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Bülent Diken & Carsten Bagge Laustsen, 'The Ghost of Auschwitz, published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, UK at <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/diken-laustsen-ghost-of-auschwitz.pdf>

Publication Details

This web page was last revised on 20th June, 2004

The Ghost of Auschwitz

Bülent Diken & Carsten Bagge Laustsen

Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil oppression and violence, and enjoy it to the full (Trotsky, 1940, shortly before he was killed by Stalin; quoted in Viano, 1999: 47)

Who can bear testimony to Auschwitz, given that its "true" witnesses died in gas chambers (Lyotard, 1988: 3; Agamben, 1999: 34-35)? Herein lays the revisionists' most serious trump: there is nobody who can prove that he or she died in gas chambers. But do we not have survivors, testimonies, museums and miles of literature on the Holocaust? Why, then, take the problem of testimony and of revisionism seriously? There is, however, a more decisive problem behind this debate, which does not revolve around further evidence but, rather, the status of the Holocaust as living memory. The question is whether the Holocaust is to be inscribed in history books merely as a chapter among others or as a unique, traumatic event that explodes the frames of our comprehension.

The will to preserve the living memory of the Holocaust principally relies on testimonies. Despite being "only" second-hand witnesses to the gas chambers, the survivors are first-hand witnesses to the terrors of the camp. And because the Holocaust is unique and beyond comprehension, their unsuccessful attempts to depict the camps can bear testimony to this incomprehensibility. Consequently, this "puritan" strategy is bent on refusing every intervention that does not rely on testimony as inauthentic and mistaken. But the problem is



that the Holocaust generation will not be with us very long, that is, in the absence of living memory we will soon have to be content with history. This is a situation in which the very problem of Holocaust denial might potentially revamp. It is the emergency of this problem that is today reflected in the ever-increasing quantity of Holocaust-related cultural production. Indeed, if historically it is denied and pushed aside, the Holocaust is, today, if anything, an overexposed topic. Forgetful under-representation and trivializing over-representation in the form of veritable Holocaust constipation, however, produce the same result: the Holocaust loses its uniqueness as an event.

We are here confronted with two equally unsatisfactory alternatives. The first consists of accepting the Holocaust as the ultimate mystery that cannot be represented for it is rooted in the survivors' experience. Thus many attempts at demystification are perceived as the negation of the unique in the catastrophe (Žižek, 2001: 66-67), which makes a critical reflection on the Holocaust difficult. Further, there is a problematical conformity between the imperative to let the events (or the survivors) to speak for themselves and the de-personalizing silencing produced by The Third Reich (Trecisz, 2001: 51). The other alternative is to abandon the Holocaust to history: holocaust with a little h, as one of many genocide incidents. To explain the Holocaust is however to normalize it. We no longer stand face to face with a mystical evil but something that can be explained by economical, political or social factors or by the evil genius of leaders of totalitarian mass movements. But again the consequence is destructive. Is not the Holocaust what has enabled the West too see evil as something different from a lack or defect, and created a moral and political will to resist it?

Refusing these two strategies, Agamben investigates the possibility of a third, in which the Holocaust is neither elevated to a mystery that escapes representation nor reduced to an object that can be exhausted by understanding. This alternative consists of investigating the space that opens up between the two possibilities (Agamben, 1999: 13). Auschwitz materializes the aporia of historical knowledge: that facts and truth, verification and understanding can never coincide (Agamben, 1999: 12). In as much as "aporia" refers to a tension without which ethics, memory and the political cannot exist, the aporia of the Holocaust consists of bearing testimony to something, which is impossible to bear testimony to. Remembrance is impossible but imperative. The *Muselmann*, who for Agamben materialize the horror of the camp in person, is reduced to a bodily existence without worth, aim or dignity. He has lost everything, including his self, his ability to narrate and thus his ability to give testimony. Thus Agamben rejects dignity, freedom, choice and humanity as the fundament for an ethics that can safeguard the individual against the biopolitical intervention. Ethics, instead, must take point of departure in naked life. But how can we hear the *Muselmann's* silent prayers? Testimony is a way of investigating this central problem. Testimony thus contains an insurmountable difficulty. The survivors bear testimony to something that is impossible to bear testimony to (Agamben, 1999: 13).

Agamben's work on Auschwitz is an interesting intervention into the philosophical debate on the Holocaust. Equally interesting is the more popular discussion of the Holocaust in Benigni and Cerami's film *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita é bella*, 1998). Here we attempt to establish a dialogue between these two discussions, allowing them to fertilize each other. This increases the stakes in relation to both discourses. Thus, the ethical problematique of *Remnants of Auschwitz* opens up an interesting line of interpretation regarding *Life is Beautiful*, while, in turn, this interpretation becomes a test for its own ethical strength. Indeed, *Life is Beautiful* sets up the problem of remembrance more radically, focusing not "only" on the survivors' testimony but also on post-remembrance as practiced by the post-war generation.

1. Life is Beautiful

The film plunges headlong with Guido's (played by Benigni himself) entrance. Together with his friend Ferruccio (played by Sergio Bini Bustric) he is in his car on the way to a Tuscanian village. Down the hill they discover that the brakes do not work. At full speed they approach the cheerfully decorated town expecting the King's visit. Without brakes, Guido and Ferruccio overtake the King. When they approach the festive gathering, Guido feverishly moves his arms to warn the gathering who, misunderstanding the gesture, ecstatically address Guido with a "Heil Hitler", which was originally prepared for the King. Herewith, the leitmotif of the movie is disclosed: the Jew Guido drifts towards an unavoidable catastrophe. To be sure,



Guido can avoid the barriers on his way but the course (towards the final solution) is not possible to change. Not that Guido seems “Jewish” or behaves like a “Jew”. We find out that he is a Jew only when the local fascist authorities start to treat him as such.

