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MEMORY AND INSPIRATION IN THE MOVIE "LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL", BY ROBERTO BENIGNI

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ABSTRACT

This article exposes the course developed in research carried out to understand the conditions of possibilities that allowed the achievement of the film *Life is Beautiful*, directed by Roberto Benigni, and his controversial recognition. For this, it takes into account the director's trajectory, raising the hypothesis that, assuming certain positions expressed in film production, structured learning becomes evident in a web of relationships established by Benigni in counterpart of the cultural poetics of the turn of the twentieth century. It is about guiding the construction of memory that is revealed as inspiration in the creative process of said film.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is the result of a four-handed work and is linked to the studies developed by the Research Group registered at CNPq, Cinema and Audiovisual: memory and cultural training processes, and by the Post-Graduate Program in Memory: Language and Society of the State University of Southwest of Bahia (UESB). The purpose was, after an analysis of the critical fortune dedicated to Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), - girded by a myriad of interpretations that considered it the most controversial non English language film in history, - conditions of possibilities that allowed the achievement of said cinematographic narrative, as well as the conditions for its repercussion and worldwide recognition. To reach this goal, we exercise a methodological and epistemological procedure based on the understanding of memory as a faculty that composes the structuring of social systems and that enables the maintenance of interactive and institutional standards. Performing as a collective construction process composes the conditions of possibilities of the imaginary, the development of relationships and the material interchange of social systems with nature, providing the parameters for the organization of its space-time dimension, its configuration and rhythms of reproduction and change.

Thus, the conception of this work prioritizes the following perspective: a cultural expression can be understood, among other things, by the network of social relations composed of interdependent individuals and by the codes and values established by an epoch. From this perspective, we ask: what are the conditions of possibilities that allowed the achievement of the cinematographic narrative of *Life is Beautiful*? How did the conditions for worldwide repercussion and recognition of this film set? An effort to understand the processes of transmission of knowledge and learning that traverses Roberto Benigni's journey, as well as the apprehension of the space-time conditions of film production, has become fundamental to find the answers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

When we take the subject of memory, whether we speak of perception, whether we mention linguistically organized memory or through images and mechanisms of remembrance, we are dealing with knowledge funds in process, accumulated and mobilized through the actions of human groups. Thus, it can be said that what is done are permanent processes of learning. Processes that parameterize expressive possibilities and participate effectively in the formulation of ways of life, which, in turn, are in counterpart of the world images, cosmologies, narratives that, to a certain extent, determine and

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situate the possibilities of expression. In this direction, we take the film *Life is Beautiful* from the networks of sociabilities developed by Roberto Benigni. Strictly speaking, the film is divided into two parts: the first, a comic narrative, light and romantic; the second, the drama of a Jewish family, traumatized by the Nazis, struggling to survive the Holocaust. In addressing the Jewish genocide by means of a light and comical narrative, the cinematographic account of *Life is Beautiful* has undoubtedly become one of the most controversial films in world cinema. This repercussion around the film was a fundamental factor for the construction of the proposal that fuses our text, namely, a reflexive assertion that envisages to understand the object on canvas, as an artistic narrative that allows us to examine - through the categories of memory and corporate social knowledge - the conditions of possibilities that have potentiated the production and repercussion around the film *Life is Beautiful*. Our reflective understanding of the film has direct inspiration in the thinking of sociologist Norbert Elias. In *The Cutting Society* (2001), Elias indicates a way to delineate a cartography of the decision-making process of a creator articulated with the lived situation and the network of formation of which he is part, that is, the decisions and creations of a person are articulated with socio-historical development, or rather, historical becoming. Thus, in the dynamics of relationships established during his trajectory, the creator is being guided to have certain behaviors. This movement of internalization of a way of thinking and behaving, often unconsciously, and built in the long term, articulated with the dynamics of tension control between individuals and social networks, Elias (1997) calls *habitus*.

