocosm, the family is eventually forcibly extracted from the estate, and rounded up in preparation for deportation. The performance of normality is thus exposed as a catastrophic coping strategy. However, because the surrounding environment presents such a strategy as suitable, the fate of Italy’s Jews is shrouded with tragic inevitability – as if blinded by their own illusions, they could not have foreseen what was to come.

Chapter Two examines Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, a film whose lack of any direct reference to the Holocaust amounts to a structured absence - a void that nonetheless conditions the actions of the film's characters. Through both its style and narrative, *The Conformist* presents a split between an illusion of normality on the surface of daily routine, and the volatile reality lurking beneath both the film's polished aesthetics and its protagonist's calm veneer. Through the film's construction of a cowardly, Fascist protagonist, Bertolucci presents ideological identity as a performative, much like feminist theorist Judith Butler argues that gender identity is a performative, meaning that Fascism (or masculinity or femininity) is not an inherent characteristic that one *is*, like an identity to be chosen through a single exercise of will, but rather "something one does, a condition one enacts" through many small acts, performed as part of one's everyday routine.⁶ Through this strategy, *The Conformist* highlights that Fascist conformity is merely a disguise, but a disguise that the protagonist cannot recognize as such. Instead of seeing his ideological conformity as a choice, he takes it as an inescapable reality. Through this strategy, Bertolucci acknowledges the performative nature of the protagonist's commitment to Fascism in a manner that highlights the danger of ideological performativity – that a person need not be inherently disposed toward evil, but instead can accept evil in ways that escape their awareness. Evil can affect anyone, even in the most banal circumstances, when its acceptance rests on the day-to-day performance of numerous small acts of complicity.

Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* is the primary focus of Chapter Three. This film, overtly structured as a fable, shows how a father attempts to behave as though his

⁶ Jonathan Culler. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 103.

and his young son's imprisonment in a concentration camp is merely a game. While *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *The Conformist* implicitly critique the familiar image of a "normal" Holocaust in Italy, *Life is Beautiful* is far more overt. By the time Benigni's film was released in 1997, the image of normality had already been exposed for its distortion of the historical past. As such, the film makes explicit what is only implicit in the previous two films – that the notion of the Italian experience of the Holocaust as mild was a fable too long promoted as fact. A pleasant and touching tale of survival on the surface, *Life is Beautiful* is replete with moments pointing to fissures in this tale of beauty, suggesting that "life was beautiful" only so far as the extent of the horror of Italy's experience during the Holocaust had been repressed.

The remaining pages of this introduction are divided into three sections. First, I clarify my understanding of what "the Holocaust" consists of, and accordingly, why it is justifiable to refer to the works comprising my cinematic corpus as "Italian Holocaust films." Second, I offer a brief overview of historiography devoted to the Italian history of the Holocaust. Included in this section is a discussion regarding the important role that the "numbers" of the Holocaust have played in Holocaust scholarship, and how they have contributed to the neglect of Italian history within Holocaust historiography. Finally, I situate my cinematic corpus within scholarly literature pertaining to filmic representations of the Holocaust, specifically national cinema and film-genre approaches.

Why are these Holocaust Films?

My decision to approach and conceive of my cinematic corpus under the heading "Italian Holocaust films" finds its justification in the particularities of Fascist Italy's

relationship with Nazi Germany. The Nazi oppression of Europe's Jews can be divided into two distinct stages. Beginning with the anti-Jewish decrees of 1933 until 1941, Nazi policy for dealing with the "Jewish question" is frequently understood as one of expulsion and exclusion, which echoed similar anti-Semitic strategies undertaken against Jews in different parts of Europe during different historical periods. In 1941, Nazi policy turned towards the extermination of European Jewry as the "final solution to the Jewish question in Europe."⁷ If this shift from expulsion to extermination is conceived as the beginning of "the Holocaust," then the Holocaust begins in Italy only in 1943, after the German occupation under which the deportation of Italian Jews began. In this sense, *Life is Beautiful* invites consideration as a "Holocaust film," but *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, which ends only as "the Holocaust" comes to Italy, does not. Moreover, *The Conformist* does not really reference this specific interpretation of "the Holocaust" at all.

My invocation of the term "the Holocaust," however, is more inclusive, and accordingly, in line with the extent to which historians vary in their understandings of the Nazi agenda for Europe's Jews. For example, historian Lionel Steiman writes,

The fall of Poland eventually brought over three million Jews under German control, and the resettlement of Jewish populations in selected areas was undertaken immediately. In these ghettos Jews began to die slowly of 'natural causes' like hunger, disease, cold and exhaustion. Although some historians argue that ghettoization and even mass shootings remained consistent with the goal of a territorial solution to the Jewish question, it seems clear that the Germans regarded ghettoization only as a provisional measure. *Extermination was their goal from the start.*⁸

⁷ Raul Hilberg. *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961): 3.

⁸ Lionel B. Steiman. *Paths to Genocide*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998): 221. My emphasis.

Differing historical interpretations regarding the genocidal intent of the National Socialist government suggest uncertainty regarding what exactly “the Holocaust” consists of. Does one include the strategies of expulsion and exclusion between 1933 and 1941 as part of the Holocaust? Does the Holocaust only begin once the strategy of mass extermination of Europe’s Jew begins? Or, are these strategies one and the same, as Steiman suggests? As I will clarify below, my project is not strictly focused on questions of national cinema, nor is it concerned with establishing finite semantic or syntactic characteristics of a “Holocaust film” genre. With this in mind, I subscribe to Judith Doneson’s inclusive understanding of “Holocaust films.” In other words, I consider *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, *The Conformist* and *Life is Beautiful* to be Holocaust films because they all refer to the period (in Italy) where Nazi-inspired anti-Semitism was growing increasingly worse, and they reflect the historical process that began with the Nazi laws in April 1933, and ended in 1945 with the conclusion of World War II and the liberation of the last concentration camps.⁹ Ultimately, whether the three films analyzed in this thesis can be considered “Holocaust films” is of less importance than their capacity to reflect shifting conceptions of the Holocaust in Italy, and in turn, shifting conceptions of the Holocaust itself.

Review of Literature: The Holocaust in Italy

Italy’s experience of the Holocaust involves a history whose specifics, until relatively recently, have remained largely in the shadows of English-language Holocaust scholarship. The first scholarly book devoted exclusively to the history of Italy’s Jews

⁹ Judith E. Doneson. *The Holocaust in American Film*. 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002): 8.

prior to and during the Holocaust was Renzo De Felice's *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*, originally published in Italian in 1961, the same year as Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, arguably the establishing text of Holocaust scholarship. However, Meir Michaelis' *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian relations and the Jewish Question in Italy, 1922-1945*, the first full-length English-language scholarship to appear on the subject of the Holocaust in Italy, would not appear until 1978, and De Felice's groundbreaking study would not be translated into any foreign language edition until 2001, when an English edition was published.¹⁰

Stille states that the works of De Felice and Michaelis "were mostly concerned with documenting relations between Mussolini's Fascist regime and the leadership of Italy's Jewish community."¹¹ This would, in part, explain why these studies did not initially ignite widespread scholarly interest within Holocaust discourse. If the Holocaust is understood to mean the systematic attempt, under Nazi auspices, to *exterminate* European Jewry, this did not technically come to Italy until *after* the deposal of Mussolini and his Fascist government, when German forces occupied the nation after Mussolini's successor, Marshall Pietro Badoglio, surrendered to the Allies. However, Stille's understanding of De Felice's book fails to acknowledge the considerable light it sheds on the Fascist contribution to Italian anti-Semitism. Granted, De Felice lucidly explains the differences between the biologically determinant racism of the Nazi party, rooted obviously in the virulent racism of Hitler himself, and the "spiritual" character of Fascist racism, which believed that even "unworthy persons...could be transformed into a higher type." As De Felice observes, "Italian racism was designed to change Italian

¹⁰ Zimmerman, 5-6.

¹¹ Stille, 19.

national character, while Nazi racism was a method of imposing the innate superiority of the Aryan race on the rest of the world.”¹² Moreover, De Felice also repeatedly stresses Mussolini’s comparatively *philo*-Semitic tendencies prior to 1936/7, as well as the heterogeneous nature of Fascism, which counted many Jews among its membership and supporters,¹³ a tendency that will be explored to some degree in Chapter One. But despite De Felice’s careful distinctions between Nazi anti-Semitism and Fascist anti-Semitism, *The Jews in Fascist Italy* did expose two myths that had served to undermine the extent of Italian complicity in the imposition of anti-Semitic legislation. First, De Felice demonstrated that Fascism was not “imposed by terror wielded by a small minority,” but, like Nazism, was “enormously popular and represented [a] genuine mass [movement].”¹⁴ Secondly, *The Jews in Fascist Italy* “shattered the oversimplified stereotype that had been fed to the war generation and their children [-] that anti-Semitism wasn’t ‘really’ Italian at all; [that] it was something imposed on Italy by Hitler, but the Italians never really believed it and did everything they could to sabotage it once it had been [institutionally] established [by the 1938 Racial Laws which saw Italy become officially anti-Semitic].”¹⁵ In spite of these insights promulgated by De Felice, however, the Italian Holocaust remained in the shadows of scholarship devoted to the *Shoah*.

Historian Joshua Zimmerman suggests that the tendency in English-language Holocaust scholarship to overlook the specifics of the Italian history of the Holocaust had

¹² Michael A. Ledeen. “Preface.” In Renzo De Felice. *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*. 1st English ed. Trans. Robert L. Miller (New York: Enigma Books): vii-viii.

¹³ De Felice, 58-59.

¹⁴ Ledeen in De Felice, viii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

to do, at least in part, with this history's numbers.¹⁶ Of course, numbers have played an instrumental role in how historiography has approached the Holocaust. The numbers associated with the Holocaust have been integral in establishing the Nazis' genocidal attack on European Jewry as perhaps the defining historical event of the 20th century, or attaining even greater historical significance if the *Shoah* is conceived as the culmination of an anti-Semitism that precedes even the emergence of Christianity.¹⁷

To understand the importance of numbers to Holocaust historiography, one need only look to the debates over which numbers should be employed by Holocaust commemoration initiatives,¹⁸ or the continual invocation of "the six million" by Holocaust scholars. Historian Peter Novick even goes so far as to suggest that the phrase "the six million" now serves as a "rhetorical stand in for 'the Holocaust.'"¹⁹ However, the numbers associated with the Holocaust in Italy do not begin to meet this titanic figure. As Zimmerman notes, "A combination of factors, including the size of the [Italian Jewish] community and the relatively small number of victims...partly accounted for this neglect in historical literature."²⁰ According to historian Susan Zuccotti, 15% of Italy's relatively small Jewish population of 38,400 perished in the Holocaust, accounting for slightly more than 1/1000th of "the six million."²¹ In a discourse governed by the concavity of mass death, the history of the Italian Jews, "[w]ith the third highest survival rate after Denmark and Bulgaria," was overlooked given the emergence of a scholarly

¹⁶ Zimmerman, 1.

¹⁷ For a discussion on anti-Semitism in "the ancient world," see Edward H. Flannery. *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Antisemitism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985): 7-27.

¹⁸ Peter Novick. *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001): 214-215.

¹⁹ Ibid., 214.

²⁰ Zimmerman., 1.

²¹ Susan Zuccotti. *The Italians and the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books, 1987): xviii. It should be noted that other historians oscillate in their estimates of the number of Italian Jews killed during the Holocaust. The reasons for this oscillation primarily stem from who the historians count as "Italian Jews," but the consensus regarding the survival rate still rests between 80 and 85%.

consensus that “Italian Fascist persecution of Jews was not only mild but that Mussolini, the Italian armed forces, Italian civilians and many church officials consistently protected Jews throughout the war years.”²² In short, the experiences of Italian Jewry have been overshadowed in traditional historical scholarship of the Holocaust because their numbers amounted to a miniscule fraction of the six million.

In fact, Holocaust historiography frequently employed the numbers of the murdered Italian Jews in such a way that undermines the severity of the Holocaust in Italy. For example, in *To Bear Witness: Holocaust Remembrance at Yad Vashem*, it reads,

When the Germans took control of Italy the fascist regime participated in the deportation of Jews for extermination and in the looting of their property. While Jews were being handed over, many other Italians, in particular priests and nuns, helped Jews find hiding places. Owing to this help and the possibilities of fleeing to Switzerland, along with the Allied invasion, about 80% of Italian Jewry had been saved.²³

In addition to highlighting the high survival rate afforded by the assistance of gentile Italians, this largely optimistic portrait also overlooks the fact that of the near-40,000 Italian Jews who suddenly found themselves in danger after the Nazis occupied the nation in 1943, only a few hundred were actually able to escape to Switzerland.²⁴

Similarly, in *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, Michael Berenbaum’s invocation of numbers serves to undermine the effectiveness of strategies aimed at arresting Italian Jews:

“During the final stage of anti-Jewish persecution [after the Nazi occupation], the Italian

²² Ibid.

²³ *To Bear Witness: Holocaust Remembrance at Yad Vashem*. Eds. Bella Gutterman and Avner Shalev (Jerusalem; Yad Vashem, 2005): 224, 226.

²⁴ Martin Gilbert. *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (London: Fontana Press, 1986): 622.

police were responsible for arresting Jews. The roundup continued throughout the fall and winter of 1943/44. *Despite these efforts*, eight out of ten Jews escaped capture. Of the forty thousand Jews in Italy, eight thousand were killed.”²⁵

Other scholars have tended to emphasize Italian Fascism’s refusal to co-operate with Nazi demands in spite of their alliance during the war, undermining the extent of Fascist anti-Semitism. Raul Hilberg notes that despite German attempts to secure Fascist collaboration in regards to the deportation of Italian Jews between the end of 1942 and the summer of 1943,²⁶ the Fascist regime held out until its collapse.²⁷ Noted Holocaust historian Lucy Dawidowicz echoes De Felice’s assertions regarding the pragmatic differences between Nazism and Fascism, noting that

Whatever hardships the Italian Jews had to undergo from the end of 1938 on, their situation was enviable in contrast to those Jews who lived under direct German occupation. The Italians remained unresponsive to German demands to deport Jews. In Italy proper and in all areas occupied by Italy, the Jews remained safe from deportation, though they were subject to harsh legislation and deprivation. When the Germans occupied Italy, only about forty thousand Jews still remained.²⁸

Historian Yehuda Bauer unambiguously highlights the relatively high degree of Italian philo-Semitism, suggesting that prior to *and* following the German occupation of Italy,

the population, the church, and the Fascist government were either indifferent or actively friendly toward the small Jewish minority of some 40,000 souls and the Jewish refugees in Italian-occupied southeastern France and

²⁵ Michael Berenbaum. *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993): 169. My emphasis.

²⁶ For an examination of these attempts and their failure to gain Fascist support, see Hilberg, 414-416.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

²⁸ Lucy S. Dawidowicz. *The War Against the Jews 1933-1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975): 270.

Yugoslavia...Italian Jews hardly encountered animosity, and when Jews were persecuted, shipped off to Auschwitz or interned in local camps, this was always at the behest of the Germans or their direct and extreme supporters.²⁹

Bauer also states that after 1943, with the Allied forces occupying southern Italy with Mussolini's Nazi-appointed puppet regime of Salò controlling the north, "the attitude of the population at large to the Jews was one of commiseration and, very often, of active help."³⁰

This scholarly consensus of mild Italian anti-Semitism in the years preceding and during the Holocaust began to lose its hold on the Italian consciousness in the 1980s due, in large part, to two significant events. First was the 1982 terrorist attack on the Rome synagogue, "which brought to light the problem of rising anti-Semitism in Italy and the importance that education combat intolerance and discrimination." Milena Santerini argues that "this moment in Italian history can be regarded as the birth of fully fledged Holocaust education [in Italy]."³¹ Secondly, the nation experienced a revival in interest in Italian Jewish history in anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of when Italy became an officially anti-Semitic state in 1938, with Fascism's imposition of the Racial Laws. As the anniversary approached, "[a] new postwar generation of scholars began to reevaluate the existing sources, uncover new ones, and raise new questions."³² For example, in Susan Zuccotti's 1987 study, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, she invokes the large number of Italian Jews that survived the Holocaust, but re-contextualizes the numbers to ask

²⁹ Yehuda Bauer. *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978): 67.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Milena Santerini. "Holocaust Education in Italy." *Intercultural Education* 14.2 (June 2003): 226.

³² Zimmerman, 7

quite the opposite question...About 15 percent of the Jews in Italy during the German occupation did not survive the Holocaust. This book asks how more than 6,800 people could have been rounded up and deported to be gassed from a country that, despite its nineteenth century ghettos and the promptings of Fascist rulers, had no significant anti-Semitic tradition...[Italian Jews] lived in the shadow of the Vatican, in close proximity to the moral and spiritual leader of the Catholic world and the supreme teacher of Christian precepts of brotherly love and the sanctity of human life. And the Holocaust began much later in Italy than in most other European countries, so that Jews should have been aware of the danger and quick to flee. In Rome the danger period from September 1943 to June 1944 lasted only nine months; in most of central Italy, it continued three or four months longer; in northern Italy, it existed until April 1945. A maximum of twenty months, yet 15 percent of Italy's Jews were destroyed. How could this have happened?³³

In her essay, "The Return of the Repressed: The Holocaust in Italian Film,"

Italian film scholar Millicent Marcus notes that it is only in the midst of the post-1988 re-examination of the history of the Holocaust in Italy that the Italian Holocaust and Italian anti-Semitism has found itself explicitly manifest in Italian films with any degree of regularity.³⁴ It is from this period of re-examination and re-contextualization (circa 1988 – present) that Benigni's film emerges, tackling the now-discredited myth of the Holocaust's comparative mildness in Italy by constructing this myth explicitly as a fable.

During this period, Holocaust scholarship has also tended towards a more overtly critical stance of the Italian role in the Holocaust. Two examples of this tendency include Zuccotti's *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust* (2000),³⁵ a decisive examination of Papal inaction during the Holocaust, specifically that of Pope Pius XII;

³³ Zuccotti 1987, xvi-xvii.

³⁴ Millicent Marcus. "Return of the Repressed: Italian Film and Holocaust Memory." *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945*. Ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 321-323.

³⁵ Susan Zuccotti. *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

and *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945* (2005), a “collection of essays [that] challenges the myth of Italian benevolence [towards Jews] during the Fascist period.”³⁶ This shift towards an explicit exposure of this myth is examined in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Review of Literature: Film and the Holocaust

My approach to the films discussed in this thesis bridges two paths by which film scholarship has approached cinematic representations of the Holocaust. On the one hand are studies that focus on Holocaust representations within a particular national cinema. A notable work that adopts this approach is Judith Doneson’s *The Holocaust in American Film*. In this book, Doneson traces the representational trajectory that the Holocaust has experienced in American cinema, from the genesis of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1959), through the furor (both positive and negative) incited by NBC’s miniseries *Holocaust* (Marvin J. Chomsky, 1978), and the titanic influence of *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993). A big drawback of this study, however, which Doneson at once acknowledges and characterizes as beyond her control, is that very few American Holocaust films actually reference the American experience *during* the Holocaust, with the exception of *The Voyage of the Damned* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1976), which refers to the immigration restrictions imposed by the United States against European Jews during the war years. Thus, even though Doneson restricts her analyses to American films, rather than highlighting how the films reflect the American experience of the Holocaust, her filmic invocations serve more to reflect societal changes in how understandings of the Holocaust have shifted in the collective American consciousness, which historian Peter

³⁶ Zimmerman, 9.

Novick traces beyond the cinematic medium in *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (2001), originally published as *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999).