The opening scene ends rather pleasantly in a farm outside the city, where the charming Dora (played by Nicoletta Braschi) literally falls in his arms, as if she were sent from heaven. From this moment Guido is obsessed with the desire to win her heart. He employs some comic tricks. The logic of his tricks is Schopenhauer’s will. Schopenhauer is mentioned for the first time just before Guido and Ferruccio, who have arrived the city and got a double bed from their uncle, start calming down. Asked how it is to fall asleep so quickly, Guido says that Schopenhauer is the answer: “I am what I want to be”. Like a hypnotizer, he attempts to make Ferruccio fall asleep: “sleep, sleep, sleep ...” he whispers, while he juggles with his toes over Ferruccio’s head. Ferruccio says good night and falls asleep. Guido tries his technique a last time: “wake up, wake up, wake up ...”, and Ferruccio wakes up. Guido is surprised by the effect of his trick. Ferruccio does not share his enthusiasm, though. Who would not wake up if there were shouted “wake up, wake up” into their ears?

Guido needs his ability for humour and his Schopenhauerian tricks because Dora’s object of choice is no less than the local Party boss. Luckily for Guido, he becomes a servant at Dora’s engagement party. The “cheerful” conversation around the table is about children’s calculating abilities (Dora is a teacher in the local primary school). The head teacher refers to a task, which she has come across in the teaching material of the school: a mentally disabled person costs four marks a day, a crippled person four and a half, and an epileptic three and a half. Given that the average daily expenses are four marks and that there are 300,000 patients, how much money would the state then save by eliminating these people? The head teacher is shocked: one cannot demand such a difficult task from seven year olds! They are, after all, not German children. Dora’s future husband does not think the calculation is a difficult one and he can quickly multiply 300,000 with four. Dora herself is shocked by the dry indifference demonstrated by her future husband and the other guests. When the chance arrives, she seeks contact with Guido, and asks him to take her away. Guido comes riding on his uncle’s white horse, which is now painted green and is covered with skulls, invectives and other indicators that it belongs to a Jew. But, as he often does, Guido can turn the fascist harassment to his own advantage, and the two lovers ride away on his uncle’s horse. Guido and Dora are happy, and their son, Giosue (played by Giorgio Cantarini), is born.

Giosue’s growth is characterized by the sheltering provided by his parents on the one hand and fascism on the other. Guido does much to protect him against the latter. For instance, Giosue sees a shop sign saying “no entrance for dogs and Jews” and asks his father “Dad, why are dogs and Jews not allowed to enter the shop?” Guido answers: “it is because, they don’t like Jews and dogs, exactly in the same way as the ironmonger wouldn’t like Spaniards and horses inside his shop and the pharmacist, Chinese and kangaroos”. “But dad, with us, everybody is allowed to enter?” “Yes”, answers the father, and asks Giosue what he does not like. “Spiders”, Giosue says. Guido adds that he is himself not crazy about Visigoths. So they decide that when they open the shop next morning, they will hang a sign that forbids Visigoths and spiders entrance.

When, in the film, we arrive at the year 1945 the mood of the film takes an abrupt change. On Giosue’s sixth birthday Dora finds their house devastated. Her husband, son, and Guido’s uncle have disappeared. After a short while she finds them in the local train station, from where they are to be deported to a concentration camp in cattle trucks. She desperately tries to convince the authorities that there is a mistake but is told that there is none, implying that her husband and son are, according to race laws, both Jewish. When she cannot free them, she asks the authorities whether she could take the train with them, and after a short hesitation she gets the permission to do so. The rest of the film takes place in an unspecified concentration camp. On arrival the Jews are sorted. Guido’s uncle is directly sent to the gas chamber because he is old, Dora is sent to women’s barracks, Guido and Giosue to men’s barracks.

Guido’s love for his son and wife stands in stark contrast to the terrors of the camp. Again he tries to protect his son from the Nazi reality. For this aim he has invented a story, which for Giosue presents the camp life as a competition with other children to win 1000 points and thereby a tank. Giosue is going to have the best birthday a child can dream of! Guido has arranged everything, exactly as his father had done for him when he became six. Giosue,



though, becomes increasingly sceptical, while Guido does his best to keep up the illusion, taking considerable risks. For instance, he volunteers to translate the camp regulations, which a soldier reads for the residents of the barrack. The three most important rules of the camp are that one must not attempt escape, that all orders must be obeyed without question, and that riots are punished by hanging. These three rules become, in Guido's translation, that one loses all one's points if one cries, if one asks about one's mother, or asks for a snack.

Guido is aware of the seriousness of the situation and desires, like all other inmates, to escape. He sees his chance when he is asked to work as a servant for the camp commandant's dinner parties. Here he meets an old acquaintance, Dr. Lessing (played by Horst Buchholz). We meet Dr. Lessing for the first time in the film six years before, in the uncle's hotel, where Guido serves and where Lessing regularly eats, while he ponders over riddles together with a friend of his. He often asks Guido for help. The intelligent and humoristic Guido charms Dr. Lessing to the extent that the film hints at a friendship between the two. When we meet Dr. Lessing for the second time in the camp, he works as a doctor, that is, he inspects the new inmates and sorts them, often very quickly, through a "glance selection". Guido tries, in the short moment Dr. Lessing checks him, to make him aware that he is Guido from the restaurant. First the doctor does not remember him, but when Guido recites a riddle he is immediately remembered. Guido can now avoid the showers. We then suspect that he becomes Dr. Lessing's "favourite Jew", that there is hidden a human being behind the SS officer, empathy behind racism, at least for one's former friends and acquaintances.

This is the necessary condition for the third and final scene, where Dr. Lessing and Guido meet. Guido now serves at the official dinners. He immediately understands his "participation" in the dinner as Lessing's attempt at helping him to escape. Guido therefore hides Giosue among the German officers' children, who are busy eating sweets in the adjacent room. Lessing makes several attempts and finally manages to talk to Guido without being seen. His only aim, however, turns out to be asking Guido for his help to solve a torturous riddle. *He* needs Guido's help! Guido is paralyzed. The contrast between the two life-worlds is further emphasized when Guido gets lost in the fog on the way back to his barrack and runs into a bunch of dead bodies. Here we see the limits to his humour and his Schopenhauerian will. Now reality is revealed in all its horror and nakedness.