Elias understood, therefore, that the functional structure of *habitus* is the result of this relationship between individual and social elements. Within this same logic, the German sociologist argues in *Symbolic Theory* (2002), that for a better understanding of the norms of constructed and incorporated socio-historical conducts, a disposition is necessary to articulate these symbols socially learned and transmitted with a human condition to store, transmit and re-signify human experiences in time, which we call memory. This put, considering the memory like participant of a complex of knowledge that instructs the creator to a cinematographic make, we analyze the film *Life is Beautiful* linking it to a generational knowledge that crosses the cinematographic formations of Roberto Benigni. In other words, the cinematographic narrative on canvas constitutes, in our view, the expression of a synthesis of socially incorporated knowledge, produced from the relations established by the Italian director. It was in this way that the research, in its entirety, sought the trajectory of Roberto Benigni, reflecting and speculating on his encounters and experiences, especially the cinematographic experiences, established by him in the flow of time. Thus, as a work built on a dialogue between cinema and a theoretical reference that includes memory in the articulation of the capacity to store and re-signify in the light of the figurations developed by individuals, it seemed convenient to resume and discuss Benigni's participation in the films that he cooperated and produced, entering into the details, making a theoretical articulation to understand how Benigni resented his experiences. From this angle, the film, the fruit of their experiences, shows a connection. It is a memory embodied in the film itself. Therefore, when we look at the film *Life is Beautiful* we will not see it as an illustration of what Benigni meant, but we will observe a learning history in

which social relations, tensions and social dynamics expressing the conditions of production and recognition of the movie.

It is clear, however, that the interactions developed during Benigni's life are not the only isolated path to understand film production on screen. Benigni's choices, too, were propitiated by the possibilities of the cultural codes of his time. Given the understanding that the analysis of a cultural expression needs to take into account socio-historical development, the ornamental game of narrative has guided us to reflect on the conjuncture of film production, so that we could understand *Life is Beautiful* through the space of the possible. From this perspective, historicizing and contextualizing the subject matter of the film, as well as the film itself, has become a fundamental element in our research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer the questions raised about Benigni's film, we began the research by drawing up the interpersonal relations and cultural expressions that gave rise to one of the conditions of possibilities for the most famous film of the Tuscan comic. In other words, although the cultural object under study has been the film *Life Is Beautiful*, we can only understand its warp when we chose the path that made it possible to understand the learning processes of its creator, considering the cinematographic path that culminated in the expression the most famous film by Roberto Benigni. This path persists the need to interrogate the past, since the "individual" decisions are associated with the human capacity to perform synthesis of knowledge stored in the intertwining of the course of a person's life with the sociocultural changes and permanencies of the time that involves it. In other words, the delineation of this look, that is, the willingness to try to understand the process of forming a cultural object, seeking to escape from superficial imagery analysis, necessitated an investigative articulation that did not neglect its inventive activity, which did not transform it into mere testimony or ideological document. This, for its part, requires a retrospective look that extrapolates the perceptions of the concrete reality and allows us to visualize an artistic object integrated with the cultural background of its producer, his historicity and his desires. In this logic, taking as a starting point the contacts established by the Tuscan comic from childhood gave us a direction for a better reading of the film in question. Put another way, the sedimentation of the artistic "mask" adopted by Benigni in his films, in particular, *Life is Beautiful*, is the result of a journey traveled by the Italian comic from his first contacts established throughout his career.

That is why we welcome Roberto Benigni as a cinematographic creator, outlined by a tributary memory of his relational networks and functional interdependencies. Thus, we consider that the sedimentation of this artistic structure that engendered one of the conditions of possibilities for the accomplishment of the film work was the contact of Roberto Benigni with the poetry of octave rhyme, with the canonical literature of the transition from the medieval to the renaissance, with the circus, with the avant-garde theater, with the films of Charles Chaplin, with Giuseppe Bertolucci, Renzo Arbore, Marco Ferreri, Jim Jarmusch, Cesare Zavattini, Federico Fellini and film producers heirs of the Pasolini tradition. The importance of the meeting, during the artistic trajectory of the Tuscan comic, with Giuseppe Bertolucci, writer and director of several productions staged by Benigni, is