Another noteworthy full-length study devoted entirely to the cinematic representations of the Holocaust in a national cinema is André Pierre Colombat's *The Holocaust in French Film*.³⁷ And of course, the Holocaust as it has been represented in French films is an important facet of Henry Rousso's examination of postwar memory in France, *The Vichy Syndrome*.³⁸ The drawback of these studies is that they isolate particular trends in Holocaust representation as *nationally-based* without recognizing that they may very well be part of representational shifts on a *transnational* scale. For example, both Colombat and Rousso discuss Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) in regards to the film's blurring of the Resistance and the Collaboration,³⁹ but neither even mention that this trend can be found in films of other national cinemas, such as *The Conformist*, that incorporate similar subject matter in similar ways, but with different national specificity

On the other hand are studies that approach cinematic representations of the Holocaust from a "film-genre" perspective. One of the most important studies in this regard is Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*.⁴⁰ The greatest strength of this work is its massive corpus, which encompasses both high profile and obscure films from all around the world that reference the Holocaust as either a primary

³⁷ André Pierre Colombat. *The Holocaust in French Film* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993).

³⁸ Henry Rousso. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991).

³⁹ Colombat, 76; Rousso, 129.

⁴⁰ Annette Insdorf. *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). First edition published in 1983,

or secondary theme. Ilan Avisar takes a similar approach in *Screening the Holocaust*.⁴¹

While both of these books devote chapters to particular national cinemas - Insdorf includes one chapter devoted to New German Cinema and Avisar includes one devoted to Czechoslovakian cinema - the films are grouped thematically for the most part, which invariably results in the effacement of national specificities. For instance, Insdorf's book includes chapters devoted to black humor, rescuers, and the "Jew as child," and Avisar's book holds as its primary objective the use of the cinema to "define the distinct discourse of the Holocaust."⁴²

Obviously by limiting my primary corpus to three *Italian* films, I am interested in how these films speak to the Italian experience of the Holocaust. However, I am not attempting to elucidate an overarching "Grand" theory that can be applied to the entire history of the Holocaust in Italian cinema. While this larger exploration would make for an intriguing project, it would take me well beyond the scope of a master's-level thesis. I am also not concerned with assigning to these films a nebulous quality of "Italian-ness" or situating them within the historical trajectory of Italian national cinema. Even though the question of how Italian films have dealt with the Holocaust is often overlooked entirely or treated cursorily within film scholarship, the placement of such films in Italian national cinema history (both from ideological and aesthetic perspectives) has already been done, most notably in English-language scholarship by Peter Bondanella in *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*,⁴³ and by Millicent Marcus in *Italian Film in*

⁴¹ Ilan Avisar. *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁴² *Ibid.*, ix-x.

⁴³ Peter Bondanella. *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*. 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001).

*the Light of Neorealism*⁴⁴ and *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age*.⁴⁵

Accordingly, in addition to exploring how these films present and distort the image of a “mild” Holocaust in Italy via their depictions of normality, I also strive to situate the films within transnational contexts so as to avoid mischaracterizing as national characteristics of the films that are, in fact, best seen as products of transnational movements. For example, in Chapter One, I explore how De Sica’s construction in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* of certain characters’ willful ignorance participates in a discourse within Holocaust scholarship concerned with the moral implications of passivity; in Chapter Two, I situate *The Conformist*’s construction of a cowardly Fascist accomplice within the transnational political consciousness inspired by the 1968 student uprisings in Paris, as well as within currents in Holocaust scholarship that focus on the nature of the Holocaust’s perpetrators; in the final chapter, I explore the fabulist quality of *Life is Beautiful* relative to broader issues regarding the ethics of mediation unavoidable in Holocaust representation.

Nonetheless, these three films, their differences notwithstanding, highlight performances of normality in ways that invoke the old consensus regarding the Holocaust’s mildness in Italy. As I aim to show, the invocation carries a critical punch, in that it reveals how the actions of normality undertaken by the films’ characters ultimately fail to suppress the horrific reality of wartime Italy. In the end, it is the danger that lurks under the guise of normality that is the focus of the films, and hence of this thesis.

⁴⁴ Millicent Marcus. *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁴⁵ Millicent Marcus. *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

1

Safe in the Garden?: The Logical Catastrophe of Deliberate Ignorance in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

There *were* moral choices to be made under the German occupation, as at other times and places. But the extremity of those circumstances put powerful constraints on choices. Looking after one's own family is a basic obligation – ranking higher, most would say, than one's obligation to strangers. When Poles were caught hiding Jews, not only they but their entire families were shot.¹

- Peter Novick

Vittorio De Sica's adaptation of Giorgio Bassani's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, 1970), is a fitting text to begin exploring reflections and distortions inherent in scholarly conceptions of the Holocaust in Italy. The film exposes the irreconcilability of an idyllic image of wartime Italy with the eventual imprisonment of its Jewish characters, while simultaneously depicting this imprisonment as a logical and inevitable conclusion, given the capacity for self-deception enabled by an idyllic construction. Millicent Marcus proposes that the film's narrative focus on two Jewish families in Ferrara, Italy, who are forced to contend with the consequences of Fascism's Racial Laws, marks De Sica's "return to a cinema of moral accountability,"² characteristic of the director's earlier neorealist work. Although the film's opulent mise-en-scène, hazy color, and inclusion of such classically attractive professional actors as Dominique Sanda and Helmut Berger complicate an aesthetic

¹ Novick, 246. Original emphasis.

² Millicent Marcus. "De Sica's *Garden of the Finzi-Continis*: An Escapist Paradise Lost." *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*. Eds. Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 271.

comparison with De Sica's neorealist works such as *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948) or *Umberto D* (1952), a concern with moral accountability can be found in the disharmony in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* between the film's luxurious aesthetic and the bleakness of its story.³ While the members of the film's two Jewish families reflect the high degree of assimilation that Italian Jews enjoyed in Italian culture, the film also reveals that their efforts to perform their everyday lives with as much normality as possible become increasingly difficult as anti-Semitic legislation is introduced. The legislation forces the family to withdraw into microcosmic, familial spaces where idyllic surroundings mask the macrocosmic political threats of Fascism and Nazism facing Italy. The consequences of official anti-Semitism are reflected in the film's concluding sequences, when the characters are shown, to some degree, to have become implicated in their fate because of their willful ignorance and isolation.

In this chapter, I will examine how forces within the diegetic world of the film repeatedly encourage the characters *to* withdraw, endorsing their refusal to acknowledge Italy's macrocosmic reality as if it were an acceptable coping strategy. By locating the responsibility for the characters' actions within their surrounding environment rather than in alleged moral or intellectual deficiencies, the film does not imply that the characters might have behaved differently. Thus, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* oscillates between a critique and a justification of the characters' deliberate ignorance, both confronting the reality of Italian anti-Semitic persecution, while presenting the ultimate imprisonment of the film's Jewish characters in its dire conclusion as unavoidable. To this end, I begin this chapter with a brief comparison between De Sica's earlier film, *Two Women* (*La Ciociara*, 1960), and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. In comparing these

³ Charles Thomas Samuels. *Encountering Directors* (New York: Putnam, 1972): 161.

two films in terms of their shared concern with issues of willful ignorance and political withdrawal, I ultimately distinguish *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* from *Two Women*, whose vision of moral and political engagement I find less incisive. Second, I examine how the two family units in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* contend with anti-Semitic legislation in different ways, while relying on similar strategies of deliberate ignorance, refusing to acknowledge the reality of the macrocosmic threats that lurk beyond their familial microcosms. Third, I explore how the film presents its characters as behaving logically, given their conceptions of Italy's political macrocosm. Finally, I conclude by looking into the suggestion in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* that enlightenment is a necessary precondition for salvation, even it does not guarantee survival.

A Shift in Moral Accountability: *Two Women* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

Ten years before *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, De Sica filmed an adaptation of Alberto Moravia's 1957 novel, *Two Women*. Thematically, the two films are quite similar: both are set in Italy around the time of World War II, and both feature characters who cope with the ever-increasing political threats by withdrawing from political reality. Where the films differ, however, is in their respective treatments of this action of withdrawal.

Cesira (Sophia Loren) and Rosetta (Eleonora Brown), the mother and daughter protagonists of *Two Women*, flee the war-torn city of Rome by retreating to the idyllic nostalgia of the bucolic village where Cesira was born. Ultimately, Cesira's strategy of withdrawal in the hopes of shielding Rosetta from the violence of war is proven to have catastrophic consequences when the mother and daughter are raped by Moroccan

soldiers, which in turn creates a deep fissure in the mother/daughter relationship.⁴ This fissure is eventually sealed in the film's conclusion, when the death of their friend, the anti-Fascist Michele (Jean-Paul Belmondo), affords a reconciliation of mother and child. Faye McIntyre argues that *Two Women* shares an "emotional and dramatic emphasis on the destruction and reparation of the bond between parent and child" with De Sica's earlier film *The Bicycle Thief*, as well as *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*.⁵ But the latter film affords no such post-traumatic filial reconciliation. Far from emphasizing the reparation of a parent/child relationship, the concluding moments of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* offer the sad reality of a family that can only survive through the separation of its members. And of course, this survival is only temporary, a respite prior to the deportation.

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis presents a dichotomous relationship between character attempts to remain in self-constructed microcosms and the livelihood imposed upon the characters by macrocosmic forces. The consequences of voluntary ignorance in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* stand in stark contrast to the reconciliatory closure afforded in the conclusion of *Two Women*. De Sica's later film posits a form of withdrawal in which ignorance is a dangerous character attribute whose threat is exposed in the face of political circumstances that demand active awareness. As I will explore in greater detail in Chapter 2, the ten years between the two films were a time when historical conceptions of the recent wartime past that had been largely accepted in Italy began yielding to new conceptions that exposed the established consensus regarding Fascist Italy as skewed constructions. Such a shift is evident in the moral accountability

⁴ Faye McIntyre, "In Love and War: Vittorio De Sica's *Two Women*," *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 250.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

De Sica assigns to the characters in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* for their willful retreat from the reality of Italy's promulgation of anti-Semitic legislation. In contrast, *Two Women* never presents Italy as complicit in her own destruction; rather, responsibility and monstrosity is continually deflected onto "others." For example, when Cesira and her daughter first flee Rome, they are motivated by the need to escape aggressive Allied bombing. After the armistice with the Allies, the barbaric Nazis that have come to occupy Italy assume the role of primary villain. Thus, *Two Women* lacks the national self-critique of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, and allows for a "happy" ending in spite of consequences arising from Cesira's disastrous strategy of withdrawal. This differs from the situation of the characters in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* who are forced to pay the ultimate price of death for having pursued the same course of action as Cesira and Rosetta.

The project of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* was, at its very inception, rooted in moralist intentions, according to De Sica himself. In an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, De Sica acknowledges that he accepted the *Finzi-Continis* project because he intimately feels the complexity of "the Jewish problem." He admits,

I myself feel shame because we all are guilty of the death [sic] of millions of Jews. Why were they killed? Because a criminal, a lunatic wanted that. But the Italian Fascists are also guilty. So am I. I wasn't a Fascist, but I belong to the country that collaborated with Hitler. I wanted, out of conscience to make this film, and I am glad I made it.⁶

While De Sica's reasons for being drawn to the project suggest the director's moral ambition, such an ambition can also be found in the film's literary source which also implies a desire to look to the past in order to achieve a degree of emotional or

⁶ Vittorio De Sica in Samuels, 159.

ethical reconciliation in the present. In his novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, Giorgio Bassani professes a similar desire to deal with one's present by engaging with the past. Discussing a lingering desire to write about the Finzi-Contini family that finally came to fruition after he visited a site of Etruscan tombs in April 1957, Bassani writes:

[M]y memory kept going back over my early years in Ferrara, and to the Jewish cemetery at the end of via Montebello...and, as if I had it actually before my eyes, the monumental tomb of the Finzi-Continis; an ugly tomb admittedly...And my heart was wrenched as never before by the thought that in that tomb, which seemed to have been set up to guarantee the everlasting repose of its first customer – his, and that of his descendents – only one of the Finzi-Continis I had known and loved in fact achieved that everlasting repose. But where (the rest of the Finzi-Contini family), deported to Germany in the autumn of '43, found their burial place is anyone's guess.⁷

While this study is not concerned with the degree of fidelity with which De Sica adapted Bassani's work, it is important to note that while De Sica's and Bassani's statements suggest similar retrospective motivations for undertaking their respective projects, the film version of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* adopts a much more critical position towards the issue of deliberate ignorance than its literary source, which is more concerned with constructing a memory of the Finzi-Continis and their idyllic garden space through an elegiac lens.⁸ As De Sica's purpose in making the film is based in a personal understanding of (Italy's and his own) implicit responsibility for a Holocaust that was, in part, carried out on Italian soil with the assistance of the Italian government, it is unsurprising the film takes up questions concerning the characters' unwillingness to confront the threat of Fascism.

⁷ Giorgio Bassani. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Trans. Isabel Quigly (New York: Antheneum, 1965): 12-13.

⁸ Marcus 2000, 276.

Familial Microcosms: Blinded by Normality

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis' critical stance in regards to deliberate ignorance can most clearly be identified in the film's employment of the family unit. De Sica constructs the family as a microcosmic unit in which one can attempt to isolate oneself, physically or mentally, in order to remain apart from that which lurks beyond the familial boundary. In the case of the Finzi-Continis, this boundary is literally the border of their garden; in the case of Giorgio's (Lino Cappolicchio) family, it is the veil of ignorance under which the father (Romolo Valli) encourages the rest of the family to act. It is important to note that the strategy of using one's own familial structure as a means to evade outside reality is not constructed as inherently problematic in the film. Rather, the danger lies in the fact that such isolation or ignorance has the potential to blind the members of this specific Italian community from the burgeoning threats of Fascist and Nazi oppression and anti-Semitic legislation in Italy between 1938 and 1943.

The isolation by which the Finzi-Continis segregate themselves from the world outside of their aristocratic estate is visually established in the film's opening scene. As they look forward to an afternoon tennis match at the Finzi-Continis, several young people cycle alongside a large wall serving as the border of the family's property. This imposing wall acts as a barrier that the soon-to-be guests must cycle around in order to gain access to their hosts' property, and thus visualizes the family's effort to segregate itself from that which exists beyond the garden's border. This segregation is further highlighted when one of the cyclists remarks that the Finzi-Continis "never leave their kingdom." Even after the guests have passed through the gate, several shots of the young guests cycling within the property demonstrate the vast distance between the border of

the property and the tennis courts, suggesting further isolation, even within the microcosm of the family estate.

Alberto (Helmut Berger) most clearly embodies the threat posed by isolation. First, the film constructs his illness and eventual death as related, in some way, to his desire to remain isolated. While it might be argued that his illness *forces* Alberto to remain confined within the Finzi-Contini estate, Micòl (Dominique Sanda) reveals that, even in childhood, he preferred to stay close to home. As growing macrocosmic turmoil in Italy continually abates his desire and ability to venture beyond his family's property at the same time as his condition worsens, the film suggests that his increased isolation may, in part, be responsible for the exacerbation of his illness. Beyond waning health, Alberto is also presented as completely accepting and unapologetic for his fondness of isolation. In the first sequence at the Finzi-Contini tennis courts, Alberto tells Malnate (Fabio Testi) that he prefers to select the faces that will be around him, rather than venturing out to where he has no control, and where he feels that he is always being spied on. Alberto's paranoia regarding the world "outside" is further evident in his statement that within the safety of the Finzi-Contini microcosm, he "never feels attacked." His acceptance of this paranoia and his tendency toward self-segregation is revealed in his response to Malnate's earlier query as to why he never goes out; to which Alberto replies, "Where would I go?"

While the Finzi-Contini family acts out willful ignorance by isolating themselves inside their own familial borders, Giorgio's father encourages his family's denial and ignorance of the effects that racial legislation will have upon them. This act of denial also becomes a source of tension between Giorgio and his father, prompting Giorgio,

while castigating his father's apparent denial of political reality, to seek isolation within the deceptively idyllic garden space of the Finzi-Continis (which finds a metaphoric embodiment in Micòl, to which I will return below).

On the surface, Giorgio's father seems to be torn between his desire to believe in the value of Fascist ideology and his gradual recognition of how the newly conceived Racial Laws (instituted between September and November 1938) will affect his family.⁹ The father's allegiance to the Fascist party motivates Giorgio to expose his father as naïve. An oppositional relationship between Giorgio and his father is established the first time Giorgio's family appears onscreen, each believing that the other is incapable of acknowledging things as they actually are. In this scene, with the family seated around their dining room table, Giorgio's father questions his son about visiting the Finzi-Contini home. While accusing the aristocratic family of welcoming the new racial legislation so that they could operate their own Jewish ghetto under their "noble patronage," Giorgio's father¹⁰ states that the only reason Aryans were also counted among the Finzi-Contini guests was to perpetrate "a vile trick, just to get hold of [Giorgio]." This attribution of malevolent intention to the Finzi-Continis, specifically Micòl, has less to do with material jealousy than with a concern that Giorgio is unable to recognize the futility of his desire for Micòl – a desire that he has been carrying with him since childhood. Likewise, Giorgio becomes frustrated with his father's apparent naïveté

⁹ For a brief discussion regarding this Freudian defense mechanism of "splitting" as it is employed in Bassani's literary source work, see Marcus 2000, 261-262.

¹⁰ Giorgio's father is never actually named in the film, and in De Sica filmographies, Romolo Valli's character is generally credited as "Giorgio's father" or "*il padre di Giorgio*" (see Bert Cardullo. *Vittorio De Sica: Director, Actor, Screenwriter* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002]: 140, and Giancarlo Governi. *Vittorio De Sica: Parlami d'amore Mariù* (Roma: Gremese, 1993]: 176.). Although it occasionally complicates readability, I have opted to refer to Giorgio's father only as such, rather than following Millicent Marcus's strategy of assigning him the name of "Signor Bassani," because it seems to apply an assumption that both De Sica and Bassani (neither the protagonist *or* his father are named in Bassani's book) specifically chose to avoid.

regarding the viability of Fascism and the newly enforced racial legislation. Shoving a newspaper that highlights the specifics of the racial laws into his father's face, Giorgio's actions force his father to come to terms with the fact that his Fascist allegiance is "not enough" to protect him and his family from racially motivated persecution.

After this realization, Giorgio's father begins to encourage his son *not* to isolate himself in response to the new laws, but to continue with his normal routine as much as possible, in the hopes that his younger brother and sister, Ernesto (Raffaele Curr) and Fanny (Marcella Gentile), will follow his lead. This strategy, of course, still acts as an attempt to downplay the severity of macrocosmic threat. It is important to note that when Giorgio's father enters his son's room to have this conversation, he pointedly looks around to make sure no other members of the family might be listening, thus suggesting that he understands (a) that Giorgio has a greater understanding than other members of the political reality facing their family, and (b) that his strategy of downplaying the extent that racial legislation will affect the family is based not on naïveté, but on the assumption that he can protect his family by preserving their ignorance. This strategy of shielding his family by encouraging their ignorance, which differs from the Finzi-Contini strategy of isolation within the idyll, is visualized in the contrast between the bright exterior of the Finzi-Continian estate and the dark interior of Giorgio's home. This tendency is pushed further in the opulent decoration of the Giorgio's home itself.