The final scene of the film shows the moment of liberation. The camp is slowly being emptied. Trucks take the inmates away and return empty. We understand from the conversation among the inmates that the Germans are liquidating all the inmates. Guido therefore hides Giosue and, cross dressing and pretending to be a woman, goes to the women's barrack to look for Dora. She is not there. On the way back, he gets caught by the Nazi and is killed. Shortly after we see the whole camp in a deserted condition. Together with few others, Giosue comes out of his hiding place. We hear a rumbling, which becomes stronger and stronger, and finally an American tank rolls into the camp. Giosue has won, and got his tank. Together, they leave the camp. On the way out Giosue catches a glimpse of his mother on a truck, and the film ends with their reunion. In the epilogue we learn that the narrator of the film is Giosue; the film is a testimony to his father, who sacrificed himself for him.

2. Holocaust as comedy

Life is Beautiful breaks many implicit rules regarding the representation of the Holocaust. Indeed, there seems to have grown a special Holocaust etiquette that requires a rigorous realism, under-toned artistic affects and a deep seriousness. "A Holocaust conformism has arisen, along with a Holocaust sentimentalism, a Holocaust canon, and a system of Holocaust taboos together with the ceremonial discourse that goes with it; Holocaust products for Holocaust consumers have been developed" (Kertérsz 2001: 269). To use the Holocaust as frame for a love story and to tell this story in the form of comedy was thus, for many, an unforgivable mistake. And of course, every time an etiquette is transgressed, it causes a public scandal. Ezrahi lists some from the US: the dramatization of Anne Frank's diary (in 1959) was perceived to be outrageous; Philip Roth's *Eli the Frantic* (1959) was too Jewish; E.L. Wallant's novel *The Pawnbroker* (1961) and its film version were seen to be too



Christian; Gerald Green's TV series *Holocaust* (1978-1979) was too heavy; D.M. Thomas' novel *The White Hotel* (1981) focused too much on sex; Art Spiegelman's cartoons in *Maus I* and *II* (1986, 1991), where the inmates of the concentration camps were depicted as mice and the guardians as cats, were too daring; Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) was too sentimental, *Life is Beautiful* too optimistic and too redeeming (Ezrahi 2001: 296). The criticism against *Life is Beautiful* can be grouped under three main points. First, it is criticized to misrepresent camp life; second, its genre, comedy, is found improper; and lastly, its plot is found unrealistic and unconvincing, even impossible, implying that it should have represented the camp life as realistically and precisely as possible (Siporin 2002: 346). Let us now dwell on these three points.

According to some commentators Benigni's film presents an idyllic camp. Art Spiegelman, for example, thinks that the film banalizes the Holocaust (Celli 2000: 1). In a drawing included in David Denby's (1999: 97) review of *Life is Beautiful*, a concentration camp inmate holds an Oscar statue in his arms. A sentence from the sale material of the film is ironically added to the drawing: "Be a Part of History and the Most Successful Foreign Film of All Times". To be sure, the film does not include much violence and we do not stumble over dead bodies or see bodily punishment (Tatara 1998). Many critiques emphasize that children were gassed immediately on arrival at Auschwitz and that those who escaped this fate in the first place were constantly humiliated. Camps were, "in reality", characterized by systematic degrading, torture and starvation (Flanzbaum 2001: 282). Thus, according to Teachout, who reviewed *Life is Beautiful*, "it is no exaggeration to say that nothing that happens in *Life is Beautiful* could possibly have occurred in real life, and that the film consists of one historical distortion after another" (quoted in Flanzbaum 2001: 281). Thus, Schickel complains that Benigni's lack of understanding of the terror characteristic of the camps is the first step towards Holocaust denial (quoted in Flanzbaum 2001: 282). The coming generations will think that Benigni's fictive camp depicts camp life as it was (Celli 2000). Schickel goes, indeed, as far as accusing Benigni of fascism:

The witnesses to the Holocaust – its living victims – inevitably grew fewer each year. The voices that would deny it ever took place remain strident. In this climate, turning even a small corner of this century's horror into feel-good entertainment is abhorrent. Sentimentality is a kind of fascism too. (Quoted in Flanzbaum 2001: 281).

To counter this predictable form of critique in advance Benigni employed Marcello Pezzetti from the Jewish centre for documentation in Milan as a historical consultant. Before its premier, the film was shown to a group of Italian Jews who had survived the Holocaust (Ben-Ghiat 2001: 254). Further, Pezzetti claimed that in reality some children were found in the camps after the inmates were emancipated; some were waiting to be gassed, and others to be used in medical experiments (Celli 2000). Also, one could claim, as Haskin (2001) does, that the film is a realistic depiction of the camp life. It could be that the latrines did not stand there, or the selection of the inmates did not take place exactly as depicted in the film (Kertész 2001: 267). But such objections basically relate to the "scenery" of the film rather than its plot and message. The scenery, after all, can be precise without the horror of the camp being realistically depicted. A story by a former concentration camp inmate and a poet, Abba Koyner, is instructive here. In a kibbutz near Haifa there is a model of Treblinka, which was built by a survivor, who was a carpenter. When the model was finished, Koyner was asked for an opinion. "There is something missing", said Koyner, "but what?" asked the former inmate, who had built the model. Everything was recreated as exactly as possible. "Horror, the horror is missing" (Hilberg 1988: 21).

Benigni's film cannot depict this horror; no doubt about that. But, after all, who could? However, Benigni is able to depict another aspect of camp life, namely the instinct of survival, which consisted of building a protective shield against the camp reality. Surviving the camp necessitates "a benign form of Holocaust denial" (Haskins 2001: 380).

But does not this device of the "game" correspond in an essential way to the lived reality of Auschwitz? One could smell the stench of burning human flesh, but still did not want to believe that all of this could be true. One would rather find some notion that might tempt one to survive, and a "real tank" is, for a child, precisely this kind of seductive promise. (Kertész 2001: 271)



Benigni does not defend himself by stating that his film is realistic. Instead, he claims that the terror of the camp was so incomprehensible that nobody can depict it as it was. The most responsible solution was therefore to depict it indirectly through the form of allegory or comedy (Viano 1999: 53). Lazmann, with his “film” consisting of eight and a half hours of documentary material and interviews, is perhaps the most radical exponent of the realist approach. If this strategy is defended with reference to the danger of delivering material for Holocaust denial, then one should also ask whether the best weapon against this is not precisely to broaden the knowledge of the Holocaust. Is a film like Benigni’s after all not better than no film or films nobody wants to see (Flanzbaum 2001: 282-283; Kertész 2001: 267)? Certainly, films like Lazmann’s *Shoah* do not have mass appeal. Furthermore, art that depicts the Holocaust is precisely art, not the thing itself (Flanzbaum 2001: 275, Trezisz 2001: 47). We have enough testimonies and “relics”; what is missing is pedagogical and experimental strategies that can gestalt the Holocaust as an active remembrance (Hartman 1996: 152). *Life is Beautiful* is appealing precisely because it is not a documentary (Flanzbaum 2001: 283).