striking in our research. It was by Bertolucci's guidance, for example, that Benigni got in touch with the literature of Dostoyevskij, Schopenhauer, Rabelais, etc. Concerning Rabelais, we note that his work, especially the book *Gargantua* - with his humor from below - assumed peculiarities in the Benigni film trajectory (PARIGI 1988: p. 165). Benigni's reference matrix, we find in the themes, scenes and language of the artistic expressions produced by him, in partnership or not with Bertolucci, a direct echo of the experiences and knowledge incorporated by Benigni in his relationship with Bertolucci. Benigni, in his constant reading of ordinary words, considered low-key words, has, in our view, converted to his characters the references of his past by means of a grotesque and popular key, a raw material systematized and organized by Bertolucci. We note that the linguistic game developed in the analyzed productions is not, at any moment, vulgar. A carnival-style game celebrates and humanizes bodily functions. In this way, the comic mask of Benigni has as its characteristic, the progressive displacement of carrying other knowledge, exclusive of a distant time, namely: the medieval poet of the public square. This information translates the tendency of a Rabelaisian entailment to the comic person of Benigni. Em sua investigação sobre o sistema de imagens da cultura cômica popular, denominado por ele de "realismo grotesco", Bakhtin (2013) argues that this "grotesque realism" was very well translated by Rabelais in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. For the Russian thinker, the images referring to the material and corporal principle, which he calls the "public square vocabulary", are the images that translate popular culture. In spite of the vulgar appearance, the "vocabulary of the square" corresponds to a popular and peasant physiology that brings to the center all those things of human daily life and that were judged as spurious and strange by the official culture throughout the civilizing process. We therefore perceive an essential aspect of the constitution of Benigni's artistic persona, at least in his early works under the guidance of Giuseppe Bertolucci: the hierarchy of the substantial and elemental properties of the grotesque. In this way, the constant evocation of obscenity, a characteristic trait of the Benigni characters, in partnership with Bertolucci, is closely linked to the internalization and mobilization of previously established knowledge. The physicality, rooted in the grotesque, artistically speaking realism that was present in Benigni's life from acting as a poet in the square, became more latent with the Rabelaisian reading suggested by Bertolucci. An example, underlined in our research that reverberates the Ravaisian essence of the Tuscan comedy is the film *Berlinguer ti voglio bene*, especially the scene in which Cioni Mario, Benigni's character, entered the dance house *Club del liscio*. In the unfolding of scene, the young Cioni visualized, inside the dance house, a solitary woman at a table. Around the table were several men courting her. Sequentially, all were rejected by the beautiful girl. Cioni, noticing the situation, picked up a bottle of soda and went into the bathroom. In the reserved, he positioned the bottle inside his pants simulating his phallus. Cioni then went to the table of the aforementioned woman, who at one time stared at the "phallus" of the young man and insinuated a reciprocal look of sexual impulse.

At this moment, the web of relations has acquired clearer contours. Cioni, in the style of Rabelais, linked the supralunary to the sublunary. In other words, Cioni communicated all his tensions and contradictions of life in the light of the corporeal plane. In this context, trying to find, in *Life is Beautiful*, signs of an interface with the knowledge acquired by Roberto

Benigni throughout his career occupied the first plane in the set of studies developed here. Considering the concretization of relations of Benigni's social and mental life, *Life is Beautiful* was useful insofar as he suggested to us, through mimetic functions, the socially incorporated knowledge and re-signified by the Italian comic. An example in *Life is Beautiful*, both from the point of view of the legacy of an intergenerational knowledge constituted and of the results of a re-elaboration of these knowledge produced in the light of a condition to suit a pure comedy, is the scene of Guido, by Benigni, at the Francesco Petrarca School, with the tricolor band on his chest - stolen from a Roman bureaucrat who had the task of supervising and guiding the school's educational policy - with the simple aim of reviewing the woman he was in love with, Dora, a character played by Nicoleta Braschi.



Source: Photo extracted from the film *Berlinguer ti voglio bene*

Figure 1. Cioni establishing contact with the girl

However, Guido was unexpectedly invited by the director to speak of the racist manifesto on the Aryan superior race, the *Manifesto della razza* - a racist manifesto launched in Italy in 1938 under the blessing of Mussolini. Surprised by the situation, the false inspector had to improvise an explanation of the supposed superiority of the Aryan race.



Source: Photo extracted from the film *Life is Beautiful*

Figure 2. Guido emphasizing his navel as Aryan superiority

On the table, the improvisation elaborated by Guido made references to the strangest parts of the body. In this general perspective of understanding the natural capacity of human beings to store, synthesize, and transmit knowledge, the interrogation of the above-mentioned scene became an interesting point of our analysis, by the proposition that this occupied a significant position in the translation of the adopted memories and understood by Benigni in the process of interdependence established during his trajectory. In the proposed interpretations, Guido, on the table, half-naked,

indicates the symbolic rescue, in the form of a synthesis and re-signified of his social funds of knowledge, namely: references to the lower part of the body, emphasis on corporeality and corporeal materiality, that is to say, it constitutes the translation of a Rabelaisian influence. The analysis of the above-mentioned scenes, such as examining the relations established by Roberto Benigni during his career, as well as the observation of the cultural expressions produced and staged by the Italian actor and director helped us to understand how the formation of interdependencies helped modulate a process of cinematic learning that made possible certain choices, certain behaviors, certain actions taken by Benigni in the production of *Life is Beautiful*. Nevertheless, throughout the research, we identified that the making of this film work, as well as its process of recognition, was not only possible because of the trajectory and learned know-how, but also, by a possibility provided by the conjuncture of the turn century. Faced with this picture, aware that the screen narrative on screen is thought of in our research as an expression of the rules of production of a specific place and period, it was decided that we dedicate a significant part of the work to scan and reflect on the order of time in which *Life is Beautiful* was produced.