The bland physical exterior of Giorgio's home calls attention to the class difference between Giorgio's family and the Finzi-Continis. At the same time, a sign on Giorgio's building in Hebrew reads (transliterated) "*Yihee Adonai Elohaynu Emanoo*" ("May the Lord live among us"), thus demonstrating a crucial religious distinction, and

anticipating Giorgio's father's comment later in the film that the aristocratic Finzi-Continis "don't even seem Jewish." The film emphasizes that Giorgio's father recognizes that these distinctions of class and religion separate the aristocratic Finzi-Continis from his family. He continually stresses that the Finzi-Continis are "superior socially" to his family as a means to dissuade Giorgio's desire for Micòl. Despite any class differences, however, the interior of Giorgio's home is opulently decorated, even if it pales in comparison to the Finzi-Contini estate. This contrast between the modest exterior and luxurious interior of Giorgio's home suggests a guise of deception in itself. If Giorgio's family is conceived as an embodiment of the bourgeois class, a classification that I will return to briefly below, the luxuriousness of the interior simultaneously acts as an emblem of distinction and, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, as a "means of denying social reality,"¹¹ giving the illusion that the bourgeois family is more affluent than it actually is. In the case of Giorgio's family, the "social reality" is evidenced by the bland exterior of their home, which the opulent interior attempts to subjugate. Giorgio's father can downplay the consequences of Fascist anti-Semitic legislation more easily so long as the guise of affluence that the family is familiar with remains intact. The home's fancy interior, along with the presence of domestic servants, thus serves the father's desire to blind his family with a comfortable bourgeois existence, even as this existence is increasingly threatened by Fascist legislation.

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984): 293.

Macrocosmic Perpetuation of Microcosmic Ignorance

When Giorgio reveals to his father that his membership at the tennis club has already been revoked because of his race, his father is rendered speechless. Giorgio can no longer close his eyes to the new reality facing Italy, as he has experienced its discrimination directly. Despite Giorgio's apparent incredulousness, however, De Sica never uses this knowledge to elevate him morally above characters that might *appear* more credulous through their inexperience of racial discrimination. Their actions (or more appropriately, their *inactions*), while morally problematic, are constructed as practical (rather than morally deficient) because the film bears in mind the environment in which this inaction exists – an environment in which willful ignorance can be seen as a viable option in the face of the present political situation. What might look like a denial of imminent danger begins to reveal itself as a coping strategy in the face of such danger.

While his commitment to the Fascist party is complicated by Giorgio's acute understanding of the threats facing the family, Giorgio's father's hopes that the laws may not be as severe as they appear is understandable given that anti-Semitism was not institutionalized in Italy until the 1938 laws, or even a component of Mussolini's conception of Fascism until 1937.¹² It must also be stressed that Giorgio's father's involvement with the Fascist party *as a Jew* should not be viewed as an anomaly. Jewish involvement in Italian Fascism can be traced as far back as the party's incipience as the *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* in 1919.¹³ Susan Zuccotti, evoking the Marxist dialectic between the bourgeoisie and the working-class, further suggests that this involvement naturally stemmed from the fact that most Italian Jews were "solidly middle-class, and by

¹² De Felice, 219.

¹³ Zuccotti 1987, 23-24.

late 1921, fascism had become a basically middle-class, antiworker movement.”¹⁴.

Giorgio’s family exemplifies this antiworker bourgeois class not only in its political affiliation with the Fascist party, but also in its role as the employer of labor.¹⁵ The film highlights the importance that the family places on employing *domestiques* when Giorgio’s mother, once she finds out that Jewish families are no longer allowed to employ Aryan servants, laments, “How will we manage?” Despite his Semitic race, Giorgio’s father’s allegiance to the Fascist party is not aberrant given his class.

Similarly, while Giorgio’s perspicaciousness regarding Italy’s threatening political environment is countered by the naïveté of his desire for Micòl, this naïveté does not diminish Giorgio’s moral stature. Like his father, Giorgio’s disillusionment is constructed as the product of an environment that privileges denial as a survival strategy. For example, despite his disdain for his father’s refusal to acknowledge the dangers of ignorant compliance, Giorgio actually follows his father’s advice by attempting to continue with his schooling as normal. When Giorgio gets kicked out of the public library for being Jewish, the inadequacy of his father’s strategy of continuing to perform normality becomes apparent. However, Giorgio is quickly able to move into the luxurious private library of the Finzi-Continis. As such, the discriminatory threat evidenced by Giorgio’s exclusion from the public library is assuaged for him by his ability to move, with great ease, into a further type of microcosmic isolation.

Even the geographic and social isolation of the Finzi-Contini family, arguably the most overt expression of voluntary ignorance in the film, is constructed as a reasonable

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For a discussion on the importance of being somebody’s boss or being nobody’s boss in the distinction between the working class and the bourgeoisie, see Michael Zweig. *The Working Class Majority* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000): 3.

strategy for coping with the new anti-Semitic legislation. Micòl reveals to Giorgio that her family is able to retain the employment of *domestiques* because her father, Professor Ermanno (Camillo Cesarei), donates to government charities. This ability of the Finzi-Continis to evade the enforcement of one of the Racial Laws reveals two important things. First, it indicates that despite the imposition of racial legislation by Mussolini's Fascist government, Italy's anti-Semitism was not embraced by the Italian population with the same enthusiasm as in other European nations. As Renzo De Felice points out,

Italy [had] never really experienced racism or racist sentiment among the general public, even within its most provincial and middle-class culture. The very roots of racism are conspicuously absent. This explains how in 1936-1937, and even more in 1938-1943, when Fascism introduced its racist policies aimed at instilling a 'racist consciousness' among the Italian people, even though the campaign was supported by enormous propaganda efforts and powerful slogans, it failed to sway the Italian public.¹⁶

This is, of course, not to imply that the imposition of the racial laws were merely *symbolic*, rather than productive of serious consequences for Italian Jews. The implementation of these laws affected the lives of thousands of Italian Jews, forcing them out of many institutions in Italian society and culture.¹⁷ However, the dissension regarding the laws amongst even members of the Fascist party, as well as the lack of severity with which the laws were imposed and recognized by the average Italian citizen,¹⁸ is reflected in the Finzi-Contini's ability to retain their servants as a "reward" for their political philanthropy.

¹⁶ De Felice, 21-22.

¹⁷ Giorgio Bassani himself, as a consequence of the laws, was forced to break his engagement to a Catholic girl. See Zuccotti 1987, 43.

¹⁸ For examples of how Italian citizens, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were able to circumvent certain racial laws, see Ibid., 47-50

Second, by being able to “buy” their way around the Racial Laws, the environment in which the Finzi-Contini family exists perpetuates the notion that even if the political threat beyond the family’s borders worsens, membership in the upper class can provide a compensation of sorts. The Finzi-Contini’s willful isolation becomes understandable in the social environment depicted in the film, with its comparatively lax legislative enforcement and its capital-driven privileges. Granted, the idea that your class can save you is wholly refuted in the film’s concluding scenes, which show the Finzi-Continis, regardless of their class, rounded up and held in classrooms with the rest of Ferrara’s Jewish population. But this catastrophic conclusion does not render the family’s error in judgment morally suspect since their environment appeared to permit, and even encourage, such voluntary ignorance.

The tendency among the film’s characters to make optimistic assumptions regarding the future by looking to the past is also evident in the nostalgia with which Micòl, and especially Giorgio look back upon their childhood “relationship.” Giorgio holds on to the memories of stolen glances at school and at the synagogue as signifiers of an idyllic past whose childhood innocence he longs to rekindle into a romantic relationship with Micòl in the present. In *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, the danger this sort of nostalgia lies in its power to blind one to the threats of an uncertain future. Survivor testimonies often suggest that “many people found it difficult to believe the rumors about Nazi plans for the Jews” since European anti-Semitism had emerged and submerged in cycles for thousands of years, and “Hitler’s racial ideology at first did not appear any more dangerous than what had come before.”¹⁹ Even after Hitler’s

¹⁹ *Witness: Voices from the Holocaust*. Eds. Joshua M. Greene and Shiva Kumar (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000): 1.

appointment as Chancellor, many Jews continued to live normal lives as members of a culture that they viewed themselves a part of. Walter S., a Jewish survivor from Germany notes that “[i]n 1933, everything seemed to be cozy for us because we, as Jewish people in Germany, were first Germans and then Jewish...In 1936, when the Olympic Games were staged in Berlin, I was rooting for the German people, the German athletes to win as many medals as they could.”²⁰ In the mid-1930s, Italy’s Jews in particular were highly assimilated into Italian society and were “Italians through and through.”²¹ While the Finzi-Contini family unit, as well as Giorgio and Micòl, attempt to ignore the reality of the present by remaining tied to a nostalgic past, their stance has less to do with stubborn naïveté than with a misguided attempt to cope with an uncertain future whose threats seem so far removed from the reality of the personal past that they cannot be conceived of in the present.

Of course, while the characters’ acts of denial may appear as rational given the cultural reality of Italy at the time, these acts are continually exposed as tenuous, foreshadowing the film’s conclusion in which the idyllic past is obliterated as Micòl, and the rest of Ferrara’s Jews, await deportation in the same classroom that Micòl remembers studying in as a child. The futility of denial is made clear when Giorgio visits his brother Ernesto who is going to school in France. Being that Ernesto is sent away to school in order to avoid the consequences of the Racial Laws that dictate that no new Jewish students will be accepted into Italian schools, his absence acts as part of his father’s strategy of downplaying the effects of the racial laws by encouraging his family to perform as close to normally as possible. However, this escapist strategy actually

²⁰ Walter S. In *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ Zuccotti 1987, 21.

exposes the ignorance under which Giorgio's family, and much of Italy's population, is operating. After Giorgio arrives in France, he begins telling Ernesto how people in Italy believe that France and Britain will compromise with Germany at the last moment. Ernesto responds by saying, "Italians know nothing. You can't think if you don't know." Up to this point in the film, Giorgio has appeared to be most aware of situation facing Italy. But Ernesto's comment suggests that although Giorgio thinks he knows what is happening in Italy, his understanding is complicated by his limited perspective - one needs to be outside of Italy's environment in order to see the ignorance perpetuated within the local environment for what it is.

Of course, Giorgio is also disposed towards ignorance by his ties to Micòl. Despite everything that Giorgio might have known about the political reality in Italy before he went to France, despite all that he learned while in France from his brother and his brother's roommate (a former inmate of the Dachau concentration camp), and despite Ernesto's last-minute query, asked with an expression of knowing concern, as to whether Giorgio is sure that he wants to go back, Giorgio still refuses to stay away from Italy, replying that "There are too many ties I can't bring with me."

Behaving as Decorum Dictates: The Importance of Jor

Giorgio's precarious position between knowing that something is wrong but being unwilling or unable to take any significant action in response is mirrored in the actions of the Finzi-Contini's Great Dane, Jor. Because Jor's presence is uncomplicated by emotions or subtle mental processes, his function in reflecting the characters' tendency to

deny political reality serves to elucidate moral complications that a cursory reading of the film may overlook.

Jor is immediately contrasted with the popular conception of the family dog as a familial protector. The first time he is acknowledged in the film, one of Giorgio's fellow tennis players refers to Jor as a "monster" even as he sits completely docile. In order to assuage their anxiety, the Finzi-Contini's butler assures the group of young people that the dog is unable to bite anyone since he only has four teeth left, immediately positing Jor as unable to fulfill the role of protector. Furthermore, the three times in the film in which Giorgio attempts physical affection with Micòl, Jor is present and either does nothing, or arrives after the physical contact has already taken place. These instances show Jor's ineffectuality in protecting the innocent homespace from outside penetration.

Moreover, Jor's passivity in the face of potential outside threats is perpetuated by his own surrounding environment, just as the characters' environment perpetuates theirs. When Micòl leads Giorgio to the *Hütte* so that he can change into his tennis clothes, Jor tags along behind the two of them. Micòl reaches down to pet Jor, praising him as a "good dog." However, when Jor attempts to follow Micòl and Giorgio inside the *Hütte*, Micòl stops him, crying out, "No!" as if to suggest that Jor's behavior can only be thought of as "good" when it conforms to the docility encouraged by the aristocratic family environment. This exchange between Micòl and Jor is remarkably subtle, and acquires its importance through its similarity to an earlier exchange between Micòl and Giorgio, in which she jokingly chides Giorgio that it is "very bad" that he does not know German and that he should learn it "at once." In both of these instances, Micòl suggests that behavior must be dictated by what decorum demands. Just as Jor's aristocratic

surroundings demand docile obedience, the culture of Fascist Italy, now on the verge of an alliance with Nazi Germany, demands of Giorgio adherence to specific linguistic behavior. Also, just as Jor is scolded for behavior that deviates from what his environment demands, Giorgio is discouraged from responding actively to his growing frustration with Italy's political condition. While Giorgio and Malnate are in a theatre watching a Nazi propaganda film, Giorgio caustically refers to Hitler as a "clown" and the Nazis as a "bunch of riff raff." His remarks spark a scuffle with several other patrons, who refer to him as a "dirty Jew." Malnate quickly breaks up the fight and drags Giorgio out of the theatre, thus snuffing out Giorgio's small act of defiance. Malnate then castigates Giorgio for his actions saying, "You can thank your God the bum didn't know you really are a Jew," as if to imply that the appropriate behavior given Giorgio's social position is inaction.

Instances when Giorgio demonstrates a desire to act, but can only follow through with a meaningless gesture, also invite comparison to the behavior of Jor. After hearing that Mussolini has declared war on the Allies, Giorgio rushes home and furiously tells his mother the news. Ultimately, however, Giorgio sulkily retires to his bed, hoping that his mother will offer a meaningful response, which she does not. The infamous declaration of war by *Il Duce* occurs immediately after Micòl tells Giorgio that she does not love him. In this instance, Giorgio's meaningless gesture in response to Mussolini's announcement is dictated as much by his disappointment with Micòl's overt rejection as his anger regarding the war, which establishes a clear connection between Giorgio's inability to act in response to the macrocosmic political reality and his desire for inclusion in the Finzi-Continian family microcosm

Similarly, in the film's only instance where Jor appears to actually be acting in response to a situation as he *should*, the act is rendered meaningless by virtue of its coming too late. The first two instances in which Micòl rebuffs Giorgio's physical contact (when he tries to hold Micòl's hand in the carriage and when he kisses her upon her return from Venice), Jor is present but makes no attempt to protect Micòl. However, the third time in Micòl's bedroom, Jor is absent. As Giorgio attempts physically to overtake Micòl in her bed, she continually tells him to stop and to "behave" himself, giving him an order that might be given to a dog whose behavior is counter to that which decorum dictates. Finally, Giorgio gets up from the bed defeated and goes to sulk in a chair across the bedroom, which foreshadows his childlike act in response to the declaration of war. This is how a dog, when chastised, might behave as well. It is only after the threat of physical penetration has been averted by Micòl's resistance and Giorgio's retreat that Jor paws at the bedroom door to be let in – an active response that comes too late to have any meaningful effect.

In a broader sense, Jor's passivity also serves as a reminder of the ignorance cultivated by the characters themselves. Before Giorgio makes a forbidden return to Micòl's room and declares he will not again return, Micòl looks out a window at her father giving instructions to workers as they landscape the property. The elder Finzi-Contini attempts to pursue this activity rife with connotations of normalcy - earlier in the film Micòl remarks that her father believes "any land left uncultivated is a total waste" – as Jor runs freely across the space of the shot, serving as a visual reminder of the blissful ignorance that allows one to focus on aesthetic maintenance at a time of political turmoil. Jor's freedom in this scene lies in stark contrast to his inability to move when the Finzi-

Continis are rounded up in preparation for confinement. The latter scene coincides with the first time Jor is shown to be physically restrained by his leash. Just as Jor was able to run freely across the yard, Professor Ermanno was able to continue with his landscaping, both blissfully ignorant, and remaining so until it is too late for any act to offer deliverance.

It is also important to note that when Giorgio climbs the wall to find Micòl after his last night out with Malnate, it is the presence of Jor that alerts Giorgio to the fact that Micòl is in the *Hütte*, rather than her bedroom. In this scene, Jor stands in for Giorgio's failure to acknowledge the impossibility of a relationship with Micòl. The dog sits outside of the *Hütte*, facing Giorgio rather than the building, seemingly unaware of, or unconcerned with, whatever might be occurring inside. Giorgio recognizes the dog only as a signal for Micòl's presence, failing to comprehend the futility of his efforts for Micòl's requited devotion until he sees her and Malnate in bed together. Both Jor and Giorgio are kept out of the *Hütte*, separating them from Micòl, but Giorgio only truly understands the inevitability of this exclusion after being led to *Hütte* by Jor. It is at this moment of revelation, when the blissful ignorance afforded by impossibility disguised as possibility, which Giorgio shares with Jor, is destroyed.

The Potential Salvation of Enlightenment

Micòl herself seems intended as a metaphor for the garden of the Finzi-Continis; both are beautiful, desirable, often seemingly within reach, but forever unattainable. Ultimately, the recognition that the idyllic possibilities seemingly embodied in both Micòl and the garden are illusory affords Giorgio the possibility for salvation. The

exposure of the idyll as illusory is stressed in the film's concluding sequence, which features shots of the recently abandoned, locked-up Finzi-Contini homestead, its tennis courts and garden that bear strong resemblance to images from Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1955). These images contrast sharply with the soft-focus, dream-like beauty prevalent in the rest of the film.

As Millicent Marcus suggests, this power afforded by the film to enlightenment differentiates the moral engagement of De Sica's film from the elegiac reconstruction of Bassani's novel,²² a distinction briefly discussed above. The notion that salvation is possible only through enlightenment is subtly suggested throughout the film as Giorgio remains unable to act due to his desires for Micòl, but it is spelled out explicitly by his father after Giorgio sees Malnate and Micòl together and returns home, understandably depressed. A means of both appeasing his son and atoning for himself, Giorgio's father aligns, in Marcus's words, "[b]lind Fascist allegiance and adolescent infatuation [which both act as] gardens that benumb the critical intelligence and paralyze the will to act."²³ Giorgio's father tells his son, "In life, in order to understand, to really understand the world, you must die at least once. So it's better to die young when there's still time left to recover and live again." The death of Giorgio's deceived self, killed by his knowledge of Micòl and Malnate, yields him the possibility of salvation. But this "death" does not necessarily, as Marcus claims, "insure [*sic*] survival."²⁴ While Giorgio's new, disabused understanding of Micòl frees him from his inability to save himself, his father understands that his own illumination regarding the Fascist party has come too late, on the grounds that "there is no time to start over from zero." While repentant for the

²² Marcus 2000, 276. My emphasis.

²³ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

“many, many mistakes” that his generation made, and confident that Giorgio’s painful enlightenment is “for the best,” Giorgio’s father understands that his own enlightenment has come too late. The father’s knowledge of this is evident in his pessimistic response to the radio announcement proclaiming that German soldiers are facing “stiff resistance” in Russia, yet he tells Giorgio that he does not believe that the Germans can be pushed back. For Giorgio’s father, this scene of atonement is at once a confession of the stubborn ignorance of his past ties to Fascism, as well as an opportunity to invoke his own past as a means of appeasing for Giorgio. And of course, even after revealing his new outlook, the father still remains blinded by his skewed understanding that different outcomes may await Jews of different classes. When he sees that Micòl and her grandmother are being held in the same classroom as himself, he expresses surprise that they are “here too.”