The other main criticism against *Life is Beautiful* targets its form. The Holocaust was a tragedy; therefore, the form of comedy is, with its redeeming laughter, both improper and false. Genocide cannot be redeemed (Celli 2000: 3). A more adequate representation of the Holocaust would have been one that represents the unredeemable as, for instance, in Théo Angelopoulos’ film *Ulysses’ Gaze* (1995), in whose final scenes a Bosnian family is totally liquidated by a paramilitary group. It should be recalled here that Pezzetti was against the idea of letting Giosue live, while Benigni felt that his death would give the film a tragic toning (Celli 2000). The most serious criticism that can be directed against Benigni’s choice of genre is perhaps not the choice of comedy as a form but the use of the Holocaust as a frame for a love story. Benigni’s primary interest was not to make a film on the Holocaust but to create a radical and challenging framework for his plot (Viano 1999: 51).

Pezzetti has defended *Life is Beautiful* by stating that the comical elements are limited to the first half of the film, after which Benigni respectfully lets the tragic form take over (Celli 2000). Laughter is then replaced by tears, optimism with fear. The use of humour in the first half aims to “purify” the final part, thereby strengthening the tragic effect (Viano 1999: 55). Comedy is thus elevated to the form of tragedy. It passes on a tragic message (Žizek 2001: 72). *Life is Beautiful* laughs, claims Pezzetti, not at the Holocaust, but directs the power of the laughter against the destructive effect of the catastrophe (Viano 1999: 63). Comedy and laughter are enemies of the camp. Whereas tragedy is given by a claustrophobic closeness, comedy establishes a liberating distance to its object (Ezrahi 2001: 298). This argument can be naturally also directed against *Life is Beautiful*. Comedy creates a distance from an unbearable reality and thus is incapable of depicting the Holocaust (Ezrahi 2001: 300). The question is therefore which aspect of the camp life one would like to depict: the Nazi attempt at de-humanization of the victims, or the victims’ attempt to preserve their humanity or simply to survive. Following this, one could claim that humour was the weapon of the inmates against their executioners. It helped them to preserve their humanity (Frankl 1984: 63; Appelfeld 1988: 85). To add, comedy can also be seen as an attempt at re-establishing a human universe after the Holocaust (Ezrahi 2001: 287). In this respect Benigni expressed the idea that only laughter can save us, that we would be helping the Nazi if we let ourselves be demoralized by the terrors of the Holocaust (Viano 1999: 51).

Thirdly, it is claimed that *Life is Beautiful* urges identification with Giosue’s gaze. Just as Guido tries to protect Giosue against the camp the film does the same with the audience (see Celli, 2000: 3). When in the final scene Giosue is saved by a tank, his imaginary world remains intact.

“Life Is Beautiful” is soothing and anodyne – a hopeful fable of redemption. It is also one of the most unconvincing and self-congratulatory movies ever made [...] “In the end, Benigni protect his audience as much as Guido protects his son; we are treated like children” “Life is Beautiful is a benign form of Holocaust denial. The audience comes away feeling relieved and happy and rewards Benigni for allowing it, a last, to escape. (Denby quoted in Haskins 2001: 375)

Benigni can be rightly criticized to focus on the survivors. They are, as Levi pointed out, precisely exceptions. The *Muselmänner* and the gassed are the rule. Bruno Bettelheim’s reaction against Des Pres’ (1980) contested work, *The Survivor*, is worth recalling here. “It will be startling news to most survivors that they are ‘strong enough, mature enough, awake



enough [...] to embrace life without reserve,' since only a pitifully small number of those who entered the German camps survived. What about the millions who perished? Were they 'awake enough ... to embrace life without reserve' as they were driven into the gas chambers?" (Bettelheim quoted in Agamben 1999: 93). Or, one could, with Appelfeld (1988: 85), stress that people kept sewing their buttons even when death seemed inevitably close.

In fact it is not true that Guido's imaginary world is not shattered. On the way to his barrack from the officers' dinner he mumbles in the fog: "what if it is just a dream?" Shortly after, he runs into the dead bodies. What appears to be fog turns out to be the smoke from the crematorium (Viano 1999: 57). Even daydreaming does not allow him to escape the reality of the camp. Indeed, in this context it is relevant to discuss the character of Guido's fictive universe. His motto is, as mentioned before, "I am the one I want to be". The same, however, could be said about the Nazi. Benigni's merit is to show that the power of imagination can work in the service of both good and evil (Ben-Ghiat 2001: 254). Guido's reversal of Schopenhauer is, in this context, interesting. Schopenhauer counted, together with Nietzsche, as one of the favourite philosophers of the Nazi. Guido's Schopenhauer is of course simplified and naïve but in no way seems to be more far away from the truth than the strongly revised and vulgarized Nazi version; one distortion against another!

Guido's use of Schopenhauer is not a denial of the terrors of the camp. He is clearly aware that one cannot just become whom one wants to be. If one could he would not have ended up in a concentration camp. Guido is not in himself a comic person but one who strategically makes use of humour and imagination. The condition for this is seriousness and a sense for reality. The fourth time Guido uses his Schopenhauerian trick is thus in a deadly serious situation, in which the Nazi's dogs sniff out Giosue. We are here confronted not with a man who thinks he can form his world according to his wishes but with a desperate father who hopes for a miracle. Perhaps the film is not so much about the ability to fictionalize but about the ability to have faith. Leslie Epstein wrote in the program for the Jewish film festival in Boston, where Benigni's film was shown:

The war against the Jews was in many ways a war against the imagination (and at bottom the Jewish conception of God): to suppress the workings of that imagination to deny the sufferings of the Jews any sort of symbolic representation – would make that a war that Hitler had won. (Leslie Epstein, Boston Jewish Film Festival Program, quoted in Viano 1999: 53)