In the study on the situation in which the most famous film by Roberto Benigni was produced, we identified a concern of several sectors to rectify the ills provided by modernization, especially the great wars and the holocaust. In this process of recognizing responsibility for the past, particularly in the fear of repeating the damage caused by the past in the future, the tragedies provoked by the great war were scrutinized by new angles, new looks, new perspectives. Paul Ricoeur in his book *Memory, History, Forgetfulness* (2007), noted that some crimes are unforgivable, unjustifiable and imprescriptible. This is well illustrated in the letters of the international military courts of Nuremberg which have classified crimes against humanity, including genocide, as imprescriptible and unforgivable. In this sense, an imprescriptible crime means to say that the malefactor remains contemporary with his crime, scaring the present. Therefore, to prevent damage to posterity, Ricoeur understood as necessary, in order to rectify the problems and protect future generations, to hold those guilty of such imprescriptible crimes as a duty of remembrance. Finally, in line with the turn of the century - marked by the processes of rediscovery, accountability and re-signification of tragic events - the holocaust began to be scrutinized by all possible prisms. In the light of this more prospective inclination, a series of studies were developed in Italy, especially at the end of the 20th century, aimed at understanding the effective participation of the Italians in the greatest crime against humanity historically recognized. In fact, we identified that this environment of resignification constituted itself as a new thread enabling the production of Roberto Benigni's film.

It is in keeping with this conjuncture in which it is increasingly possible to make a narrative that presents portions of Italian "good society" as complacent of the war crimes of the Italian state, that the most famous film of Roberto Benigni presented scenes of "good society" as a participant in the Holocaust. A scene corresponding to the influence of this conjuncture is the dialogue on the night of Dora's engagement between Mr. Galardini, the son of a former combatant of the *Risorgimento* who fought alongside Garibaldi, and the director of the Francesco Petrarca School on the level of German education. In analyzing a German math problem for the third grade

children who described the costs that mentally, crippled and epileptic patients generated in Germany and how much the nation would save by eliminating all these individuals, they were struck by the complexity of the problem. The connection of this scene with the conjuncture of the end of the twentieth century is best revealed in the detailing of the dialogue between the mentioned characters:

Director: And I'm not even talking about Berlin... I'm talking about the province of Grafeneck, a third elementary elementary class. Listen to this problem, I remember it because it impressed me. A madman costs the state four marks a day. One cripple is 4.50, one is epileptic 3.50. Given that the average share is four DM per day and the total number of patients is 300,000, what would be the total savings if all these individuals were eliminated?

Perplexed and distressed by the director's cool explanation and reassurance, Dora reacted to the situation:

Dora: Oh my God, it's not possible!
 Director: I had the same reaction, Dora! "My God, it's not possible!" It is not possible for a seven-year-old to solve a problem of this kind. The calculation is complex, the proportions, the percentages ... it takes a minimum of algebraic familiarity. It would be a problem for high school for us.
 Galardini: No, just a multiplication! These cripples are all 300,000, you say?
 Director: Yes!
 Galardini: 300 000 times 4: if we kill all, we save 1 200 000 marks a day. Easy!
 Director: Exactly, very well ... but you're 50, Galardini. In Germany they give this problem to seven year olds, they are really another breed¹. (BENIGNI, CERAMI, 1998, pp. 87-88).

Although the broader research presents other examples, this brief dialogue, presented here, by two representatives of the "good Italian society," the director and Mr. Galardini, helps us to understand the link between Roberto Benigni's film and the cultural codes of the end of the 20th century. When they restrict themselves to discussing the ideal age to solve the mathematical problem, the two characters reverberate, symbolically, that the failure of the Italian Jews was only possible because there was a significant part of the Italian population that welcomed, sometimes even with great satisfaction, the fascist orders. Thus, we observe throughout

¹ Direttrice: E non dico a Berlino... ma addirittura in provincia, a Grafeneck, terza elementare. Sentire che problema, me lo ricordo perché mi há colpito. Un pazzo costa allo Stato 4 marchi al giorno. Uno storpio 4,50, un epilettico 3,50. Visto che la quota media è 4 marchi al giorno e i ricoverati sono 300 000 quanto si risparmierebbe complessivamente se questi individui venissero eliminati?