However much Giorgio’s salvation comes through his own enlightenment, his altruistic savior must be viewed as Micòl. While a cursory reading of the film may view Micòl’s continual cycle of flirtation and rejection as an indication of a “sinister side [to her character] that eludes Giorgio,”²⁵ her role is actually quite similar to that of Giorgio’s father. Just as Giorgio’s father’s reluctant awareness of the threat of racial discrimination is complicated by his belief that he can keep his family safe through their political ignorance, Micòl’s awareness that she and Giorgio cannot have a romantic relationship is complicated by the fact that she is shown to care deeply for him. After Giorgio declares he will never return to the Finzi-Contini garden, Malnate assures him of how much Micòl likes and respects him. Micòl grows to understand that Giorgio’s desires for her must be severed in order for Giorgio to save himself. Micòl initially seems blind to the severity

²⁵ Avisar, 174.

of the current political reality, as is suggested in the playful manner she tells Giorgio that he must learn German at once, as well as her comment that her father might recover the tennis courts “next year maybe.” But a new political awareness is evident in her facial response when she sees her father landscaping, which suggests that she sees his actions as futile. After she returns from Venice, where she experienced discrimination at the hands of a Nazi professor, Micòl’s rejections of Giorgio’s advances begin to attain significance beyond the intimacy of their relationship, as she moves from being a “victim [of her own] elaborate psychic defenses” that render her incapable of intimacy, to a “victim...of a tragic foreknowledge that precludes sentimental attachments.”²⁶ Upon returning to Ferrara from Venice, she refers to the “wrong turn” taken in her relationship with Giorgio as “very dangerous.” After Giorgio kisses her in her bedroom, she tells him that it would be best for them not to phone each other, and for him not to come back. When he does return, she tells him that she does not love him. Micòl does these things not to be cruel to Giorgio, but for his own protection. His desires for Micòl do not allow him to see this, however, and even after his own declaration that he will not return to see Micòl, he is drawn back to her after Malnate tells him how highly she thinks of him. What Micòl cannot make Giorgio understand by *telling*, she makes him understand by *showing*, even if it means abasing herself by allowing Malnate, a man that she finds “ill-bred,” “too much a communist,” and “too hairy,” to penetrate her.²⁷ It is important to note that when Giorgio looks through the *Hütte*’s window at Micòl, before he realizes Malnate is also present, she is looking right at the window and is in no way surprised or startled when she sees him looking in at her – it is as if she is waiting up for him, just as his father is

²⁶ Marcus 2000, 269.

²⁷ Samuels, 161-162.

waiting up when he returns home afterwards. Micòl exposes both Malnate's presence and her nude self to Giorgio, taking an active role in her own demystification. She also reverses Giorgio's voyeuristic gaze back onto himself when she turns on the light, an action interpreted by Marcus as "shattering his illusion of invisibility and reversing the subject-object relationship...[Micòl's] return gaze, along with the sight of a nudity that preempts the need for imaginative speculation, forces Giorgio to accept that Micòl is indeed *other*, a separate subject able to make him, in turn, into the object of consciousness."²⁸ In an interesting reversal of the widely-accepted notion that to *look* is male and inherently active behavior, and to *be looked at* is female and inherently passive,²⁹ the film presents Giorgio's positioning as an object to be looked at by Micòl as the event that *breaks* the infatuation that had driven him *towards* passivity.

Just as Giorgio's father's enlightenment regarding Fascism comes too late to save him, Micòl's enlightenment regarding her own power comes too late to save her. She comes to understand too late that her *very presence* offers a false and dangerous sense of tranquility. Alberto was never able to recognize this tranquility as illusory, and for this reason, Micòl tells her father that if she goes to see Alberto on his deathbed, she would be "lying" to him since her presence can offer only false reassurance. Her inability to recognize the harmful consequences of Alberto's conception of her until it is too late mirrors Giorgio's father's inability to recognize the threat of Fascism until it is too late. In this sense, Micòl and Giorgio's father can be seen as victims of an ignorance recognized as such only when it is too late to save Alberto, or Italy from Fascism

²⁸ Marcus 2000, 269.

²⁹ Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Leo Braudy and Marshall Coen, eds. 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 841.

regardless of Giorgio's evasion of imprisonment, which grants them a degree of moral (if not physical) salvation.

A National Moral Charge

If the punishment that Micòl and Giorgio's father must face for their role in perpetuating willful ignorance can be seen as an indication that *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* marks De Sica's "return to a cinema of moral accountability,"³⁰ the harshest moral criticism within the film is reserved for the role of Italy itself. After the argument with his father in the dining room, Giorgio's assertion that, "We stood by silently when it wasn't happening to us" implicates not only his family but Italy as a whole since it is an indictment of public tolerance for persecution.³¹ Italian passivity is also implicated when the library director kicks Giorgio out of the building, suggesting that he must follow Fascist orders because he has a family. Giorgio expands this excuse by applying it to the whole nation, saying, "All Italy has a family," suggesting that there will always be an excuse to look away when action is necessary. De Sica's desire to offer a moral critique of Italy's past is further evident when Giorgio rides the train to France and overhears two Italian soldiers discussing the barbaric use of poison gas in Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia. National self-inculpation of this sort is indicative of the post-May '68 consciousness concerned with confronting Italy's traumatic wartime past by exposing the established historical consensus as a skewed construction – a phenomenon that will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

³⁰ Marcus 2000, 271.

³¹ Ibid.

In his examination of British policy towards European Jews between 1939 and 1945, Bernard Wasserstein notes that

[t]he men chiefly responsible for...refusing to admit significant numbers of Jewish refugees to Britain, Palestine, or the Empire, for blocking the bombardment of Auschwitz...were the sort who would probably have played the role of the Good Samaritan if their neighbor had fallen among thieves. But the agony of European Jewry was enacted in a separate moral arena, a grim twilight where the ethical code did not apply. And so they 'came and looked, and passed by in the other side.'³²

As this quote shows, Wasserstein indicts British bureaucrats during the Holocaust for a kind of double-standard. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that their actions (or inaction) were undertaken under the auspices of a historical aberration that problematizes the application of an *ex post facto* moral pronouncement. Similarly, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* articulates a critical moral position that exposes the catastrophic outcome of voluntary ignorance without morally condemning those characters for this response. By attempting to isolate or deny the full macrocosmic reality of wartime Italy, the characters remain vulnerable to persecution, and eventually imprisonment. However, by constructing his characters as responsive to a deceptive environment that engenders the notion that such ignorance is a viable response, De Sica's film keeps its moral commentary engaged with the history it represents. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* offers no indication that any other courses of action would have been *right*, to thereby offer salvation rather than damnation. As such, the film's dire conclusion points to an unfortunate inevitability, an inescapable fate that is antithetical to the notion of actions *misrecognized* as fate in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, the primary text of the next chapter.

³² Bernard Wasserstein. *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (London: Clarendon Press, 1979): 357.

2

The Conformist: Shadows of Conformity

As a methodology... 'the history of everyday life' is neutral. It becomes an evasion, an attempt to 'normalize' the Third Reich, only if it fails to confront the degree to which the criminal policies of the regime inescapably permeated everyday existence under the Nazis.... Normality itself had become exceedingly abnormal.¹

- Christopher R. Browning

In spite of a narrative focused on the making of an Italian Fascist rather than on the persecution of Italian Jews, not to mention a dearth of iconography associated with cinematic representations of the Holocaust, such as swastikas, concentration camps, decimated prisoners, and SS soldiers, Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (*Il Conformista*, 1970) contends with a looming, seemingly unanswerable question facing Holocaust historians: "Just what is it that allows ordinary people to commit extraordinarily evil acts?"² A response of voluntary ignorance and withdrawal in the face of totalitarian aggression, like that adopted by the Jewish characters in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, may be understood as a rational coping strategy, however fatal the ultimate consequences. But cases concerning individuals who directly participated in the execution of the Holocaust, in one form or another, defy such rational explanations. Instances of complicity that appear, at least retrospectively, to be voluntary "resist the traditional historian's effort at the kind of empathy which would permit one to see [the

¹ Christopher R. Browning. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998): xix.

² Sara R. Horowitz. "But is it Good for the Jews?: Spielberg's Schindler and the Aesthetics of Atrocity." *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*. Ed. Yosefa Loshitzky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997): 137.

event from the perpetrator's perspective], as it were, from the inside."³ Regarding his attempt to write the history of a German battalion that was responsible for massacring 1500 Jews in Jósefów, Poland in July 1942, historian Christopher R. Browning asks,

Can the history of such men [ie. the German reservists] ever be written? Not just the social, organizational, and institutional history of the units they belonged to. And not just the ideological and decision-making history of the policies they carried out. Can one recapture the experiential history of these killers – the choices they faced, the emotions they felt, the coping mechanisms they employed, the changes they underwent?⁴

The question that Browning poses suggests that any attempt to write the history of “such men” is complicated by the inexplicable nature of their actions. *The Conformist* approaches this challenge by highlighting the banality of both its protagonist, Marcello Clerici (Jean-Louis Trintignant), and his adherence to Fascist ideology, as well as by exposing the circumstantial nature of his complicity rather than localizing it in an inherent, yet nebulous conception of “evil.” This chapter explores how the film calls attention to the ambiguity of Marcello's Fascist commitment through both formal and narrative devices. This strategy, in turn, serves to suggest that Marcello's Fascism must be recognized as a performance in the face of the challenge that “such men” pose to historiography. To this end, I begin the chapter with an exploration of the post-May '68 political environment in which *The Conformist* was released, including a brief comparison to Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), which focuses similarly on how circumstantial, contingent events had led a young French man to join the Collaboration rather than the Resistance. Second, I examine formal and narrative characteristics that

³ Christopher R. Browning. Quoted in Hayden White. “The Modernist Event.” *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*. Ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996): 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

bring the banality of both Marcello's character, and of the chance circumstances behind his association with the Fascist regime, to the fore. This construction, in turn, serves to reflect the performative nature of Fascism itself, suggesting that, like gender, ideological affiliation is "not what one is but something one does."⁵ Marcello's performance as a Fascist extends only so far as the performance does not demand active violence. In part the result of this cowardice, Marcello and his complicity exemplify, to borrow a phrase from Hannah Arendt, "the banality of evil."⁶ Marcello is not a perpetrator driven by hate, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or by anything inherent to his character. In this respect, Bertolucci's film differs notably from its source novel by Alberto Moravia, in which there is evidence of an inherent lust for violence within Marcello. Third, I explore the cross-generational nature of this banality, as well as its ramifications for Marcello's misrecognition of his Fascist allegiance as a pre-determined fate rooted in his past. I conclude this chapter by positioning Bertolucci's construction of Marcello within two conflicting strategies mobilized in Holocaust historiography to contend with perpetrator complicity, namely Arendt's conception of the Holocaust in terms of the "banality of evil" and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's influential postulation that "ordinary Germans" acted as "Hitler's willing executioners."⁷

The May '68 Uprisings and the Ambivalence of Criminality

The Jewish characters in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* repress the political reality of the Fascist-governed macrocosm of war-time Italy by withdrawing into

⁵ Culler, 103.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964): 252.

⁷ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

microcosmic denial. Marcello, *The Conformist*'s quasi-Fascist protagonist, attempts, on the other hand, to repress a self-perceived, abnormality in his personal microcosm by conforming to the normative decorum of the Fascist macrocosm. In Marcello's eyes, Fascism is not just an ideological affiliation, but a means of constructing an external, "normal" social identity. The film reveals how Marcello's internal disposition continually threatens to emerge, and thus to betray this performance of normality as superficial. Bertolucci's film adopts a more overtly accusatory tone than does De Sica in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. As such, *The Conformist* reflects the altered political consciousness in Italy in the wake of the student protests of May '68, adopting a specifically Italian lens that serves to undermine the image of the Holocaust's Italian perpetrators as relatively benign.

Here one can draw a parallel between Italy's postwar culture and that of France. Henry Rousso, in his seminal examination of French memory since 1944, *The Vichy Syndrome*, claims that in May 1968, two Frances clashed with one another as "a generation noisily proclaimed its repudiation of a certain type of society and therefore, implicitly, of a certain version of its history."⁸ Most fundamentally, the new generation rejected the image of a "sacred and edifying history of the Resistance [against the Nazi occupation of France]"⁹ that had been constructed by General Charles de Gaulle, in part by exorcising the memory of Vichy from the French consciousness.¹⁰ This heroic Gaullist image of the wartime past was perceived, by the younger generation, as an "invented honor," crafted by their parents' generation as a refuge. Such a refuge was now unnecessary, as the protestors refused to acknowledge any correlation between the

⁸ Rousso, 98.

⁹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 71-72.

heroic image and the current government, which “saw and presented itself as the heir to the Resistance.”¹¹ As the previously conceived notion of a heroic resistance began to yield to revelations about French collaboration with the Nazis during occupation, revelations fueled by Marcel Ophüls’ seminal documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le Chagrin et la pitié*, 1969), the French complicity marked by the Gaullist myth forced the younger generation to confront what Lynn Higgins refers to as “the post-war question par excellence” – “Is this horror something I (or my parents) *saw* (as an innocent bystander, a powerless witness), or is it something I did?”¹² In other words, revelations of French collaboration not only undermined the Gaullist myth of the Resistance; they also undermined the familiar conception of the Occupation in terms of a dichotomous battle between the unequivocally virtuous and the unequivocally evil, “[placing] criminality in a wider context”¹³ through the collapse of this binary.

One consequence of the ’68 student uprisings, in which the past weighed heavily on France’s present, was the “forties revival” which saw the production of a large number of films and books set between 1940 and 1944.¹⁴ Higgins points out that this *mode rétro* involves a “backward turn” in the form of a nostalgic style, which formally reflects the cross-generational tension inherent in the uprisings. However, she also notes that this formal trend operates in conjunction with an ideological “trend to re-examine the ‘dark years’ of the Occupation.”¹⁵ For example, Louis Malle’s 1974 film *Lacombe Lucien*, in a highly unusual approach to depicting the war years, features a protagonist

¹¹ Ibid., 99-100.

¹² Lynn A. Higgins. *New Novel, New Wave, New Politics: Fiction and the Representation of History in Postwar France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996): 202. Original emphasis.

¹³ Rousso, 105.

¹⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵ Higgins, 190.

whose choice for collaboration rather than resistance is decided by chance rather than by ideological commitment. After he is unable to join the Resistance forces in 1944 France, the 18-year old Lucien (Pierre Blaise) finds himself in the midst of French collaborators after his bicycle accidentally malfunctions. This chance event prompts him to join the Collaboration as opposed to the Resistance, and eventually leads him to a career with the German police. Higgins notes, “By foregrounding the collaborator as protagonist, by its less than glowing portrayal of the Resistance, and by giving chance a crucial role in shaping events, *Lacombe Lucien* contributed to the emergence of a countermyth [to the Gaullist construction of a fully unified Resistance]”¹⁶ Lucien’s path was not paved by an inherent ideological tendency, but instead by a desire to somehow participate in the action. The ideological affiliation of the group did not matter to him, as long as he was allowed to participate. As such, *Lacombe Lucien* transgresses the opposition between virtuous and diabolical by “[playing] with the ambiguity of commitment, reacting...against any notion of ideological determinism.”¹⁷ While Higgins and Rousso are referring specifically to popular culture in post-1968 France, whose mood, in Higgins’ words, was one of “self-examination,”¹⁸ *The Conformist* falls into *le mode rétro* current via its aesthetic style and its narrative construction. Specifically, Bertolucci highlights his protagonist’s ambiguous character so as to blur the line between virtue and vice in a manner similar to *Lacombe Lucien*. As Angela Dalle Vacche observes, the restrained acting style of Jean-Louis Trintignant (Marcello) is antithetical to the histrionic, overtly “evil” Fascist/Nazi characters that appear in earlier Italian films concerned with Fascism, most notably perhaps Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City*

¹⁶ Ibid., 190-191.

¹⁷ Rousso, 129.

¹⁸ Higgins, 190.

(*Roma, città aperta*, 1945). This shift suggests that “[a]fter May 1968, Fascism can no longer fit inside a parenthesis.” Representations of Fascism and Fascists based clichés had begun to yield to historical representations characterized by ambivalence.¹⁹

Bertolucci’s film actually goes further than Malle’s in its foregrounding of Marcello’s ideological ambiguity. While Lucien’s ultimate decision to join the Collaboration as opposed to the Resistance is rooted in chance, the boy’s inherent disposition towards violence is revealed in the film’s opening scene, which begins with Lucien killing a bird with a sling shot. This penchant for harming animals is further suggested in the gleeful manner by which Lucien poaches rabbits. In this sense, Lucien bears a greater similarity to Marcello’s character in Moravia’s novel than in Bertolucci’s film, a distinction to which I will return below. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Malle juxtaposes Lucien’s gleeful poaching with a scene that reveals his heartbreak at the death of a horse, as if to undermine the possibility of reading the character as unequivocally malicious.

Marcello’s Conformity as Unrecognized Illusion

As Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar suggest, *The Conformist* “scarcely claims to account for Italian fascism. Instead, it explicitly questions its own staging of the past, in what amounts to a self-critique.”²⁰ Peter Bondanella remarks that the expressive and poetic lighting style of *The Conformist* is reminiscent of a 1930s studio film.²¹ Indeed, the film’s invocation of the past is clearly evident in its style, which presents, not unlike

¹⁹ Angela Dalle Vacche. *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 57-59.

²⁰ Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar. *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005): 19.

²¹ Bondanella, 301.

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis, relatively attractive characters in luxuriously decadent surroundings. However, I would not go so far as Andrew and Ungar in stating that the film *explicitly* reveals its own historical staging. Rather, I would argue that the staginess of the past is suggested only implicitly, as the opulent visuals of the film act as a mask that hides the brutal reality omnipresent around the characters. In this regard, the film's implicit suggestion of its own staginess correlates the film's aesthetic beauty with the frailty of Marcello's Fascist disguise that hides his self-perceived personal aberrance. The most obvious sequence of glamorous nostalgia in *The Conformist* indicative of *le mode rétro* is the dance/seduction scene between Giulia (Stefania Sandrelli) and Anna (Dominique Sanda) in a club full of well-dressed Parisians. Here the stoic and uncomfortable Marcello appears "trapped in the coil of a snake-like *farandole*."²² While this glamorous aesthetic may seem to overshadow the threat of Fascist/Nazi aggression, the polished, sleek imagery, evident throughout *The Conformist*'s violent narrative, "[corresponds] to Fascist spectacles which hid signs of disturbance beneath a surface of regimentation."²³ The fluid structure of the *farandole*, which simultaneously envelops Marcello even as he is set apart through his obstinate refusal to participate, contrasts sharply with his stiff mannerisms. The stylistic superimposition of a nostalgic aesthetic onto a violent narrative thus finds its allegorical manifestation in the split between Marcello's adopted "normal" external persona and his actual "abnormal" internal disposition: "Marcello's rigid body language, typified by robotic-like movements and a

²² Dalle Vacche, 70. Original emphasis. The "farandole" refers to a linked, circular dance.

²³ Ibid.

total absence of physical spontaneity, reflects...his efforts to control the chaos of his inner psychic state.”²⁴

Although *The Conformist*'s narrative is constructed in a way that only gradually exposes Marcello's Fascist identity as a tenuous disguise, the film's opening sequence reveals a division between two separate facets of the protagonist's identity, highlighting the ambiguous nature of his character through both formal and narrative strategies. The film's mise-en-scène, specifically colour and lighting, plays a role here. For instance, during the title sequence, Marcello is framed in a medium shot, sitting on a hotel bed, and several times a flashing light outside the hotel causes the lighting on his face to shift from almost completely dark to a harsh red light. Oscillating between darkness and light, this visual contrast anticipates the important allegorical role that shadows assume for the rest of the film, dividing the protagonist between the repressed “light” of his true self and the illusory “shadow” of his Fascist disguise. In the same scene, after he receives the phone call from Manganiello (Gastone Moschin) telling him that Anna has left with her doomed husband, the highly expressive lighting accompanies binarism at the level of the film's narrative. After hanging up the phone, Marcello grabs a gun in anticipation of the violence of his mission. This act is immediately followed by Marcello affectionately rearranging the blankets on the bed for the sleeping Giulia before leaving their hotel room, an act suggesting matrimonial devotion. These two instances, one stylistic and one narrative, set up the precariousness of the division between Marcello's internal self and external guise, as he never fully conforms to what true Fascist allegiance would require, nor is he able to accept his “abnormal” disposition – i.e., his homosexuality - which he attempts to repress via conformity to Fascist codes of behavior.

²⁴ Marcus 1986, 296.