3. The unspeakable

We are here facing a series of aporias. We are urged to represent something which is beyond the comprehensible. As the discussion of *Life is Beautiful* has shown, every representation of the Holocaust seems to misrepresent its object. The horror seems impossible to re-present, the form of comedy and the notion of a post-Holocaust redeeming are improper, and finally the identification with the gaze of the child is problematical. The debate of *Life is Beautiful* did not, of course, take place in a vacuum; it was strongly influenced by philosophical discussions of ethics and representation. Trezise counts three meanings of the "unspeakable", which can sum up the debate on the uniqueness of the Holocaust. First, the unspeakable is what cannot be uttered, what cannot be understood and therefore cannot be represented. The Holocaust transgresses our categories and therefore no description can do justice to it. The second meaning of the unspeakable emerges as to the dimensions and character of an evil act, e.g. the "unspeakable evil" of Nazism. Finally, there is a third meaning which takes the form of a prohibition against utterance or narration. In this sense the unspeakable refers to something sacred or a taboo (Trezise 2001: 39).

Adorno's famous dictum "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" and "after Auschwitz one cannot write poetry" and even that "all post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage" (Adorno 1973: 367), is often utilized as an axis around which the discussion of the representation of the Holocaust revolves (Trezise 2001: 43). In an essay titled "Commitment" Adorno emphasizes that he sticks to his original wording and explains that it has two central meanings: firstly, every artistic representation of naked violence contains in itself the possibility of being in receipt of a desire to confront it. Following this, and secondly, any



representation will invest meaning in what has no meaning. There is thus established an emancipating distance through which horror is relieved (Trezise 2001: 44).

In this mindset, poetic license is, potentially, a form of mendacity as harmful as falsification of the historical records; the siege mentality that prevails in these quarters regards the pernicious effacement of reality as commensurate with the self-conscious editing of reality in acts of imagination that, presumably allow the pleasure principle to upstage the pain principle” (Ezrahi 2001: 297)

Hence Lazmann argues that strong affective reactions (e.g. laughter and crying) have an effect of catharsis. One must avoid these and instead confront the Holocaust with “dry eyes” (quoted in Flanzbaum 2001: 227). What is central here from our point of view is the question of distance. The ideal is presence. The catastrophe must be remembered as an ever present and haunting trauma. An undesired distance emerges when one adds something external: the artistic process, something that refuses the raw reality (Trezise 2001: 48-49). However, when Agamben claims that the Holocaust is unspeakable, he does not do this with reference to aesthetics but to Arendt’s and Levi’s understandings of the Holocaust as an event that explodes the frame of any past evil (Agamben 1999: 31-32). Agamben quotes the central stanza from Arendt’s *Essays in Understanding*:

Before that we said: Well, one has enemies. That is entirely natural. Why shouldn’t people have enemies? But this was different. It was really as if an abyss had opened. *This ought not to have happened.* And I don’t just mean the number of victims. I mean the method, the fabrication of corpses and so on – I don’t need to go into that. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can (Arendt, quoted in Agamben 1999: 71)

What horrified Arendt was the mass production of dead bodies. The Nazi did not kill but eliminated the Jews. The camps were a radical manifestation of biopolitics. Whereas ordinary biopolitics targets the health of the population – as a kind of “life politics” – the Nazi biopolitics aimed at the opposite. The Nazi did not only desire opening up a Lebensraum for the Aryans but also a Todesraum for the Jews and others. The politico-theological background here is central. Biopolitics is at the same time totally “profane” and deeply “religious”. Profane, because one acts, as a master of life and death, without recourse to higher authorities, and religious, because, one acts without limitations, e.g. without any consideration of justice, as if one had divine powers. The Nazi positioned itself as a master over the judgment day and attempted on earth to realize both paradise (The Reich of Thousand Years) and hell (the concentration camps).

The camps verified the Nazi politics, the essence of which was, in Goebbels’ words, an art of making the impossible possible (Agamben 1999: 77). As God created the world out of nothing, the Nazi created a world in the image of their power. The essence of Aryans was, as Rosenberg and Hitler repeatedly emphasized, their creative power. They did not owe their existence to anybody. The camps confirmed this imagery of self-referential sovereignty. A distorted understanding of self-interest could perhaps explain the will to kill the Jews but not the systematic humiliation and torture. It was this lack of self-interest, regardless of how distorted it was, that distinguished the Nazi from other extremities as those in Cambodia or Hiroshima (Agamben 1999: 31-32). The radical evil is radical precisely because it cannot be explained as a consequence of a default or lack; it materializes as an evil will. Herein lies the reason why every rational explanation of the camps is necessarily mistaken. To see them as rational would be to understand them as a means for something else. On the contrary, the camps were an end in themselves and as such they materialized an unspeakable evil (Seeskin 1988: 110).

For Agamben, too, the Holocaust is unique in its dimensions and character (the second meaning of the unspeakable). Similarly, the Holocaust is the limit of the language and the speakable (the first meaning of the unspeakable). Agamben claims, for instance, the unfortunate term Holocaust is an attempt at giving meaning to something that has no meaning (1999: 31). He does not, however, accept that the Holocaust is a mystical event that contains a sacred aura (the third meaning of the unspeakable) (Agamben 1999: 31-33). To say this would be playing the Nazi’s own game. How can one avoid the apparently logical step from the first two understandings of the unspeakable to the third? The solution is to emphasize the aporetic character of testimony. We are urged to communicate what is incommunicable.



This is why those who assert the unsayability of Auschwitz today should be more cautious in their statements. If they mean to say that Auschwitz was a unique event in the face of which the witness must in some way submit his every word to the test of an impossibility of speaking, they are right. But if, joining uniqueness to unsayability, they transform Auschwitz into a reality absolutely separated from language, if they break the tie between an impossibility and a possibility of speaking that, in the *Muselmann* constitutes testimony, then they unconsciously repeat the Nazi's gesture; they are in secret solidarity with the *Arcanum imperii*. (Agamben 1999: 157)

Before focusing on *Muselmann's* testimony, let us here draw a parallel to Adorno's thought. What is central in Adorno's dictum and more generally in his negative dialectics is a dialectic tension between aesthetics and ethics. This tension does not allow for redemption. Literature is, on the one hand, a waste, rubbish, something that brings with it enjoyment and moral well-being, which is why it is impossible to unite with a universe after the Holocaust. But, on the other hand, it is exactly the survivors' suffering that demands the sustained existence of the very art it forbids (Trezise 2001: 50). To demand the art which it prohibits is the aporia of the Holocaust, which is a problematique that could be displaced onto the relation between naked life and testimonial memory. A similar aporia is here taking form.

