Good Morning Babilonia

In the film’s final sequence the brothers Nicola (Vincent Spano) and Andrea (Joaquim de Almeida) stage and record their deaths for the camera.
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Derek Duncan

The extraordinary commercial and critical success outside Italy of La vita è bella (Life is Beautiful, 1997), Roberto Benigni’s romantic comedy about the Holocaust, marks the culmination of a decade in which Italian cinema has re-established itself on the international scene. Films such as Giuseppe Tornatore’s Nuovo Cinema Paradiso (Cinema Paradiso, 1987) and Gabriele Salvatores’s Mediterraneo (1992) won Oscars for Best Foreign Film, and the established stars Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni received similar Lifetime Achievement awards. This was not the first time, however, that Italian cinema had attracted world acclaim. Previously the type of Italian films to attract attention abroad had been strictly art-house, yet the films successfully exported since the late 1980s appeal to a broader market. They do not, therefore, represent a continuation of the experimental tradition of Italian cinema best known through the neo-realist cinema of the immediate post-war era, and the work of innovative film-makers such as Antonioni and Fellini in the 1960s and 1970s. Their appeal is more middlebrow, attracting an audience closer to the mainstream. This chapter will look at Good Morning Babilonia (Good Morning Babylon, 1987), an early example of this more recent trend in Italian film-making. Typically, these films are elegantly crafted, slow moving, spectacular epics. Set sometime in the recent past, they recall a lost Italy that nevertheless is in the compass of living memory. They are sentimental, occasionally humorous, films about men and masculinity, and their historical dimension is largely the backdrop for the exploration of intimate, but never sexualised, relationships between the male protagonists. In every respect La vita è bella fits firmly into this category. While some have hailed Benigni’s treatment of the Holocaust as startlingly original, it is perhaps more accurate to see his film as characteristic, or indeed imitative, of this strand in contemporary Italian film production in terms of its aesthetic values, its thematic concerns, and crucially its marketability.

Good Morning Babilonia, directed by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, is not the most successful, nor the best, of these Italian films but serves usefully as a compendium of their cinematic values. Set in the early part of the twentieth century, it relates the story of two brothers who leave Italy to make their fortune in the United States. They are able to utilise their traditional stonemasonry skills in the burgeoning Hollywood film industry, and although they die (in each other’s arms) fighting in the First World War, they manage to film their deaths, providing a permanent record for posterity. The film was a joint production venture