Given Marcello's homoerotic tendencies, it might appear that *The Conformist's* portrayal of Fascism falls in line with a current in Italian cinema, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, in which Fascism/Nazism is aligned with "deviant" sexualities. More specifically, a latent homosexual inclination that manifests itself in Marcello's "murderous" tryst with Lino (Pierre Clémenti) could be seen as the catalyst that leads Marcello towards Fascist conformity, thus associating an aberrant sexuality with a disposition toward totalitarian dictatorship in the same manner as in *The Damned* (*La Caduta degli dei*, Luchino Visconti, 1969). Furthermore, comparisons can be drawn with sado-masochism in *The Night Porter* (*Il Portiere di notte*, Liliana Cavani, 1974) and *Seven Beauties* (*Pasqualino Settebellezze*, Lina Wertmüller, 1975), and the overall sexual depravity of the characters in *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1976) and *Salon Kitty* (Tinto Brass, 1976). From this standpoint, *The Conformist* can be said to reveal the hypocrisy and duplicity of totalitarian ideologies by attributing aberrant sexualities to totalitarians whose aim, in the words of Marcello during his pre-wedding confession, is to "hunt down subversives (*sovversivo*)."²⁵ However, the film does little to post such a mono-causal explanation of Marcello's decision to volunteer his services to Mussolini's dictatorship. Most obviously, the subtle voyeuristic tendencies of Professor Quadri (Enzo Tarascio) and the bisexuality of his wife, Anna, prevent establishing a strict correlation between Marcello's "abnormal" sexual inclination and Fascism. Furthermore, as Millicent Marcus observes, the depth and immutability of Marcello's homosexuality is called into question by the fact that of the three characters that arouse him sexually (Lino, the prostitute in Ventimiglia and Anna), two are females.²⁵ And of course it should be noted that this

²⁵ Marcus 1986, 307.

equation does not include Marcello's largely platonic desire for Giulia, whom he primarily views not with sexual desire but with the intent of forming a normal familial unit. Marcello's precarious commitment to his Fascist duties suggests that his repressed homosexual desires are incidental to his *political* affiliation, because to him, Fascism is merely a "logical" means to an end whose primary importance is conformity to *normality*, rather than specifically to Fascism. Bertolucci himself suggests that "[h]omosexuality is just an element in Marcello's character,"²⁶ and as such, it should not be understood as a definitive explanation for Marcello's desire to conform to Fascism.

This is not to say that Marcello's homoerotic tendencies play no role in his desire to perform normality through Fascist conformity, but rather, that this journey from self-perceived abnormality to Fascist allegiance is not inspired by anything inherent in his character, even if Marcello misrecognizes it as such. Just like the ambiguous circumstance – as opposed to ideology - that led Lucien to join the Collaboration instead of the Resistance in Malle's film, the traumatic, homoerotic tryst in Marcello's past that guides his search for normality is represented as a completely chance encounter. The serendipitous meeting of the young Marcello and Lino, the sexually ambiguous chauffeur whose advances prompt Marcello to attack, is the earliest *story* event that is visualized in Bertolucci's film. As this seminal piece of information is only presented approximately thirty minutes into the film, its narrative purpose is to alleviate the epistemological blind spot left by Marcello's stated desire for a "normal" life during his conversation with Italo (José Quaglio). However, this flashback seemingly comes out of nowhere, as Bertolucci matches the image of the adult Marcello holding up his hand to stop Managnello's car with that of the young Marcello hailing Lino's. The boy's action is quickly revealed to

²⁶ Bernardo Bertolucci. Quoted Ibid.

have been a means to avoid bullies that had been harassing him, which reveals this encounter as a chance circumstance. Even though Marcello hails a ride with Lino, they apparently had never met before this encounter, as is indicated when Lino asks the young boy his name. Like the accidental bicycle malfunction in *Lacombe Lucien*, there is no indication in *The Conformist* that Marcello would have been drawn to Fascist conformity had he not hailed a ride with Lino on March 25, 1917.

By locating the catalyst for Marcello's self-perceived abnormality in a specific, chance circumstance, Bertolucci's film makes a subtle, yet unquestionably important departure from Alberto Moravia's novel. Although Marcello's traumatic encounter with Lino is still the most significant event that goads Marcello towards his eventual adoption of Fascist conformity, in Moravia's novel several incidents that precede the violent confrontation with Lino suggest an inherent, abnormal wickedness in the young boy. For example, in the novel, the young Marcello has an attraction for "real weapons, in which the idea of menace, danger, and death is not conveyed by the familiar shape alone, but is instead the reason for their existence."²⁷ This fascination with weapons contrasts sharply with the young Marcello's aimless, awkward gun-handling when he "kills" Lino in the film. Similar to Lucien's acts of violence against birds and rabbits in Malle's film, Marcello's predisposition for violence in Moravia's novel is further developed through his destructive actions towards flowers before making an "imperceptible" passage to killing lizards,²⁸ and eventually killing a cat that he mistakenly hits with a slingshot while attempting to murder his friend Roberto.²⁹ Furthermore, the moment in the novel when Marcello has his violent encounter with Lino occurs on their second meeting, which they

²⁷ Alberto Moravia. *The Conformist*. Trans. Tami Calliope (Milan: R.C.S. Libri S.p.A, 1999): 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14-17.

had planned,³⁰ as opposed to the chance encounter in the film. All of these incidents, which in the novel precede the “murder” of Lino, suggest that the literary Marcello possesses an inherent penchant for violence that disposes conformity to Fascism, a suggestion foreign to the film version.

Rather than reading the film’s depiction of Marcello’s eventual conformity to Fascism as an inevitable character disposition, it is more accurately described as the by-product of a path in life defined by repeated attempts to nullify *any* differences between the self that he projects and what he conceives as normal behavior. In this regard, the ambivalent contentment that Marcello finds in the banality of his relationship with Giulia mirrors his commitment to Fascism. The latter, far from sincere, is repeatedly exposed as a façade by (in)actions that undermine Marcello’s stated devotion to Fascist ideology. The repression of his true (different) self - be it a murdering self, a homosexual self, a father-less self, or some traumatic combination of these and other selves that Marcello attempts to repress - requires that he adopt a disguise that is counter to his true self. His marriage to Giulia, and his satisfaction with her ordinary, middle-class nature, can never be mistaken for anything other than a facet of the disguise of normality that Marcello continually works to perform. There is, however, one moment when Marcello sheds his disguise with Giulia that affords a glimpse of his “abnormal” desires. On the train ride to Paris for their honeymoon, Marcello finally grants his new wife the overt sexual advances she has desired, but only after she reveals the details of her licentious affair with her sixty-year-old “uncle” when she was fifteen. Marcello’s amorous advancements on Giulia as she destroys the myth of her “normal” virginity look forward to his eventual

³⁰ Ibid., 54-62.

desires for the anti-Fascist bisexual, Anna, which again stress that his ideological conformity requires a repression of genuine desire.

Accordingly, Marcello's performance of Fascist "normality" is complicated by a cowardly internal disposition. His professed loyalty, both for Fascism as a regime and for the mission in Paris for which he volunteered, is exposed as an illusion by his inability to follow through when action is required. After Marcello first meets the brutal Special Agent Manganiello outside his mother's house, he chides the bigger man for equating family and country, telling him with Fascist bravado that country must come before family. Marcello's declaration that action must be defined by ideological devotion, however, is immediately undermined when he asks Manganiello to attack his mother's oriental chauffeur/lover, Chi, rather than undertaking the action himself. As such, Manganiello's *actual* brutality can be read as an antithesis to Marcello's *proclaimed* brutality, the former acting as the "embodiment of Fascist practice,"³¹ while the latter acts merely to expose the performativity of Fascist conformity through the performance's ultimate inaction. Because a performative act, such as Marcello's pronouncement of himself as Fascist, succeeds only if and when it "[brings] into being the condition to which it refers,"³² Marcello's inability to perform his Fascist commitment, as when he relies on Manganiello to attack Chi or commit murder, calls attention to the *failure* of Marcello's ideological performance. If ideological affiliation, like gender, can be said to be what one *does* rather than what one *is*,³³ Marcello's failure to perform as a Fascist exposes his Fascist identity as a disguise, whether or not he recognizes it as such.

³¹ Marcus 1986, 291.

³² Culler, 100.

³³ Ibid, 103.

Marcello's limited capacity to successfully perform his Fascist disguise is further revealed in the nature of the initial mission that he proposes to the Fascist government – to covertly gain information about the exiled anti-Fascist Professor Quadri. Such a mission conveniently affords Marcello the opportunity to perform the role of a Fascist without have to actually do anything overtly dangerous or violent. When he discovers that the mission has been changed during his stop in Ventimiglia, and that Professor Quadri must now be eliminated immediately, Marcello adopts the outer persona of a loyal Fascist, saying “This means I have no alternative,” accepting the orders but not moral accountability for his actions – a sentiment that echoes the countless Nazi officers at the conclusion of Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955), who claim, “I am not responsible,” on the grounds that they were “just following orders.” Even as Marcello “greet[s] this command with good grace like [a] proper functionary,”³⁴ his docility only serves to bolster his Fascist disguise. Once action is actually demanded of Marcello, he is unable to perform, as when he attempts to give his gun back to Manganiello in the kitchen of the Chinese restaurant. Although Marcello cannot be described as either surprised or dismayed when he receives his instructions to kill Quadri, the awkwardness with which Marcello randomly points the gun around the restaurant kitchen brings to mind the aimlessness of his gunplay during the “murder” of Lino rather than the composure of a committed ideologue about to perform the will of his superiors. Of course, Marcello's cowardly inability to carry out his mission frustrates his antithesis Manganiello, whose belief in the extremist rhetoric of Fascism and Nazism is clearly evidenced in his disgust with Marcello's passive inability to murder (or attempt to rescue) Anna, and is spelled out clearly as he equates the cowardly protagonist with other

³⁴ Marcus 1986, 291.

“subversive” groups while urinating outside the car, “Cowards, perverts, Jews. They’re all the same. If it were up to me I’d put them against the wall all together. It would be even better to eliminate them immediately, at birth.”

The moral charge within the film rests in Marcello’s inability to recognize Fascism for the ideological aberration that it turned out to be,³⁵ and in his inability to recognize his own performance of Fascist normality as a fraud. In this regard, Marcello embodies the prisoners in Plato’s allegory of the cave – an allegory of explicit relevance to Bertolucci’s film - who are unable to recognize their shadows as illusions of reality as opposed to reality itself. Professor Quadri, however, recognizes the frailty of Marcello’s Fascist disguise, even if Marcello cannot. As their conversation in the professor’s study concludes, Quadri tells his former student that “a real Fascist doesn’t talk the way you do.” As he says, this the professor opens the blinds that Marcello had previously shut, thus obliterating the presence of Marcello’s shadow against the wall, suggesting that the young conformist can be freed from the Fascist prison he has constructed for himself, but only if he can recognize his disguise for the illusory shadow that it is.

The internal conflict between Marcello’s “normal” public image and his “abnormal” inner self is most significantly manifested in the tension between his desire to rescue Anna and his desire to remain bound to a façade of normalcy via Fascist conformity. Just as Marcello’s sexual self emerges with Giulia only upon her revelation of the abnormality of her sexual past, Marcello’s attraction to Anna’s vicarious and unconventional sexuality is genuine. While initially Marcello’s desire for Anna stems from her uncanny resemblance to the prostitute in Ventimiglia, his fascination and sexual attraction grows as he covertly observes her sexual advances on Giulia. Dalle Vaccha

³⁵ Ibid., 290.

describes Anna as Marcello's "homosexual alter ego,"³⁶ suggesting that Anna stands in for Marcello's true self, which he is torn between embracing and repressing (or destroying). During the film's first half-hour, as Marcello joins Manganiello in an attempt to catch up to the professor and Anna, Marcello verbalizes his desire to save Anna while a series of flashbacks sporadically begins to fill in how Marcello got to this point. When Manganiello makes it clear that even if they catch up with the professor's car, Anna will have to be killed, because she is a witness, Marcello demands angrily to be let out on the road, which in turn prompts his flashback to the traumatic encounter with Lino. This flashback is intercut with two flashforwards to Marcello's confession that Giulia made him undertake prior to their wedding.

The structuring of this flashback/flashforward sequence is important for a number of reasons. After Marcello remembers his experience with Lino, he never again mentions a desire to save Anna. By cutting between the events of March 25, 1917 and the confession scene in which Marcello continually reasserts his desire for a normal life, which the priest lauds after scolding him for the "abnormality" of his past, Marcello's bizarre conception of atonement is made clear. Since the confession and its religious significance are merely additional factors that can serve to augment the normalcy of his impending marriage to Giulia, Marcello does not view the atonement afforded by the priest's absolution as true atonement because it is merely a part of the disguise of normality he is constructing. For Marcello, only "blood washes away blood," and this statement reveals an entrapment in the past that can be escaped only through the obliteration of the "difference" that the "murder" of Lino symbolizes. All the same, this conception of brutal atonement is complicated by Marcello's genuine desire for Anna.

³⁶ Dalle Vacche, 74.

The possibility of saving Anna would seem to offer an alternate means of atonement, one that might also alleviate the turmoil Marcello feels because of his difference, serving to balance out both his “murder” of Lino (through saving a life) and his homosexual desires (through his heterosexual desire for Anna). But once Marcello recalls his encounter with Lino, he no longer verbalizes an overt desire to rescue Anna. Moreover, Marcello’s recollection is engendered by Manganiello’s assertion that Anna’s murder is unavoidable, which suggests that Marcello assumes that the violence that he will soon be a part of is his necessary fate.

The Weight of the Past on Marcello’s Present

The extent to which Marcello conceives himself to be entrapped by his past reflects the extent to which the sins of an older generation weighed heavily on the generation that protested in May 1968 Paris. Marcello’s sense of entrapment by his past actions is formally manifest in the film’s unconventional narrative construction, which presents a plot whose story can be fully understood only after a complete viewing of the film.³⁷ This sort of narrative structure invariably undermines the ascription of a fatalistic determination to Marcello’s conformity. Bertolucci visually calls attention to the haunting nature of Marcello’s past by choosing to cast Dominique Sanda simultaneously in the roles of Anna, the Ventimiglia prostitute, and a mistress in the Fascist headquarters during Marcello’s first visit. While all of these characters are actually different people, the physical similarities that ignite Marcello’s attraction to Anna reveal Marcello’s subjective overestimation of the extent to which his past looms over his present. Of course, at the same time as Marcello is ensnared in his past, he attempts to destroy the

³⁷ Bondanella, 303.

abnormality of the past via normative conformity. In this regard, Marcello's internal struggles assume an overt Oedipal nature, most obviously when he invokes the crimes of his father's participation in the rise of Fascism while visiting him in the mental institution, harshly demanding details regarding his father's "patrols." Generational tensions were at the forefront of the May 1968 uprisings, as Rousso characterizes it: "'The father is dead. The time has come to draw up an inventory of the estate.' The parental voice had fallen silent; its mythical language had ceased to capture the imagination."³⁸ As Peter Bondanella notes, Marcello's rejection by his father motivates a desire to "please successive surrogate fathers," such as Professor Quadri, however much the orders to kill his former mentor reflect an Oedipal struggle.³⁹ This struggle between Marcello and his past is indicative of a political struggle whereby the power of an official conception of the past is being called into question.

After the substantial flashback recounting the entire history between Marcello and Anna, Marcello tells Manganiello of a dream that he had in which he and Anna were able to romantically come together. Here Marcello seems capable of altering his "destiny," and thus altering the violent trajectory the film's narrative is about to take, by assuming an active role in rescuing Anna,⁴⁰ but only if he is able to recognize his Fascist identity as an illusory shadow. When Marcello sits idly by while Anna pounds on his window, screaming for his help, his immobility is not simply a "cowardly inertia"⁴¹ that serves to localize the moral abdication of Fascism within one of its followers. Rather, it reflects an

³⁸ Rousso, 100.

³⁹ Bondanella, 303. This Freudian invocation also serves as an allegorical reference to Bertolucci's own decisive departure with *The Conformist* from the anticommercial filmic style of his cinematic mentor, Jean-Luc Godard, who previously shared the address and telephone number of the doomed professor Quadri, who would be killed, indirectly, by his former protégé and surrogate son.

⁴⁰ Marcus 1986, 297.

⁴¹ Ibid.

unconscious decision on Marcello's part to remain blind to the illusion afforded by Fascist brutality. By allowing Anna to be murdered, Marcello attempts to destroy permanently that facet of his self that had emerged with his attraction to her, to the prostitute in Ventemiglia, and to Lino. Since his libidinous feelings for Anna reflect those that he had for Lino, her presence threatens to expose the "abnormal" inner self that Marcello has attempted to repress. Thus, while his genuine desire for Anna might complicate the orders from above to have her killed, her elimination is absolutely necessary if Marcello is to continue conceiving the Platonic shadow of his Fascist disguise as reality.

The allegorical significance of Marcello's Fascist disguise is never more obvious than in the film's denouement, in which the fall of Mussolini destroys the illusion of normality that Marcello had found in the dictator's regime. Upon discovering that he had not actually killed Lino, that the trauma that had dictated his present up until October 15, 1938 was an illusion, the former conformist again attempts to distance himself from the violence of his past now that the murder of Professor Quadri and Anna can no longer serve as atonement for his sexual abnormality. He quickly sheds his precarious Fascist persona by publicly projecting blame onto Lino for the murder of the Quadris and loudly exposing his friend Italo as a Fascist just as an anti-Fascist parade on the nearby street disinterestedly passes them by. As he is no longer able to ascertain from which "society" he must beg forgiveness for his abnormality, Marcello finally embraces his personal difference in the film's concluding moments between him and a young male prostitute, which visually positions Marcello as one of the prisoners in Plato's cave allegory.

This denouement is a complete departure from the end of Moravia's novel, in which Marcello is killed in an air raid.⁴² The novel's conclusion brings full circle the presence of a macrocosmic fatalism that the inherently destructive and violent young Marcello suggests. The film's conclusion, however, returns to the stylistic motif of shadows to stress an ambiguity that remains associated with Marcello even after he sheds his idealized fantasy of heterosexual, monogamous, normal Fascism. Like the film's opening scene, in which Marcello is situated between the light and shadows as if to suggest the liminality of his character, the film's conclusion points to Marcello's embrace of his "true" homosexual self, and in a manner that retains a degree of ambiguity, given that Bertolucci does not visualize Marcello as fully illuminated, but rather shows his face cloaked half in light and half in shadow. This visual strategy suggests an enduring moral uncertainty in regards to Marcello's acceptance of his latent desires, which may be conceived either as an embrace of the fire of truth or as another illusory shadow.⁴³ Marcello's eventual break from the Fascist inheritance left for him, both by his father and by the *faux* murder of Lino, is not perceived as any less mono-causal than his prior adherence to Fascist conformity. In the collective conscious engendered by the 1968 student uprisings in Paris, the opposition between the virtuous and the diabolical is etiolated through the de-mystification of an imaginary heroism, which invariably demystifies any conception of Marcello as inherently evil. It is for this reason that Marcello's embrace of his true self cannot be understood as unambiguously virtuous, since the situational circumstances that propelled his journey to Fascism, and his corresponding lack of active participation in Fascism, undermines a conception of

⁴² Moravia, 323.

⁴³ Marcus 1986, 301.

absolute vice against which this potential virtue might be posited. As such, the moral charge of *The Conformist* lies in its construction of “evil” as ambiguously banal; a situational choice rather than the workings of fate posited in Moravia’s novel.