4. The *Muselmann*

The *Muselmann* is often described as a worthless being who lacks the ability to distinguishing good and evil, noble and base. This condition was primarily defined physically, as a consequence of under-nutrition, stress and cold that reduced the *Muselmann* to merely a bodily existence (Agamben 1999: 42-43). Hence the *Muselmann* had only one aim: survival. Even worse, he did not even register the guardians' physical violence and only occasionally protected himself. The *Muselmann* had no sense of a self; like an autistic child, he pulled himself into his own delirium and fantasy world (Agamben 1999: 46). The *Muselmann* reminds us of, above all, a walking corpse (Agamben 1999: 41). The term *Muselmann* originates in Auschwitz and associates to the Muslims bending forward in prayer (Agamben 1999: 41). In Majdanek the term in use was "donkeys", in Dachau "cretins", in Stutthof "cripples", in Mauthausen "swimmers", in Neuengamme "camels" and in Buchenwald "tired sheikhs" (Agamben 1999: 44). In addition, Primo Levi's telling term must be named here: the "drowned".

The *Muselmann* was the product of an absolute power. As is well known from Hegel's master-slave dialectic, death is the limit of power. When the slave dies, the master's power over him disappears too. The Nazi, however, by reducing the inmates to *Muselmänner*, delimited a space between life and death, and continued thereby their exercise of power over the Jews even in death. They robbed the *Muselmann* of his death (Agamben 1999: 48). The camps were thus in a sense the epitome of de-humanization. The Nazis did not call the inmates by their names but tattooed a number on their skins (Appelfeld 1988: 83). This extreme de-humanization culminated in the killing of the Jews. There was nobody who died in his or her own name in the camps (Agamben 1999: 104). Nobody died as individuals but as parts of an industrial production of corpses. They died, in other words, as numbers.

[T]he expression "fabrication of corpses" implies that it is no longer possible truly to speak of death, that what took place in the camps was not death, but rather something infinitely more appalling. In Auschwitz, people did not die; rather, corpses were produced. Corpses without death, non-humans whose decease is debased into a matter of serial production. (Agamben 1999: 71-72)

It is this aspect that gives Auschwitz a special status and defines the character of its horror (Agamben 1999: 72). Death has always been thought of as a limit, as a figure of nothingness against the background of which the finite, life itself, finds meaning. The Nazi appropriated this limit, reducing the infinite to the finite, or, in other words, turned the exception into the rule. Death was no longer something distant, an external limit, but the condition in which the *Muselmann* lived. Against this background we can also understand the reason why the inmates of the concentration camps distanced themselves from *Muselmänner*. One avoided them, because in their eyes one saw one's own coming death (Agamben 1999: 45, 52).



Even reflection on different ways of dying indicates a (minimal) distance from death as an omnipresent reality (Stark 2001: 100). Thus suicide was seldom in the camps. Further, it was often impossible to identify a suicide. Was it, for instance, a suicide or an attempt at escape, when the inmates run to the electrical fences (Stark 2001: 101)? If suicide is a fundamental human act, an expression of freedom and the right to organize one's own life, then the lack of suicide in the camps shows that the inmates were robbed of this possibility (Ibid. 94). As Arendt wrote, humanness is primarily given by the ability to start something new, by spontaneity, or, by what she called natality (Arendt 1973: 455). In this sense suicide would be a spontaneous act breaking with the routines of the camp life, and as such it could take the form of a (minimal) resistance (Stark 2001: 95).

On 28th August, 1942, five women from Würzburg committed suicide immediately after their deportation. Gestapo quickly found five replacements for them to thereby punish the Jewish community for the five women's "initiative". In Theresienstadt the punishment for unsuccessful suicide attempts was extremely harsh. Families, friends, and others with relation to the dead person were also punished. A survivor from the camps, Filip Müller, a Czech, tells about his suicide attempt by joining other Czechs who were to be gassed. The attempt was prevented by the intervention of the guardians. While they beat him, they shouted: "You bloody shit, get it into your stupid head: we decide how long you stay alive and when you die, and not you" (Stark 2001: 97). The minimal form of autonomy characteristic for suicide was unacceptable for the Nazi, even though their project was the elimination of the Jews from the surface of the world (Stark 2001: 98).

Levi gives three explanations for the low rate of suicide. First, suicide is a human act and therefore unimaginable for one reduced to animal existence. Second, it was, as a form of self-punishment unnecessary; the punishments of the Nazis were abundant. And third, the fight for survival exhausted all the energy of the camp inmates, at any rate of the *Muselmänner* (Stark 2001: 100). Almost regardless of how the *Muselmänn* is described, it is not possible for him to attain a distance to himself. To kill one-self requires precisely a self, which is what the *Muselmänner* lacked. Autonomy, self-determination and freedom necessitate a reflexive distance to oneself. Conscience, likewise, entails that one can relate to one's self as if it were somebody else. Agamben uses the concept of shame to describe this relationship. What is central here is not the subject of shame, but its object. What is it that which we are ashamed of? The answer is: our nakedness. We are ashamed of those acts from which we can establish no distance. Here Agamben draws on a Levinasian phenomenology:

To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed. But what cannot be assumed is not something external. Rather, it originates in our own intimacy; it is what is most intimate in us (for example, our own physiological life). Here the "I" is thus overcome by its own passivity, its ownmost sensibility; yet this expropriation and desubjectification is also an extreme and irreducible presence of the "I" to itself. It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own. In shame, the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame. (Agamben 1999: 105-106)

What one is ashamed of is something that cannot be appropriated and this something is the nakedness of the subject (Agamben 1999: 105). Shame does not originate from a consciousness of a lack which one attempts to distance oneself from (Ibid. 104-5). One is ashamed of not being able to escape oneself. More technically, shame is produced when the subject acts as a subject for his own de-subjectification (Agamben 1999: 106). Here one could recall Sophie in *Sophie's Choice*. She is forced, by the guardians of the camp, to choose between her two children – one will survive, the other will be sent to the gas chambers. She is forced to choose. And even though it is a forced choice, it is one that, because she is actively acting, produces shame. Shame is thus not a feeling but a condition of being (Agamben 1999: 106).