Dora: Dio mio, non è possibile!

Direttrice: La stessa reazione che ho avuto io, Dora! "Dio mio, non è possibile!" Non è possibile che un bambino di sette anni risolva un problema di questo genere! Il calcolo è complesso, le proporzioni, le percentuali... un minimo di infarinatura algebrica. Un problema da scuola superiore per noi.

Galardini: No, basta una moltiplicazione! Tutti questi storpi sono 300 000, hai detto?

Direttrice: Sì!

Galardini: 300 000 per 4: se li ammazzano tutti risparmiano 1 200 000 marchi al giorno. Facile!

Direttrice: esatto, bravo... ma tu hai 50 anni, Galardini. In Germania lo propongono ai bambini di sette anni, veramente un'altra razza (BENIGNI, CERAMI, 1998, p. 87-88).

the research how the elements presented by the conjuncture of the end of the twentieth century has become yet another enabler of the film *Life is Beautiful*. In other words, the cultural codes of his time became an actor who made viable a series of practices in the film. In the course of this research, however, we diagnose that it is not convenient to see the conjuncture of the turn of the century as only one possible aspect for the film production. In fact, we have identified that the historical context has also enhanced the acceptance and repercussion around the Benigni film. Acting in connection with this proposal, we have promoted in our research an effort to seek in the past, throughout the civilizing process, the conditions that supported the acceptance and celebration of Roberto Benigni's film. Analyzing the critical fortune of this process has pointed to the need to take a step back in history to understand how control organizations have established an imbalance between the ways of narrating important historical events and personages. In that game, the scale fell unfavorably to the comedy. In a moving time, the socially "decorous" conduct that inhibited the comic narrative about tragic events became less intense.

Under such needs we came to the realization that as the compulsion over laughter and the comic narrative changed throughout the civilizing process, it also altered the understanding of different ways of relating to sacred themes and objects, including , in the last decades of the twentieth century, the holocaust. This change in the stage of control demands made more acceptable what was previously avoided during the long process of formalizing conduct and disciplining people. In other words, the process of flexible conduct, characteristic of the late twentieth century, made laughter, previously connected with a sense of uneasiness, come to occupy all domains, including the holocaust, hitherto concealed by a veil of seriousness. The connection between these specific changes in the way we deal with laughter and the narrative of Jewish extermination has become, in our view, one of the possible conditions for the recognition of the film narrative. *Life is beautiful*. Put another way, the atmosphere of change and permanence that followed during the civilizing process and later as a result of the process of informalization that made possible a relaxation of the old rules of the behaviors, obtained its own impulse in the most famous film of Roberto Benigni.

Conclusion

The path taken so far has been to present how, through memory studies, we take the trajectory of the filmmaker Roberto Benigni as a central element that concentrates all the articulated references of a memory of the interactions and a time. To understand the possible conditions for the production and acceptance of *Life is Beautiful*, the broader research sought to cross the network of sociability in which the Italian producer was immersed with the cultural expressions in which he was active. The resulting analysis of the materials claimed that the film *Life is Beautiful* is shaped by a memory built during Benigni's cinematographic trajectory and re-signified from the articulations of his interactions.

In this sense, memory is understood, among other things, as a faculty shaped by the interaction between creator and society. Concurrently, and synchronically with our methodological path, which seeks to understand the elements that can influence the decisions and margins of maneuver of creative behavior, we are interested in the study of the conjuncture. To reflect on the conjuncture means to develop an exercise that presents a cultural expression as tributary, also, of the subjects, of the modes of organization and of the exhibition of the artistic matter that the "cultural poetics" presents to the creator. Therefore, we consider here that the film *Life is Beautiful* results, among other things, the possibilities of invention and assembly that the filmmaker mobilized in the audiovisual narrative, which is certainly standardized in the cultural codes of his time. Roberto Benigni did not use anything that was out of production. Thus, the cinematographic narrative on canvas is the fruit of the socio-cultural and historical signs that crossed it at the turn of the century. Therefore, we conclude our research, realizing that the cinematographic narrative was produced following established patterns and transmitted by the network of sociability that helped him to produce. At the same time, its approval and recognition depended, among other things, on the religious, ethical, moral, social, economic, political and cultural values of its time.

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