Bertolucci and the Banality of Evil

By suggesting that Marcello has the possibility to escape the violence of his Fascist association, but cannot because of his mistaken belief that taking action against the anti-Fascists Quadri and Anna in the name of normality will allow him to atone for the abnormality of his past, *The Conformist* positions Marcello between two familiar and conflicting interpretations of perpetrator complicity in regards to the Holocaust. Because his eventual position within the Fascist regime stems from a biographical accident rather than an inherent penchant for violence, his actions on the part of Italy’s dictatorial regime reflect important aspects of Hannah Arendt’s construction of Adolf Eichmann in her study, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Rather than depict the high-ranking Nazi as a synecdochic embodiment of an ideological evil that transcends his person, Arendt stresses the banality, both of Eichman’s character and of the factors that drove him to act on behalf of Hitler’s regime. She undermines any conception that sees Eichmann’s actions, as monstrous as they were, as inspired by a desire to reach some sort of predetermined end – that is, the genocidal elimination of a particular people. For example, she points out that in the first stages of National Socialist Jewish policy, Eichmann, along with many others in the Nazi party, viewed Zionism as an appropriate movement, in line with the Nazi’s initial focus on *expulsion* (to Palestine, as well as other nations) rather than

extermination.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Marcello departs from Arendt's understanding of Eichmann because he conceives his mission, whether it is to spy on the Quadris or to have them eliminated, as the imposition of a predestined fate, governed somehow by his past. In this regard, Marcello's adopts a teleological understanding of his fate, along the lines of what Christopher Browning refers to as

traditional humanistic historiography, in which human 'agents' are conceived to be in some way fully conscious and morally responsible for their actions and capable of discriminating clearly between the causes of historical events and their effects over the long as well as the short run in relatively commonsensical ways – in other words, agents who are presumed to understand 'history' in much the same way as professional historians do.⁴⁵

Of course, Bertolucci undermines Marcello's fatalistic conception by suggesting - largely through the stylistic invocation of shadows à la Plato's allegory - that it is only Marcello's wrongheaded belief that his present actions are governed by his past that drives him towards his skewed conception of Fascist normality. By critiquing Marcello's misunderstanding of an inherent predetermination, *The Conformist* also departs from possibly the most well-known recent (1996) documentation of the "ordinariness" of Holocaust perpetrators, Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Rather than the situational precariousness that Arendt argues led Eichmann to participate in acts of genocide or that goads Marcello towards Fascist involvement, Goldhagen postulates that a *latent* national

anti-Semitism moved many thousands of 'ordinary'⁴⁶ Germans – and would have moved millions more, had they

⁴⁴ Arendt, 58.

⁴⁵ White, 21-22.

⁴⁶ It is important to note that Goldhagen himself puts quotation marks around "ordinary" in this case, prompting the reader to wonder what exactly this "ordinariness" consists of. I point to the quotation by

been appropriately positioned – to slaughter Jews. Not economic hardship, not the coercive means of logical propensities, but ideas about Jews that were pervasive in Germany, and had been for decades, induced ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenseless Jewish men, women, and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity.⁴⁷

In effect, Bertolucci can be said to have positioned Marcello between Arendt and Goldhagen, and in a manner revealing the danger of misinterpreting as an inherent character trait what is, in fact, only a biographical contingency, albeit one which no less susceptible to nefarious influence.

In the closing chapter of his book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Browning highlights the danger of failing to recognize the force of accident and contingency in attempts to understand the nature of Holocaust perpetrators and their motives:

In every modern society, the complexity of life and the resulting bureaucratization and specialization attenuate the sense of personal responsibility of those implementing official policy. Within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behavior and sets moral norms. If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?⁴⁸

Bertolucci's construction of Marcello as taciturn and cowardly instead of innately evil does not attempt to nullify the horror of Italy's Fascist history. Rather, it is reflective of a shift in understanding of the Holocaust whereby the perpetrators' actions are not seen as resultant from a latent evil festering within a culture or within individuals. By constructing Marcello's conformity to Fascism as resultant from a chance, situational

Christopher R. Browning that opens this chapter which suggests that Goldhagen's "ordinary" Germans are only normal insofar as abnormality had *become* the norm.

⁴⁷ Goldhagen, 9.

⁴⁸ Browning, 189.

encounter in his childhood, and from an ambiguous devotion to the state to which he is aligned, Bertolucci's film presents the nature of active complicity as a precarious slope whose danger does not lie readymade within the perpetrator, but in the ambiguous banality of everyday performances of identity.

3

“This was [my father’s] gift to me”: The Reality of the Fable in *Life is Beautiful*

Holocaust survivors will have to face the facts: as they grow weaker with age, Auschwitz is slipping out of their hands. But to whom will it belong? Obviously, to the next generation, and to the one after that – as long as they continue to lay claim to it, of course.¹

- Imre Kertész

Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*, 1997) is easily conceivable as a “Holocaust film,” in contrast to *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *The Conformist*, in which the Holocaust takes place offstage, as it were. Even though its invocation of humour and adoption of a fabulist structure make Benigni’s film an unconventional example of historical representation, the film does represent the Holocaust, rather than merely allude to it, as is the case in the other two films examined in this thesis. This chapter examines the fabulist quality of Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* relative to the frequent depiction of the Holocaust in Italy as mild and even “beautiful” when compared to other European countries that experienced the *Shoah*, such as Germany, Poland or France. As discussed in the introductory chapter, this idealized image was enabled by the emphasis in Holocaust historiography on the small number of Italian Jewish victims, differences between Nazi and Fascist anti-Semitism, and widespread circumvention the Fascist Racial Laws by many Italians. The films examined in this thesis, in one way or another, refer to the established historiography’s repression of the reality of the Holocaust

¹ Imre Kertész. “Who Owns Auschwitz?” Trans. John MacKay. *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 267.

in Italy, which saw the persecution, deportation and extermination of the nation's Jews, communists, and, after the German occupation in 1943, Italian soldiers.

Whereas *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *The Conformist* offer implicit alternatives to the established historiography through their nostalgic styles and narrative trajectories, *Life is Beautiful* is far more explicit in revealing its own status as a story, evident in its presentation of the historical past “like a fable,” as is announced in voiceover right in the film's opening sequence. Although the film, on the surface, offers a sweet tale of a father's altruistic love for his son, replete with a bittersweet ending of sacrifice and survival, its rendition of this story in fabulist form alludes to the reality of what is actually happening, which momentarily appears when fissures in the film's constructed façade of normality threaten to undermine both the fantastic quality of the film itself, and the construction of concentration camp imprisonment as a game created by a father to protect his son. The prime example of such a fissure occurs towards the end of the film, when Guido (Benigni), with his son in tow, encounters a massive wall of corpses –a scene I will return to later in the chapter. In short, the film not only emphasizes that its portrait of the Holocaust is a subjective recollection by one of the characters, but it also shows that this recollection can be experienced as beautiful only if one represses those moments when horror threatens to destabilize the innocent fable, whose overt moral is that “life is beautiful.”

The world that Guido performs for his son Giosué (Giorgio Cantarini) normalizes the abnormality of concentration-camp life by constructing it as a game. This game, in turn, fully informs Giosué's perception of his experience of the Holocaust, which invariably becomes the experience that the film offers the viewer. *Life is Beautiful* does

not claim to be a “historical” representation. Quite the contrary, the film is a representation of a subjective memory construction whose *failure* to adequately represent the reality of the Holocaust serves as a testament to the power of the image of a “beautiful” Holocaust for postwar Italy, including the Italy of Benigni’s generation. Accordingly, this chapter will conclude with an exploration of Benigni’s own relationship to the Holocaust, mediated through his father’s stories of imprisonment in a concentration camp, as well as how the public discourse of postwar Italy repressed stories such as those of Benigni’s father.

Critical Conceptions of *Life is Beautiful* and “The Holocaust” as Cultural Artifact

The historiographical consequences of *Life is Beautiful*’s fabulist style of have frequently been overlooked by critics, who regard the film’s narrative strategy as an end in itself, to be either vilified or lauded. *New Yorker* critic David Denby goes so far as to call *Life is Beautiful* “a benign form of Holocaust denial [from which] the audience comes away feeling relieved and happy and rewards Benigni for allowing it, at last, to escape.”² Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer fault the film for its emphasis on a “denial of witnessing...The only evidence of Giosué’s own recognition is in the telling of the story, which itself breaks down considering the reporting of things that Giosué could not in fact have seen.”³ Even favorable critical responses often acknowledge the film’s fabulist nature without recognizing what it can reveal about Italy during and after the Holocaust. For example, film critic Linda Holt describes the film as an “innocent

² David Denby. “In the Eye of the Beholder: Another Look at Roberto Benigni’s Holocaust Fantasy.” *The New Yorker*. 15 Mar. 1999. 99.

³ Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer. *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001): 128.

piece of work.”⁴ Indeed, the film’s ending, in which mother and child are reunited after a horrifically traumatizing experience is unlike the reunion at the end of De Sica’s *Two Women*. In this regard, *Life is Beautiful* differs from other films that have used comic strategies in their representations of Holocaustic subject matter, such as black humor in Lina Wertmüller’s *Seven Beauties* (1975) or the slapstick comedy of Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940).⁵ *Life is Beautiful* certainly pays homage to Chaplin’s film not only through Benigni’s histrionic body movements, but also in the identification number 0737 that Guido shares with Chaplin’s Jewish barber, from whom he also replicates the utilization of a camp loudspeaker to broadcast a message to his wife, Dora (Nicoletta Braschi).⁶ Nevertheless, *Life is Beautiful* lacks both the darkness evident throughout Wertmüller’s film, as well as the anger of Chaplin’s, which comes to the fore in the humanistic soliloquy in the film’s concluding sequence. Holocaust survivor and novelist Imre Kertész also lauds the fabulist quality of Benigni’s film, arguing that “the spirit, the soul of *Life is Beautiful* is authentic, and it moves us with the power of the oldest kind of magic, the magic of fairy tales.”⁷

These critical responses share, in their positive and negative adjudications of Benigni’s film, a failure to examine what the film’s fabulist structure *does* to the film’s representation of the Holocaust. As such, the manner in which the fable-like structure of *Life is Beautiful* distorts the realities that lurk behind the tale of filial love and sacrifice goes unnoticed or unnoted. The fact that the film affords moments of horror to create

⁴ Linda Holt. “If all this were nothing but a joke.” *The Times Literary Supplement*. 12 Mar. 1999. 20.

⁵ I acknowledge that Chaplin’s film was released, depending upon one’s understanding of what “the Holocaust” consists of (see Intro pp. 5-7), either prior to or during the *Shoah*. Regardless, *The Great Dictator*’s invocation of Holocaustic subject matter is irrefutable and thus serves as an apt comparison.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kertész, 271.

brief yet overt fissures within a story promulgating the apparent banality that “life is beautiful,” in combination with the film’s explicit declaration of the mediated nature of its representation, demands that the fable be recognized as a mask serving to distort a reality, and one whose distorting function is made explicit.

In the 27 years between the releases of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *The Conformist* in 1970 and *Life is Beautiful* in 1997, popular cultural conceptions of the Holocaust have changed significantly. In 1988, the year of the 50th anniversary of the imposition of Italian Fascism’s Racial Laws, Ilan Avisar stated, in his book *Screening the Holocaust*, that “[t]he inhumanity and unspeakable atrocities of Auschwitz and other death camps assign to the Holocaust a critical *universal* significance,” even as Jews comprised “the main and ultimate targets of Nazi atrocities.”⁸ It must be noted, however, that this universalized understanding of the Holocaust emerged only gradually. It developed over time as the distance between the reality of the death camps and the present widened. In *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, Peter Novick stresses that

in the first postwar years, much more than nowadays, the Holocaust was *historicized*, - thought about and talked about as a terrible feature of the period that had ended with the defeat of Nazi Germany. The Holocaust had not, in the postwar years, attained transcendent status as the bearer of eternal truths or lessons that could be derived from contemplating it.⁹

As such, while *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *The Conformist* allude to the Holocaust through their representations of specific events occurring in Italy, *Life is Beautiful*, in its fable-like nature, invites critical responses that overlook the Italian specificity of the events it recounts. Attempting a counter-interpretation, I approach

⁸ Avisar, 90. My emphasis.

⁹ Novick, 110.

Benigni's film from a starting point different from that of the universalized Holocaust often invoked in discussions of Benigni's film. In other words, I will locate Italy within the film's representation of a fabulist Holocaust, rather than try to find the Holocaust within a specifically Italian setting, as was the case with De Sica's and Bertolucci's films.

Between Fact and Interpretation: Finding Benigni Through Spielberg

Issues of historical authenticity weigh particularly heavily on cinematic representations of the Holocaust. This emphasis is evidenced by the fact that Holocaust films frequently invite criticism informed by a historical bias that Millicent Marcus terms "Holocaust fundamentalism," especially when the film's director was born after the Holocaust. Critics subscribing to this approach, Marcus claims, "insist that historical accuracy be the principal criterion for judging representations of the Shoah." Marcus goes even further, however, suggesting that "for such critics the factual record stands as a sacred textual source that gives the Holocaust the status of religious absolute any deviation from which amounts to heresy."¹⁰ The concept of "Holocaust fundamentalism" provides a relevant point of entry to the issues taken up in this chapter. First, in its linguistic invocation of religious zeal, it refers to the Holocaust's evolution since the 1940s from historical phenomenon to a moral signifier, as discussed by Novick. Second, it calls attention to the importance of the "factual record" that Holocaust representations must be held accountable to. Ironically, these two features can be at odds with each other, insofar as the conception of the Holocaust as a meta-historical signifier would seem to transcend the historical "facts" that must serve as that signifier's absolute source of authority.

¹⁰ Marcus 2002, 268-269.

The importance of the factual record to Holocaust fundamentalism suggests a dichotomous relationship between historical fact and historical fiction, and Benigni's Holocaust "fable" would appear to be an egregious departure from the former. In anticipation of the barrage of criticism that *Life is Beautiful* would face upon its release in Budapest, Kertész wrote "I can't well imagine what it is in the film that has provoked such debate. I suppose that once again a choir of Holocaust puritans, Holocaust dogmatists and Holocaust usurpers is being heard, asking: 'Can, should the Holocaust be treated in this way?'"¹¹

Kertész's point can be understood in terms of the ideas of historian Hayden White, who argues that the opposition between fact and fiction is both the "founding supposition of Western realism," and a challenge to familiar conceptions of "how to represent reality realistically."¹² For White, the challenge has been exacerbated in the twentieth century by the occurrence of "holocaustal" events. According to White, these events - a prime example of which was the Nazi assault on European Jewry - are also *modernist events* that could not "possibly have occurred before the twentieth century [and their] nature, scope, and implications...no previous age could even have imagined."¹³ Such events "bear little similarity to what earlier historians conventionally took as their objects of study and do not, therefore, lend themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry."¹⁴ In order to contend with the challenges posed to historiography by the vast scale and comparative incomprehensibility of modernist events such as the Holocaust, historians, White argues,

¹¹ Kertész, 270.

¹² White, 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

have experimented with “abandoning the ground on which realism is construed as an opposition between fact and fiction.” The attempt to move beyond the fact/fiction opposition has informed the “creation of new genres, in both written and visual form, of *post-modernist*, parahistorical representation, called variously ‘docu-drama,’ ‘faction,’ ‘infotainment,’ ‘the fiction of fact,’ historical metafiction,’ and the like.”¹⁵ Historical representations exhibiting these post-modernist genre forms “[place] in abeyance...the distinction between the real and the imaginary – realistically imaginary or imaginarily realistic, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated.”¹⁶ In stark contrast to what Holocaust fundamentalism lauds as essential, the historical “appropriateness” of these works no longer relies on a pre-determined degree of verisimilitude, on a correspondence between the facts of the event itself and its representation (cinematic or other). Instead, such events provoke representations that suggest a degree of self-awareness regarding their own limitations.

An example of what White seems to have in mind can be found in *Life is Beautiful*, whose comically fabulist “characters and plot are historically neither true nor possible.”¹⁷ In departing from the Holocaust’s factual record, *Life is Beautiful* has been criticized in terms similar to those applied in the criticism levied against Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993). These two films might appear to adopt very different

¹⁵ Ibid., 18. Original emphasis. It must be understood that White’s invocation of the term “post-modernist” to describe these genres is a minor variation on his conception of modernist historiography rather than an understanding of postmodernism as an epistemological paradigm shift “following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts.” For an influential formulation of the latter, see introduction to Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): xxiii. To reiterate, if modernism dissolves the opposition between fact and fiction, then genres that White describes as “post-modernist” extend this idea by completely overlapping the two.

¹⁶ White, 19.

¹⁷ Holt, 20.

methods of Holocaust representation, but they both conform to White's conception of a "modernist historiography" whereby the dichotomous relationship between historical fact and historical fiction is blurred. As such, criticism in regards to both films has often been based in similar concerns regarding representational authenticity. A consideration of such similarities offers insight into the fable-like quality of *Life is Beautiful*, and its self-conscious exposure of the official image of the Italian Holocaust that the government had attempted to pass down to the postwar generation,

Here a comparison with *Schindler's List* is instructive. We can begin with the consequences following from Spielberg's combination of a melodramatic narrative with a realist film aesthetic. By adopting a film-realist visual aesthetic, *Schindler's List* presents moments of melodrama as ontologically equivalent to moments of representation whose historicity conforms to the "factual record" of the Holocaust. This strategy has inspired much criticism of the film, which has often been charged with crafting a deceptive viewing experience, offering a historical representation that *looks* authentic, but is not. Such views are spelled out by Sara R. Horowitz, who writes,

The black-and-white, hand-held cinematography of *Schindler's List* reinforces the truth claims of the film. The film seems 'old,' suggestive of genuine documentary footage...AT the same time, because the film is not really old and genuine but merely filmed 'as if' if were so, it *makes a false claim to authenticity*, much like a contemporary family momentarily donning Victorian garb for a sepia-tinted photo whose truth claims may be readily punctured and debunked.¹⁸

Horowitz's account overemphasizes the realism of the film's aesthetic strategies (black and white, hand-held cinematography) in generating "truth claims," ignoring counter-examples in the form of the film's utilization of sweeping crane shots, titanic

¹⁸ Horowitz, 122. My emphasis.

production values, not to mention the presence of high-profile Hollywood actors. But Horowitz does point to problems posed by the film's incorporation of fictional elements into its depiction of factual events. Most obvious in this regard is the film's narrative trajectory as a story of rescue. Horowitz points to several examples when events of mass death are occluded through a focus on the good fortune of a particular "Schindler Jew," who is personalized by the film in a way that distinguishes him/her from the rest of the soon-to-be victims. This strategy, Horowitz argues, "repeatedly deflects audience attentions from the catastrophe [the film] represents."¹⁹ Examples of this deflection in Spielberg's film occur when: Stern (Ben Kingsley) intervenes as a teacher is about to be placed on a truck for "unessential" workers, thereby drawing attention away from the rest of the workers on the truck; Schindler (Liam Neeson) rescues Stern after he is mistakenly placed on a train to a concentration camp, thus deflecting attention from the rest of the prisoners on the train; Nazi officer Amon Goeth's (Ralph Fiennes) gun malfunctions, resulting in a pistol whip rather than a bullet in the head for a rabbi, to thereby divert attention away from the overall efficiency of the Nazi death-machine..

One way to illuminate what is at stake at such moments is to consider the relevance of Linda Williams' account of melodrama's tendency to operate between the realms of "nick of time" and "too late."²⁰ In all of these examples, melodramatic instances of rescue that occur "in the nick of time" offer the salvation of a few rather than horrible death of many. The horror faced by victims who remained on the trucks for "unessential" workers until their final destinations in the gas chambers, who were

¹⁹ Ibid., 135.

²⁰ For a discussion on the melodramatic mode and its tendency to operate between the realms of "nick of time" and "too late," see Linda Williams. "Melodrama Revised." *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Ed. Nick Browne. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 69-77.

shipped to concentration camps in cattle cars, and who were shot by Nazi madmen, finds a compensation of sorts in the film's "nick of time" liberations. This deflection from genocidal catastrophe toward individualized rescue threatens to undermine the film's historical accuracy by allowing the theme of (individual) redemption to dominate. As such, "the Holocaust" constructed by Spielberg comes down to the story of an opportunistic-turned-benevolent Czechoslovakian Nazi whose cunning and humanity offered salvation for a select number of European Jews.