One can live in shame - and certainly all in the camp did. Those who did not hit the bottom avoided this fate by stealing from other inmates or by working in *Sonderkommando* or by overtaking policing functions in the camps (Agamben 1999: 24). It was impossible to preserve one's dignity (Ibid. 60). We mentioned earlier that nobody died in own names. It must be



added that there was not anybody, either, who survived in own names. They survived, because others died instead of them (Agamben 1999: 104). The inmates occupied what Levi characterized as a grey zone, in which the distinctions between executioner and victim, good and evil, worthy and unworthy lose their meaning (Ibid. 21). Similarly, the condition of the *Muselmann* is not the lowest form of being in an ethical hierarchy of forms of being, but that which makes the whole hierarchy meaningless (Agamben 1999: 63; Žižek 2001: 78). If ethical categories no longer make sense in this zone, it also means that they are not genuinely ethical categories (Agamben 1999: 63). Auschwitz is a test every genuine ethics must pass through: *Ethica more Auschwitz demonstrata* (Agamben, 1999: 13). One cannot imagine, for instance, a priest in the camps urging the inmates to preserve worth and dignity; this would be an insulting gesture (Ibid. 63-4). An ethics after the Holocaust must start at the point at which worth disappears and the naked life reveals itself (Ibid. 69).

Shame has an active and a purely receptive pole. The *Muselmann* incarnates the first and the person who bears testimony the other (Ibid. 111). What is significant is the relationship between these two poles. Testimony is, as the appropriation of something that cannot be appropriated, exactly such a relation. Agamben seeks to identify this relationship through a series of concepts such as auto-affection, immanence and the existence of the grammatical "I". This "I" has no substance in itself. It is merely the link between a series of utterances. As such, the grammatical "I" refers to the same nakedness, which the *Muselmann* incarnates (Ibid. 116). The "grammatical I" marks a non-being, which is the condition of all being. We started with the nakedness of the *Muselmann* and now end up with this nakedness as the fundament of every speaking subject. Testimony emerges at the point at which the mute gives the speaking subject a voice, and the speaking subject bears testimony to the impossibility of speaking with one's own voice (bears testimony to that which cannot be communicated and represented) (Ibid. 120). It is only because we all share in common the fundamental nakedness of the *Muselmann*, because human life is precarious and vulnerable, we can bear testimony to the *Muselmann*. "The witness' survival of the inhuman is a function of the *Muselmann* survival of the human. What can be infinitely destroyed is what can infinitely survive" (Agamben 1999: 151).

Levi repeatedly emphasized that those who survived were not the real witnesses. The *Muselmann* would have been a real witness. But those who have seen the Gorgon either did not come back or came back without the ability to witness. The survivor is the exception, the drowned the rule (Agamben, 1999: 33). Therefore meaningful remembrance must relate itself to the fundamental nakedness of the subject, and thus always take place per delegation.

At first it appears that it is the human, the survivor, who bears witness to the inhuman, the *Muselmann*. But if the survivor bears witness for the *Muselmann* – in the technical sense of "on behalf of" or "by proxy" ("we speak in their stead, by proxy") – then according to the legal principle by which the acts of the delegated are imputed to the delegant, it is in some way the *Muselmann* who bears witness. (Agamben 1999: 120)

Testimony does not guarantee the factual truthfulness of a given utterance and thus does not enable a definitive historical archivation. The Holocaust is that which resists archivation for it escapes both the appropriating memory and the willed forgetting (Agamben 1999: 158). But then, how can we keep alive the aporia, the tension between speech and naked life, between the traumatized testimony and the appropriating forgetfulness, and thus "mediate" between the past and the present? How can one represent the impossibility of depicting horror?

5. The riddle of the Holocaust

As we have seen before, many critiques think that Benigni misused the Holocaust for his own comical ambitions. What they oversee, however, is the reference of the film to a series of riddles, which strengthens the descriptions of the film and thus mark the existence of a horrific reality which can only be depicted indirectly. Let us thus discuss the four riddles that appear in the film.

The first one: "the bigger it is, the less one sees", and the answer is "darkness". Darkness is here a metaphor for fascism and Nazism as well as cynicism and hate (Siporin 2002: 349). The more one hates, the less one will experience the other who no longer appears as a singular and vulnerable being. Fascism and Nazism darkened the soul of its supporters –



blinded them. It is Lessing, who gives Guido the riddle, and the riddle is more than anything else a key to understand his personality. When Lessing meets Guido in the camp, he is morally blind for Guido's situation. For Benigni, Lessing incarnates the evil of Nazism. Indeed, apropos of Arendt's (1992) discussion of Eichmann, one could claim that Lessing stands for the banality of the evil. Both Eichmann and Lessing perceive their activities as a part of a normal job. And in both cases the relationship between the executioner and the victim is reversed. As Lessing is tortured by his riddles, Eichmann was at pains regarding his lack of promotion and loss of pleasure in his work. Just as Eichmann, Lessing has isolated himself from the world and thus de-humanized himself. For both, there exists a sharp distinction between the private and the public realm, and their empathy does not reach outside the private sphere. The one who is a friend in the private sphere is reduced to an ideological stereotype when met in the public sphere: to a Jew, an inmate, or a subhuman being. Dr. Lessing is banal exactly in the same way as is Eichmann. Neither of them thinks, that is, reflects on their acts morally. One does not need to be a psychopath to function in the service of evil. A lack of thinking and callousness will do. The first riddle condenses this terrifying message.

The second riddle is the only one told by Guido and is therefore not surrounded by the same darkness as Lessing's riddles. "Snow White among the dwarves. Solve this riddle, genius, in the time that the solution gives you (in seven minutes; among seven small ones)". The answer is already given in the formulation of the riddle. The Italian word "minutes" is ambivalent and means both minute (time unit) and small (a reference to the dwarfs' height). Central here is not the latent content of the riddle; it does not have any. It must be understood precisely as that which it is, as part of an innocent children's game. It expresses joy over life and optimism (Siporin 2002: 350). It is significant for Benigni that there is room for hope, humour and redemption amidst the terror of the camp. Even more significant it is *after* the Holocaust room is given for these abilities which children's games symbolize.