If this strategy of deflection truly allows *Schindler's List* to amount to what Horowitz refers to as a "feel-good Holocaust film,"²¹ the status afforded to the "facts" that the film's redemptive moments supposedly contradict demands examination in itself. Criticisms of *Schindler's List*, like Horowitz's, turn a blind eye to moments in the film when a "nick of time" rescue moves into the realm of "too late" (moments in which victims *are* murdered without intervention). This critical omission indicates a conformity to what White terms "conventional historical inquiry [according to which] the 'facts' established about a specific event are taken to be the 'meaning' of the event."²² In other words, instances in *Schindler's List* in which Jews are shown to be killed by Nazis appear "realistic" because they conform to the historical facts that have been established and accepted in regards to the Holocaust. Consider, for instance, the several instances in the film depicting murder at the hands of Nazis - an elderly man with one arm who works for Schindler is shot in the street; the head construction engineer in the Plaszow concentration camp is shot after telling Goeth that a structure would have to

²¹ Horowitz, 135.

²² White, 21. Original emphasis.

be entirely rebuilt; a father and son are both shot after the son attempts to run away from the Nazis; an injured woman in the arms of her husband is shot by a Nazi officer.

A traditional historiographic approach, like Horowitz's, treats the massacre of Jews as the meaning of the Holocaust. Because the film's moments of "too late" do not counter this meaning, they can be viewed unproblematically as "historically accurate." However, when the film focuses on the personalized rescue of a few within an event whose defining characteristic was the industrialized murder of a mass, moments whose fact/fiction delineation is unclear – i.e., moments of rescue - imply a meaning apparently counter to historical fact. That is, the meaning of the Holocaust is the murder of many, not the rescue of the few, and because this meaning is intimately bound to established Holocaust historiography, any conflicting representation must be viewed as historically flawed.

Such a view is espoused in regards to *Life is Beautiful* by Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer in their 2001 book, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation*: "What makes [the film] so palatable, so consumable, is the way in which it 'reintegrates' the crisis of the Holocaust within a 'transformed frame of meaning,' a family narrative that binds the child together with a loss that is seemingly forever deferred."²³ Just as Horowitz argues that Spielberg's film deflects attention from atrocity to redemption, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer argue that that Benigni's film employs a similar mode of deflection whereby the "[fabulist family] narrative...is so prominent as to divert viewers' and critics' attention from the ways in which the narrative's failure is due to the structure of the film's status as testimony."²⁴

²³ Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, 128-129.

²⁴ Ibid, 125.

But the film's failure as narrative-as-testimony is acknowledged in the very structure of the film, as is made clear in the opening voiceover that accompanies the image of a nebulous figure walking in a mist – a moment that Benigni revisits towards the film's bittersweet conclusion. The disembodied voice, which the film's conclusion reveals as belonging to an adult Giosué, states, "this is as simple story but not easy to tell." This revelation immediately undermines the film's status as a "historical representation of the Holocaust" that can be separated from the voice that presents the film's narrative. This is not to say that the film derives authority through its overt concession regarding the limits of its testimony. If this were the case, the film could be aligned with what Paul Arthur terms an "aesthetics of failure," a representational strategy adopted by documentary filmmakers since the early 1980s whereby "*failure* to adequately represent the person, event or social situation stated as the film's explicit task functions as an inverted guarantee of authenticity."²⁵ The explicit mediation stated by *Life is Beautiful*'s opening voiceover does not offer any such guarantee; instead it undermines any reading of the film that fails to acknowledge that the film *is* mediated and presented "like a fable." Furthermore, the fact that the story is said to be simple yet "not easy to tell" is an acknowledgement of the Holocaust's sublime nature,²⁶ which renders aspects of the event unavailable to knowledge. This sublimity, then, problematizes the representation, the *telling* of the Holocaust experience, even by first-hand witnesses, in light of the recognition that the catastrophe of the *Shoah* is "something the witness sees but cannot

²⁵ Paul Arthur. "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)." *Theorizing Documentary*. Ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993): 127. Original emphasis.

²⁶ The specifics of what this sublimity entails are understood in various ways by different thinkers. For a concise exploration of various philosophical understandings of the sublime nature of the Holocaust, see Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, 1-22.

say,”²⁷ a condition that *Life is Beautiful* points to in its opening voiceover. The sublimity of the Holocaust, according to Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, renders the event unavailable to knowledge because even though a victim experienced the event, lived the event, “she was not fully conscious at the time of its occurrence.”²⁸ This disjuncture between the sublime event that one sees and one’s inability to articulate that which one sees manifests itself in the “twin impulse of speech and its failure...in which the ‘self’ that remains in the camp or ghetto is at odds with the self who has survived to tell the tale...[T]he silences or stutters in [survivor] testimonies are a result of this battle.”²⁹ Similarly, the narrative limitations of the film, such as the presence of moments that the narrator could not have born witness too, serve as a reminder of the self-proclaimed fallibility of *Life is Beautiful*’s testimony.

Performance vs. Reality

Life is Beautiful, throughout its entire duration, exhibits an *overt* contrast between performances that are enacted as though they are real and reality itself. For example, in the sequence that follows the film’s grey, misty title sequence, to which I will return below, Guido and his friend Ferruccio (Sergio Bustric) are driving on a country road on their way to the city to work for Guido’s Uncle Eliseo (Giustino Durano). Guido naps, while Ferruccio drives and recites a poem. Suddenly, Ferruccio realizes that the brakes are not working. Guido initially misrecognizes Ferruccio’s expression of fright as merely a part of the poem, failing to comprehend the severity of their predicament until the car is completely out of control. This blurring of reality and performance quickly

²⁷ Ibid., xi.

²⁸ Ibid., xii.

²⁹ Ibid., xi.

assumes a political stance as the two men careen towards a Fascist celebration. Guido madly gestures for the participants to get out of the way of the car, which they do. The celebrants, however, interpret Guido's arm movements as a Fascist greeting, which they return. After the car finally stops and Ferruccio attempts to fix the brakes, Guido meanders away and lightheartedly tells a young girl that he is a prince, and that the land they are on belongs to him. He then alludes to Mussolini's brutal 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by playfully telling the girl that he will rename the area Addis Ababa, and replace the cows with camels and hippopotamuses. Guido's make-believe adoption of a royal stature is the first explicit example in the film of how Guido's good-natured performances serve to distort the brutality of the "dangerous times" in which he lives. Guido's fabulist skill is evident even in the film's first half in which the narrative trajectory is concerned not with survival but rather with the romantic formation of the couple (Guido and Dora).

Guido's reference to Addis Ababa suggests that the racialized colonialism of Italy's recent past is not lost on him, even if the fabulist rhetoric that he uses to present himself as royalty hardly captures the severity of Mussolini's totalitarian regime. In the film's fairy-tale-romance first half, a degree of obliviousness to the political threats that exist outside of his focus for Dora is certainly ascribed to Guido. After his Uncle Eliseo's house is ransacked, Guido responds with humor and does not entertain the possibility that the attack may have been racially motivated. Guido's Jewish race is revealed almost accidentally, after Eliseo's white horse is painted green with the words "Jewish horse" written on it, and Guido jokes that the same people might paint him yellow and write "Jewish waiter" across his chest. As such, while Guido may very well be aware of the

racist intent of this attack, he remains oblivious to the ominous threat that it suggests. While visiting Dora's school, where he adopts the guise of a Fascist official come to lecture on the superiority of the Italian race, Guido's physical comedy points to the irrationality of Fascism's racially-based pseudo-sciences. Aware as he is of the racial ideologies promulgated by Italy's Fascist government, Guido is unable to anticipate that these ideologies will eventually justify his family's deportation. His endearing performance in front of the children seems motivated more by a desire to see Dora again rather than to criticize the racist policies of Mussolini's regime.

Guido's implicit denial of the very real threat of anti-Semitism becomes evident in the climax of the film's opening half, when Guido successfully steals Dora from her Fascist fiancé using Eliseo's desecrated horse. The image of the couple trotting out of the engagement party on horseback suggests an icon familiar to fairy-tales, a fitting conclusion for the romantic trajectory of the film's first half. However, this same image also serves as a visual reminder that coinciding with the fairy-tale romance is the reality of Italian anti-Semitism, which will loom large during the film's second half.

Furthermore, Guido's initial playful invocation of Addis Ababa is contrasted in this scene by the presence of Ethiopian performers and an Ethiopian cake on display for the gaze of the Fascist audience. In this sense, Guido in the first half of the film can be viewed as a comic variation of Giorgio from *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Just as Giorgio is aware of the threats underlying the imposition of the Racial Laws, and yet is unable to act due to his desire for Micòl, so too is Guido perceptive of the racial motivation behind the vandalism of Eliseo's horse, but is so enamored by the gentle Dora that he is unable to recognize the threats posed by the Fascist racism. The film's

second half, set predominantly in an unnamed concentration camp, further explores how the performance of normality can distort reality. Here Guido continually attempts to render the camp experience into a game to shield his son from the omnipresent threat of extermination. But it must be understood that the world within the film continually complicates the efficacy of this guise, just as the moments in *Schindler's List* that slip from the realm of “nick of time” into “too late” complicate dogmatic assertions that the film’s a deflection strategy will necessarily result in a “feel-good Holocaust film.”³⁰

Even before the family is deported to the concentration camp, explicit evidence of Italian anti-Semitism surfaces after the formation of the couple and the subsequent birth of Giosué. Guido’s own bookshop is marked as a “Jewish store,” and a sign on another business forbidding Jews and dogs from entering prompts Giosué to ask his father why they are not allowed inside. Guido tells Giosué that the signage simply reflects the subjective prejudices of that shop’s particular owners, a response that echoes Guido’s earlier invocation of humor to mollify the consequences of the attacks on Eliseo. To “prove” his point, Guido tells Giosué that they will put up a sign reflective of his son’s “prejudice,” barring “spiders or Visigoths” from entry. It is essential to note, however, that the presence of anti-Semitism is not lost on Giosué, and that even before the deportation to the camp and the commencement of the “game,” Guido attempts to craft not what his son sees, but rather his understanding of what he sees.

Repressing the Real: The Guise of the Fable in *Life is Beautiful*

Giosué’s experience of the Holocaust becomes intimately bound to the image that Guido attempts to craft for him, an image that relies on repression. Guido’s strategy

³⁰ Horowitz, 135.

throughout the entire film, which assumes its most explicit form after he and his family arrive in the concentration camp, is to use humor and fantasy to repress the ramifications of the reality surrounding them. One way to capture what is at stake here is through the Lacanian terminology invoked by Slavoj Žižek, who sees Guido as constructing the horrific reality of the concentration camp as a harmless game in order to repress the “Real.” The latter, Žižek proposes, is “unfathomable because it is fundamentally impenetrable and cannot be assimilated to the symbolic order of language and communication (the fabric of daily life).”³¹ In *Life is Beautiful*, the Real, “the hidden, traumatic underside of our existence or sense of reality,” assumes the role of the true horrors of the camp that lurk behind the guise of the game. By constructing their deportation initially as a special trip in honor of Giosué’s birthday, and then as a game upon their arrival at the camp, which mutates specific elements of the concentration camp experience into “challenges” that, upon successful completion, provide the “players” with “points,” Guido’s strategy of repressing the Real does not, as Žižek notes, “protect the son from the harsh reality of the camp, [but rather] provides the symbolic fiction [of the game] that renders this reality bearable.”³² In other words, Guido attempts to give meaning to the logic-defying sublimity of the Holocaust, a “strange and unexpected place [within which, according to Lacan’s conception of the sublime,] the disturbing effects [of the Real] are felt.”³³

But of course, the presence of the Real repeatedly emerges, in spite of Guido’s efforts at repressing it, thereby creating fissures in the symbolic fiction that he must fill

³¹ Marek Wieczorek. “The Ridiculous, Sublime Art of Slavoj Žižek.” In Slavoj Žižek. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway* (Seattle: The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000): viii.

³² Žižek, 29.

³³ Wieczorek in Žižek, viii.

in order for the repression to continue. For example, Giosué notices that suddenly there are far fewer children in the camp than before, even if he does not fully understand the ramifications of the “showers” to which they were sent. He also tells Guido that “they make buttons and soap out of us,” and “they burn us in the ovens,” which signals an emergence of the Real that Guido must again repress by using humor to dismiss as ludicrous the horrific possibility of using people to wash his hands or button up his shirt. In this instance Guido also invokes the symbolic fiction of the game, telling him that other players are using these stories as a means of deception, offering a seemingly rational explanation for a reality that lies beyond comprehension.

As the film’s narrative is revealed to be a recollection on the part of Giosué, the dual presence of the Real (the true nature of the camp) and the symbolic fiction (the “game”) cannot be isolated from Giosué’s experience of the Holocaust. Furthermore, this experience is implicitly revealed as mediated, not only because the concentration-camp experience is mediated by the game, but also because the film’s story, presented as Giosué’s flashback, contains moments that Giosué did not experience. Of course, the entire first half of the film precedes his birth. While I do not wish to extrapolate as to how the film’s narrative might have been passed on to Giosué, it is important to note that these logical gaps within the film’s narrative-as-testimony act as reminders that the narrative is not a representation of historical fact. That is, the film’s narrative does not conform to the Holocaust fundamentalist ideology, but instead functions as a memorial recollection bound up with the repression of the Real. It is for this reason that the film’s repressive strategies transcend the film’s story to become manifest in the film’s narration itself.

While instances of anti-Semitism run beneath Benigni's comic histrionics during the film's first half, and signs of the camp's true reality create fissures within the symbolic fiction of the game during the film's second half, Guido must repress his awareness these *glimpses* of the Real in order to (a) win Dora from her Fascist fiancé in a fairy-tale like fashion, and (b) maintain the guise of the game for Giosué. However, the most visceral manifestation of the Real occurs in the film's opening scene, and is revisited towards the film's conclusion. As I mentioned above, prior to the scene in which Ferruccio's brakes fail and Guido meets Dora, the film's opening voiceover, which states the difficulty of telling this story, accompanies the image of a nebulous figure walking through a fog. When this scene returns towards the film's end, only then is the pile of corpses hidden within the fog made visible. In this instance, the Real finds its most overt and visceral manifestation in death and decay, and succeeds in fully emerging within the *form* of the fable as opposed to surfacing solely in fissures within the symbolic fiction. As this same moment of revelation is initially subjugated, or repressed, by the film's fabulist form, yielding to the fairy-tale romance, the entire narrative can be conceived as attempting to repress this moment of the Real. When this moment is again able to emerge, the film's narrative trajectory shifts, even as its fabulist testimonial structure remains the same.

It is important to note that Guido's discovery of the pile of corpses occurs immediately following a sequence in which the Real and the symbolic threaten to intertwine. After Guido shows Giosué that there are still children left in the camp (although he does not tell him that they are *German* children) the father and son are seen by a guard who assumes Giosué to be German (since Guido is in his prisoner clothes,

there is no mistaking his national identity). As she approaches, Guido instructs Giosué, under the guise of the game, of course, to remain completely silent. Until this point, the symbolic function of the game has been to repress the Real for Giosué by making him believe the game *is* the Real. Guido, on the other hand, presumably recognizes the symbolic fiction of the game for what it is – not the Real, but merely a symbol standing in for the Real. After Giosué is “captured” by the German guard, Guido shifts his instructions, telling his son to repress his language, which is within the realm of the symbolic,³⁴ because it will betray himself as an (Italian) subject.

The disjunction between the Real and the symbolic that Guido recognizes and that he attempts to hide from Giosué manifests itself most clearly when Benigni “translates” the German instructions from an officer regarding the prisoners’ work duties into Italian, detailing the rules of the “game.” In this instance, the precarious mutability of the symbolic function of language is clearly evident, as Guido manipulates the language to construct a new symbolic fiction completely distinct from the actual instructions given by the officer. This distortion serves as a reminder of the “symbolic” nature of the game, as its true existence lies only in the language Guido uses to create it. However, when Guido tells Giosué to not speak after the German guard takes him away to the very party for which Dr. Lessing (Horst Bucholz) recruited Guido as a server, the father is no longer attempting to repress the Real; instead he is attempting to repress the *symbolic* which assumes the form of language. Guido’s anxiety is that if Giosué speaks, his (Italian) language will reveal his true (Italian) self. Given the cultural dichotomy of the camp whereby the Italian prisoners are subservient to their German masters, Guido

³⁴ Martin Jay. *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993: 350.

perceives that language is so tied to the subject that it becomes intimately bound to the nature of the subject. In other words, he fears that the German guards will assume Giosué's utterance of his native Italian tongue to stand in for his Italian *being*. Of course, this turns out to be the case when Giosué accidentally utters "*Graci*" when another server places food in front of him. Anticipating the consequences of this revelation of Giosué's (Italian, ie. prisoner) self, Guido quickly has the rest of the children in the room saying "*Graci*" by the time the waiter returns with the German guard. Because all of the children are now using the Italian language, the symbolic function of language once again lacks a clear correlation between the linguistic (Italian) utterances of the children and a revelation of a specific identity. Just as Guido is able to invoke language so as to craft a symbolic fiction to render the Real of the camp bearable for Giosué, he is able to manipulate language in this case in order to render it entirely apart from the identities of the uttering subjects.

Despite Guido's acumen regarding Giosué's inability to recognize how his Italian language can betray his self, in this same sequence Guido's naïveté is revealed through a similar failure to recognize the Real. Although he might understand the symbolic nature of the game for the fiction that it is, Guido is still blinded by hope of rescue. Denby argues that "Benigni has the clown's gift of obliviousness," a characteristic employed to triumph over the "world's malevolence in an expression of *buffa*," that Guido shares with earlier Benigni characters in films such as *Johnny Stecchino* (Benigni, 1991) and *The Monster (Il Mostro)*, Benigni and Michel Filippi, 1994), in which he plays "an innocent

dolt mistaken for (respectively) a Mafioso and a serial killer, and he overcame the suspicions against him by simply not noticing them.”³⁵

Up until the revelation of the pile of bodies, this oblivious nature certainly seems to apply to Guido. I have already explored examples in the film’s first half and in the beginning of the second half that suggest Guido does not comprehend the extent of anti-Semitic persecution. But this obliviousness, which can perhaps more aptly be described as desperate naïveté, continues after the family is deported to the camp. For example, when Giosué is supposed to be hiding in the barracks during the day, he appears while Guido is performing manual labor, hauling heavy anvils as he fulfills his actual role within the Real of the camp while he pretends that his torturous actions are a part of the symbolic fiction of the game for his son’s benefit. After Giosué tells his father that all the other children have been rounded up for “showers,” Guido scolds him for not accompanying them. This instance of paternal authority, however, reflects an egregious lack of comprehension of the Real. In the preceding scene, Dora learns from another female inmate the true purpose of these showers. At the moment when Guido instructs Giosué to go to the “showers,” the word “showers” acts as a symbol of the Real (the true extermination intent of the camp) which Guido fails to recognize as such. It is only Giosué’s stubborn demeanor that saves his life rather than the symbolic fiction of the game, rendered useless in this instance by Guido’s misrecognition of what the “showers” actually consist of.

An even more significant example of Guido’s own failure to recognize the Real is the result of his prior relationship with Dr. Lessing. After Guido recognizes the Nazi doctor from his time as a waiter in Arezzo, he tells another inmate that the doctor is his

³⁵ Denby, 98. Original emphasis. *Buffa* translates to “funny” or “comic.”

“friend” and believes this connection might enable him, Dora, and Giosué to escape the camp. This misattribution of benevolent intent to the Nazi doctor reveals that Guido, to some degree, has bought into his own constructed repression. When he discovers that the only reason Dr. Lessing arranged for him to be a server at the banquet was to gain his assistance in solving a riddle, Guido’s hope for a possible means of escape collapses. It is immediately following this sequence, in which the opposition between the Real and the constructed fiction of the game nearly dissolves, that Guido stumbles onto the abject pile of bodies.

As the dichotomous relationship between the Real of the camp and the fictions constructed by Guido blur, Guido walks through a nebulous fog, telling Giosué to sleep, and wondering aloud whether what they are experiencing is dream. At this moment, a more primitive (Freudian) means of contending with the unfathomable nature of the Real rather than the symbolic fiction of the game is evoked. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer characterize this moment when Guido stumbles upon a pile of corpses as “the only moment of seeing in the entire film, but it is embedded in a narrative that otherwise refuses to show such acts of seeing.”³⁶ Once Guido has this experience of seeing the Real, his desperate hope that the Real is simply a dream is destroyed. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan suggests that “our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. The subject does not see where it is leading, he follows.”³⁷ Accordingly, since Guido has been blinded by the fiction he has constructed, the revelation of the corpses serves as a testament to the presence of the Real just as it exposes the *game* as a dream from which Guido must awake in order to maintain the

³⁶ Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, 126-127.

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977): 75.

fiction for the sake of Giosué, even to the point of sacrificing his own life. In this regard, the final wink that Guido gives to the hiding Giosué assumes a self-reflexive role. Since the wink is also directed towards the audience (Guido looks directly into the camera) it suggests that the father fully comprehends the necessity of his ultimate sacrifice.

Of course, such acts of seeing can exist *within* the narrative, but they do not change the form of the narrative itself, since Giosué, the source of the film's narration, is shielded from the Real by his father. The return of the repressed, the Real that Guido sees in the form of intertwined bodies, is not made available to Giosué, asleep on his father's shoulder, his back to the abject mass of death. For Giosué, the Real remains repressed. It is for this reason that the fog scene, initially repressed in the beginning of the film when it quickly yields to the comical escapades of Guido and Ferruccio in their car, is repressed again as Guido continues to evoke the symbolic fiction of the game up until the film's conclusion. Although Guido is afforded recognition of the Real, Giosué is still operating unknowingly under the guise of the game, and since Giosué is the film's narrative authority, the emergence of the Real is again repressed and the film retains its fabulist form right up until the bittersweet reunion of Dora and Giosué that concludes the narrative.

Contending with the Reality of the Fable

Because the film's entire narrative is revealed to be a recollection by Giosué, the narrative is retrospectively marked by the distortion of his present. What Giosué is left with, the gift that his father has given him, is a mediated version of the Holocaust whereby the true nature of the event is repressed. As Žižek suggests, and I have

discussed above, Guido's game does not protect Giosué from the harsh reality of the camp, but renders it bearable through the symbolic fiction of the game.³⁸ Moreover, this fictionalization distorts Giosué's impression of the Real, which remains intimately bound with the testimonial nature of the narrative itself. In this regard, a clear connection exists between Giosué (the author of the narrative *within* the film) and Benigni (the author of the film itself). Some critics have argued that Benigni's fabulist construction mirrors Guido's construction for Giosué whereby the film's repression of the Real (supposedly resulting in a sweet fairy-tale Holocaust film) treats the audience much like Guido treats his son.³⁹ But this argument fails to acknowledge that the film's fabulist nature does not repress the Real for the sake of the film audience's protection. Rather, the fabulist form mirrors Giosué's experience of the event, a form conveyed through Guido's invocation of the symbolic fiction. Benigni does not attempt to shield his audience from the Real as Guido attempts to shield Giosué, but rather allows the film's structure to reflect the structure of Giosué's experience of the event.

At this point, it is useful to highlight the connection between the mediated nature of Giosué's experience of the Holocaust and that of Benigni's own experience, which serves to illuminate how the film contends with the legacy of the distorted perception of the Holocaust in Italy. Born after World War II, in 1952, Benigni acquired an understanding of the Holocaust dependent on stories told to him by his father, Luigi, a former Fascist soldier who was imprisoned in a German concentration camp for two years.⁴⁰ The use of humour throughout *Life is Beautiful* reproduces the "protective

³⁸ Žižek, 29.

³⁹ See Denby, 99 and Žižek, 29.

⁴⁰ Ruth Ben-Ghiat. "The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 255.

denial” that Luigi Benigni employed to censor the horrific reality of the stories that he told his family, as various commentators have suggested. The latter include Roberto Benigni himself, who recalls that the story of his father’s imprisonment in a Nazi camp was told “like in the film, like a fable. He was afraid to make us fearful. He was protecting us like I am protecting the son in the movie.”⁴¹ Although his father’s history was peppered with fellow prisoners dying around him night and day, Benigni remembers that “[h]e told us about it in an almost funny way – saying tragic, painful things but finally his way of telling them was really very particular. Sometimes we laughed at the stories he told.”⁴² Given Guido’s repression of the Real for the sake of Giosué, a clearer connection can be ascertained between Guido and Luigi Benigni, with both Roberto Benigni and Giosué left with the legacy of the fables constructed by their fathers.

But Luigi’s and Guido’s strategies of protective denial transcend the boundaries of mediation within a family history. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes, *Life is Beautiful* is “a text founded on the tension between family memory and public history.”⁴³ Just as Luigi and Guido repressed certain realities for the sake of shielding their families from the true horrors of the Holocaust experience, so too were the experiences of Italian soldiers like Luigi Benigni repressed in order to construct the image of a less-than-horrific Holocaust in Italy.

Once Marshall Pietro Badoglio, Mussolini’s successor, “instructed the Italian army to lay down its arms before the Allies but to ‘react’ to attack ‘from any other quarter,’”⁴⁴ Italy’s Fascist soldiers underwent a transformation from conquerors “who

⁴¹ Benigni. Quoted in Ibid., 259.

⁴² Benigni. Quoted in Marcus 2002, 271.

⁴³ Ben-Ghiat, 259.

⁴⁴ Zucotti 1987, 6.

were groomed for war from birth on and sent to fight alongside Hitler for a new rightist Europe,”⁴⁵ to captives. In other words, Italian soldiers were left to fight against their former Nazi allies, who were already present in many parts of Italy, without any leadership. In these circumstances, many of the soldiers were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps, and after the war, were shameful indications of Italy’s involvement in World War II. “[With t]heir haunted air and their often-mutilated bodies, they stood out even among Italy’s landscape of devastation as disturbing reminders of the abyss between expectations and outcomes....between the past ideal of the fascist conqueror and the present reality of national impotence.”⁴⁶

The cultural consciousness of postwar Italy was ripe for repressing the traumatic memory of its recent past. In terms of the cinema, this consciousness was reflected in the rapid waning of domestic interest in Italian neo-realist cinema, whose “engagement with contemporary social problems” foregrounded the wartime devastation that Italians could see first-hand without being reminded of it onscreen. A further reflection of repression was the “economic encouragement of and support for films that promoted positive images of Italian life” offered by the Christian Democrat government that assumed political power in 1948.⁴⁷ As a result of this reluctance to face the past embodied in soldiers like Luigi Benigni, stories of these soldiers remained unspoken in the public sphere. Ben-Ghiat notes that “of a total of 526 full length (Italian) POW diaries and memories that had appeared as of 1997, only 35 were published in the years 1945-1950.” Furthermore, in the post-war period, no political party spoke on the behalf of the soldiers. Instead, public commemorations focused on the (victorious) Resistance

⁴⁵ Ibid., 256.

⁴⁶ Ben-Ghiat, 258.

⁴⁷ Marcia Landy. *Italian Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 149.

partisans.⁴⁸ While the experiences of Italian soldiers remained unspoken in the public arena, “a culture of victimization – which extended to civilian populations as well due to Italy’s postwar diplomatic ostracism and material devastation – also mitigated any coming to terms with Italy’s own identity as a country engaged in anti-Semitic persecution.”⁴⁹

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, this public repression began to lose its grip as the 50th anniversary of the 1938 institution of the Racial Laws approached.⁵⁰ Soon after, in the wake of the fall of Communism and the Italian First Republic, the experiences of former Fascist soldiers like Luigi Benigni became “an acceptable topic for major presses.”⁵¹ And, as Millicent Marcus notes, it is only during this post-1988 period that the topic of the Holocaust in Italy and Italian anti-Semitism began appearing with some degree of regularity in Italian films.⁵²

It is from these “new configurations of national memory”⁵³ that *Life is Beautiful* emerges. By constructing the film as a fable, Benigni explores the ramifications left by the construction of Italy’s experience of the Holocaust dependent on the repression of the Real – the true nature of the camp in the film or the experiences of soldiers like his father than were unable to find a place in the public discourse. *Life is Beautiful* must not be conceived of as a historical representation apart from its fabulist nature. Evidence of the Real within the film must be recognized in order to understand how the act of mediation serves to expose the repression required in order to craft a Holocaust in which “life is

⁴⁸ Ben-Ghiat, 258. For an intriguing exploration into the historical distortion inherent in this popular emphasis on Resistance Partisans in Italy, see Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Spider’s Stratagem* (*La Strategia del ragno*, 1970).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 256.

⁵⁰ Zimmerman, 7.

⁵¹ Ben-Ghiat, 258.

⁵² Marcus 2005, 321-323.

⁵³ Ben-Ghiat, 258.

beautiful.” If repressions within the film’s fabulist structure are *not* recognized, then the symbolic fiction assumed by the film’s fabulist form is mistaken for the Real, just as Giosué mistakes the symbolic fiction of the game for the Real. Life is beautiful only if memory allows for it to be constructed as such. But in this case, the legacy that remains must be confronted and understood not as a representation of history “as it was,” but as a fable.

Epilogue: The Historical Holocaust

It may be that we feel the obligation of keeping the record of this past through some sort of “master-narrative,” without actually being able to define its necessary components. The reason for the sense of obligation is clear, but the difficulty in establishing the elements of such a master-narrative (except on the simplest factual level) may stem from the impression that this event, perceived in its totality, may signify more than the sum of its components.¹

- Saul Friedlander

In May 2005, I had the privilege of participating in the annual March of the Living (MOL) – a commemorative march from the main camp at Auschwitz to Auschwitz II - Birkenau that takes place every year on *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day). On the day of the march, as I gathered with thousands of other participants, all wearing our navy blue MOL rain jackets outside the train station in Oswiecim (Auschwitz), Poland, we received somber instructions regarding the march’s decorum. We were told that we could walk alone, or in groups with arms linked in solidarity, but we were to remain completely silent until we arrived at Birkenau. The other instruction was that no national flags were to be held aloft, with the exception of the Israeli *Magen David*, which looked forward to the conclusion of the MOL trip in Israel for *Yom Hazikaron* (Israeli Remembrance Day) and *Yom Ha’atzmaut* (Israeli Independence Day). As I witnessed the international group of participants (approximately 20,000) brought together as a purposely de-nationalized whole, I began to ponder the ramifications of an understanding of the Holocaust removed from continual historical engagement in favor of a universalized conception that is, by necessity, both ahistorical and meta-national. The danger of this conception, from my perspective, is that the Holocaust threatens to become an abstraction rather than an actual historical occurrence undertaken under the auspices of

¹ Saul Friedlander. “Introduction.” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*. Ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992): 3.

real men and women, and whose victims were real individuals. It was this question that led me to study Holocaust representations within a particular nation as opposed to a broader “Holocaust film” genre approach.

Of course, the *Shoah* was and is not an abstraction, and as Holocaust literary theorist Lawrence L. Langer points out, the vast body of Holocaust literature that already exists, and to this I would add the vast number of films that have been made that reference the Holocaust, obviates debates as to whether or not the event *can* lend itself to representation.² If the question then becomes how to best contend with the looming historical catastrophe left by the Nazis’ “Final Solution,” the art of the cinema affords possibilities for exceeding the limitations of language in representing that which seemingly defies, or at least challenges, linguistic rendering. Film scholar Anton Kaes suggests that cinema’s “syncretistic” quality, which incorporates characteristics of other media, including literature, but also theater, painting and photography, affords it the unique ability to “translate the fears and feelings, the hopes and delusions and suffering of the victims, all unrecorded and undocumented [by the Nazis], into pre-verbal images and thereby trigger memories, associations, and emotions that precede the kind of rational reasoning and logical-linear discourse needed in historiographical writing.”³ The films that this thesis examines do not attempt to explain how or why the Holocaust happened, either in its totality or in Italy. But they do confront the titanic topic of the Holocaust in a manner that speaks to how the *Shoah* has been understood in postwar Italy. Unlike certain of the most celebrated films centered on circumstances in Germany, France, or

² Lawrence L. Langer. “On Writing and Reading Holocaust Literature.” *Art from the Ashes: The Holocaust Anthology*. Ed. Lawrence L. Langer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 3-4.

³ Anton Kaes. “Holocaust and the End of History.” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution.”* Ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992): 208.

Poland, the Italian films examined in this thesis highlight not explicit horror, but instead mobilize the cinema's ability to call attention to seemingly banal subtleties: a daughter's expression of hopelessness as she watches her father tend the family landscape while she understands that their deportation is inevitable; the silence and stases of a man whose lover is about to be murdered under his own auspices; the wink of a father to his son before being murdered on the eve before their liberation. Such incidents suggest danger in the very normality that they bring to the fore.

Recognizing how Holocaust representations speak to specific national histories that exist within the totalizing (macro)history of the Holocaust is essential to understanding -whether in a scholarly or popular-cultural sense - the *Shoah*'s inextricability from the historical circumstances in which it occurred. A conception of the Holocaust as transcendent above historical circumstances in the name of universalization, in the name of speaking at once to everyone, in turn speaks to *no one*. Abstract theorizations about the "unrepresentability" of the Holocaust or hierarchies of representational appropriateness can only take us so far in understanding the Holocaust, especially as we now sit on the cusp of a postsurvivor world. Questioning the historical characteristics of the Holocaust and pondering how this historical catastrophe actually occurred is now more important than ever, since the availability of first-hand experience is continually waning. This is not to say that Holocaust scholars must seriously entertain ludicrous accusations from Holocaust deniers or "revisionists," but that the Holocaust must not be understood with such transcendent reverence that its characteristics are not open for discussion and debate.

To return to my experience on the MOL, the most explicit example of this tendency occurred on the first day of the trip, after we had finished walking through the crematorium in the main camp at Auschwitz. Our guide, anticipating emotional responses from the group, gave a somber, open invite for any participants to speak their feelings after their first viewing of a Nazi concentration camp. One participant remarked that he could not understand why the Jews went to the gas chambers “like sheep to the slaughter.” Regardless of whether or not this observation is historically “accurate” or not, what startled me was the virulent opposition that this remark was met with. It was not debate, but refutations suggesting that this question was an offense to survivors, and should not have been asked. In short, many of the participants in this tour devoted to Holocaust education attempted to stifle a legitimate question that could be addressed through rational discussion, as opposed to simply silent reverence. The Holocaust truly does challenge one’s ability to come to grips with the rationale that had enabled such mass destruction. If we are unable to verbalize this challenge by invoking those characteristics of the Holocaust that appear irrational, how can the *Shoah* help but be reduced to a theoretical idea as opposed to the actual, historical catastrophe that it was?

The Holocaust can maintain pragmatic relevance in the present if and only if the present remains in continual engagement with the historical past. In the introduction I mentioned that cinema has the unique ability to make the past seem present. It is through this ability that *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, *The Conformist*, and *Life is Beautiful* reveal significant insights into not only what the Holocaust was like in Italy, but into how cultural understandings of the Holocaust are mutable, and as such, are threatened by the

reduction that can occur when an abstract universal moralism precludes the continual examination and re-examination of the historical record.

Bibliography

- Andrew, Dudley and Steven Ungar. *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963).
- Arthur, Paul. "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)." *Theorizing Documentary*. Ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993): 108-134.
- Avisar, Ilan. *Screening the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- Bassani, Giorgio. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Trans. Isabel Quigly (New York: Antheneum, 1965).
- Bauer, Yehuda. *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978).
- Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. "The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 253-266.
- Berenbaum, Michael. *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).
- Bernard-Donals, Michael and Richard Glejzer. *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
- Bondanella, Peter. *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*. 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001).

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- Browning, Christopher R. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).
- Cardullo, Bert. *Vittorio De Sica: Director, Actor, Screenwriter* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002).
- Colombat, André Pierre. *The Holocaust in French Film* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993).
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Dalle Vacche, Angela. *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- Dawidowicz, Lucy S. *The War Against the Jews 1933-1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).
- De Felice, Renzo. *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*. 1st English ed. Trans. Robert L. Miller (New York: Enigma Books, 2001).
- Denby, David. "In the Eye of the Beholder: Another Look at Roberto Benigni's Holocaust Fantasy." *The New Yorker*. 15 Mar. 1999. 96+.
- Doneson, Judith E. *The Holocaust in American Film*. 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).
- Flannery, Edward H. *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Antisemitism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

- Friedlander, Saul. "Introduction." *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*. Ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992): 1-21.
- Gilbert, Martin. *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (London: Fontana Press, 1986).
- Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).
- Governì, Giancarlo. *Vittorio De Sica: Parlami d'amore Mariù* (Roma: Gremese, 1993).
- Higgins, Lynn A. *New Novel, New Wave, New Politics: Fiction and the Representation of History in Postwar France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).
- Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961).
- Holt, Linda. "If all this were nothing but a joke." *The Times Literary Supplement*. 12 Mar. 1999. 20-21.
- Horowitz, Sara R., "But is it Good for the Jews?: Spielberg's Schindler and the Aesthetics of Atrocity." *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*. Ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997): 119-139.
- Insdorf, Annette. *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- Kaes, Anton. "Holocaust and the End of History: Postmodern Historiography in Cinema." *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final*

- Solution*". Ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992): 206-222.
- Kertész, Imre, "Who Owns Auschwitz?" Trans. John MacKay. *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 267-272.
- Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
- Landy, Marcia, *Italian Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- Langer, Lawrence L. "On Writing and Reading Holocaust Literature." *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*. Ed. Lawrence L. Langer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 3-9.
- Ledeen, Michael A. "Preface." In Renzo De Felice. *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*. 1st English ed. Trans. Robert L. Miller (New York: Enigma Books): vii-xiv.
- Loy, Rosetta. *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*. Trans. Gregory Conti (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000).
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- Marcus, Millicent. *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
- . "De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*: An Escapist Paradise Lost." *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*. Eds. Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 258-279.
- . *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

- . "Return of the Repressed: Italian Film and Holocaust Memory." *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945*. Ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 321-329.
- McIntyre, Faye. "In Love and War: Vittorio De Sica's *Two Women*." *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 242-257.
- Moravia, Alberto. *The Conformist*. Trans. Tami Calliope (Milan: R.C.S. Libri S.p.A, 1999).
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism*. 6th ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Coen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 837-848.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).
- Rousso, Henry. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- Samuels, Charles Thomas. *Encountering Directors* (New York: Putnam, 1972).
- Santerini, Milena. "Holocaust Education in Italy." *Intercultural Education* 14.2 (June 2003): 225- 232.
- Steiman, Lionel B. *Paths to Genocide*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998).
- Stille, Alexander. "The Double Bind of Italian Jews: Acceptance and Assimilation." *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945*. Ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 19-34.
- To Bear Witness: Holocaust Remembrance at Yad Vashem*. Eds. Bella Gutterman and Avner Shalev (Jerusalem; Yad Vashem, 2005).

- Wasserstein, Bernard. *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (London: Clarendon Press, 1979).
- White, Hayden, "The Modernist Event." *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*. Ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996): 17-38.
- Wieczorek, Marek. "The Ridiculous, Sublime Art of Slavoj Žižek." In Slavoj Žižek. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000): viii- xiii.
- Williams, Linda. "Melodrama Revised." *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Ed. Nick Browne. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 42-88.
- Witness: Voices from the Holocaust*. Eds. Joshua M. Greene and Shiva Kumar (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- Zimmerman, Joshua D. "Introduction." *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945*. Ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 1-15.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000).
- Zuccotti, Susan. *The Italians and the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987).
- . *Under His Very Window: The Vatican and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
- Zweig, Michael. *The Working Class Majority* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000).