The third riddle is addressed by Lessing to Guido while he serves him in the restaurant: "If you say my name. I'm no longer there, who am I?" The answer is "silence". To call somebody a Jew was during the Holocaust to eliminate them (Siporin 2002: 351). Siporin suggests a further plausible interpretation. Silence also refers to the lack of protest or resistance against the deportation of the Jews, which was characteristic of the Italian population. The riddle is repeated by Guido, when he tries to contact Dr. Lessing during the selection process. He examines their bodily structure, their hands, feet and eyes. It all takes place very quickly, and Guido's examination is almost over before he takes notice of a beginning. Lessing whispers after every examination his judgment to a nurse, who notes down whether the person in question is to be gassed or not. Lessing does not recognize Guido, which is why Guido reiterates Lessing's riddle. The nurse shouts resolutely: "silence!" and thus answers the riddle without knowing it herself. Here the riddle is explicitly linked to disappearance or elimination. Lessing's verdict is, when it does not favour the inmates, a death sentence.

The fourth riddle is perhaps the most interesting one: "Fat, fat, ugly, ugly. All yellow in truth. If you ask me where I am. I tell you 'quack, quack, quack!' While walking I defecate. Who I am, tell me a little". In contrast to the previous three riddles, there is given no answer to this one. Or rather Lessing explains that the answer is not a duck. The riddle is without a solution. It is asked of Guido by Lessing during the officers' dinner in the camp, and it is implied that Lessing will help Guido if Guido helps him with the riddle. Benigni himself has explained the riddle as pure nonsense, which emerges when Guido expects a rational and emphatic act from Lessing (Celli 2000). The riddle blocks Guido's escape. It "prevents" Lessing to experience Guido as what he is, a human being in need. The riddle is a "neck-riddle", one whose solution is a question of life and death. The best examples are perhaps Samson in the Bible and the riddle fight in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Guido cannot solve Lessing's riddle, and shortly after is hanged (Siporin 2002: 357). The riddle is, to use Falassi and Ben-Amos' concept, an "anti-riddle", a riddle that does not contain the possibility of an objectively correct answer. Either the rule that riddles ought to have only one correct answer is violated or alternatively the correct answer is not verified (for instance the "duck" above). Siporin understands this as a metaphorical expression of a situation, in which civilization disappears. The Nazis transgressed all norms. They did not play according to the rules. The Holocaust is a riddle beyond comprehension and understanding (Siporin 2002: 357). As Levi said apropos of the Holocaust: "I find no solution to the riddle. I seek, but I do not find it" (quoted in Siporin 2002: 345).



6. Post-remembrance

We have mentioned several types of critique that could be addressed against Benigni's film, all of which are essentially variations on the same theme, that the film misrepresents the Holocaust. However, we can move beyond this critique, which is mistaken already in its assumptions. The Holocaust cannot be represented in its horror and all its essence for this essence precisely consists in making testimony impossible. Following this, the smoke in the beginning and in the end of the film (and the corresponding "fog" scene in between) is not an expression of a defensive distance towards the Holocaust but rather of the recognition that the horror of the camp can be depicted only indirectly. *Life is Beautiful* represents the impossibility of representing the Holocaust.

This structure is mirrored in the narrative of the film. Just as the fog represents the impossibility of representation, the final scene reveals that the narrator of the film is Giosue and the narration his attempt at remembering his father, who sacrificed himself for him (Ben-Ghiat 2001: 255). Benigni himself says that the film is to a certain extent autobiographic. Benigni's father, Luigi Benigni, spent two years in a German labour camp after the end of the alliance between Germany and Italy. When he told his children about the camp after the war, he always tried to protect them from knowledge of the real horror of the camp. His stories were not painful accounts of the camp but were marked by humour and anecdotes (Ben-Ghiat 2001: 255). *Life is Beautiful* repeats his gesture.

Further, the film is an attempt at filling the holes Benigni experienced in his father's account of the camps. In the same way as Benigni reflects over his father's fate in the Holocaust, Giosue reflects over his own father's life. Such remembrance, which does not claim the authenticity of the testimony, is vulnerable against criticism. But Kertész is fully justified when he writes: "I notice that Benigni, the creator of the film, was born in 1952. He is the representative of a new generation that is wrestling with the *ghost of Auschwitz*, and has the courage (and also the strength) to lay claim to this sad inheritance" (Kertész 2001: 272, our italics). It is as if there exists a mystical and invisible bond between Benigni and Auschwitz. It is precisely such a bond Agamben aspires to when he speaks of "remnants" of Auschwitz. "Remnant" is a messianic concept that expresses that which cannot be destroyed, a residue of the past that refuses to disappear. Or, in Kertész's words: "the ghost of Auschwitz". The word remnant appears in the biblical narration on Isaiah as *shear yisrael* (bearer of Israel's spirit) and Amos as *sherit Yousef* (bearer of Joseph's spirit) (Agamben 1999: 162). The parallel to the relation between Muselmann and the survivor, between the drowned and the saved, is thus obvious.

In the concept of remnant, the aporia of testimony coincides with the aporia of messianism. Just as the remnant of Israel signifies neither the whole people nor a part of the people but, rather, the non-coincidence of the whole and the part, and just as messianic time is neither historical time nor eternity but, rather, the disjunction that divides them, so the remnants of Auschwitz – the witnesses – are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved. They are what remains between them. (Agamben 1999: 163-164)

"The spirit of Auschwitz" is thus neither incarnated in those who died of gassing nor in those who survived, but in the bond that exists between them. It is, in this context, central that "Guido's" name stems from the Italian "guidare", to guide. Guido guides Giosue out of the camp; leads him towards redemption. Giosue thus becomes the bearer of "the spirit of Auschwitz". He bears testimony to the father's, Guido's, acts. Giosue is in the biblical context the one who guide the Jews into the promised land. Giosue's nickname, Joshua, refers, moreover, to the biblical leader who prevented the Jews from being extinguished by leading them through the desert (Viano 1999: 60). But neither Benigni nor Agamben stops here. For them we are all descendants of Auschwitz. And we are all obliged to bear testimony.



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